

ABORIGINAL ART / Rebecca Hossack tells Isabel Woolf about selecting works for *Songlines* . . .

Waking up to reality

The plangent rumblings of a distant didgeridoo gave it away. Lost in the depths of the Barbican Centre and searching for the Australian outback, this lone instrument lured all-comers down under into the Concourse Gallery on Level 5. Standing in the doorway, you couldn't help reflecting that the concrete surfaces, wall-to-wall brown carpet and strip lighting there seem an unlikely backdrop for paintings which are so much of the open air. But in that strange, tunnel-like space, Rebecca Hossack has gathered together the most comprehensive collection of Aboriginal desert paintings ever seen in this country.

All of the "dot and circle" paintings in this exhibition come out of the huge Western Desert, from the communities at Papunya Tula, Yuendumu, Billiluna and the Balgo Hills. Rebecca Hossack, who has specialised in Aboriginal art for over ten years, believes that the quality of paintings from this isolated region is higher than from anywhere else. "Over the last couple of years Aboriginal art has become rather trendy and there's been quite a lot on view in Britain," she says. "But I felt that much of it was mediocre, commercial work, the sort of thing that could be picked up in tourist shops in Alice Springs. I wanted to show people the best quality paintings which are being done by really great artists in the western communities."

She was, she says, rigorous in her selection process, and certainly there are some remarkable painters represented in the exhibition. Mick Tjapaltjarri, Turkey Tolson and Uta Uta Tjangala are names that are becoming better known among Cork Street dealers, while Clifford Possum and Billy Stockman are, as it were, the Leonardo and Michelangelo of the modern Aboriginal art movement which began in the early 1970s when a teacher, Geoff Bardon, provided Aboriginal people with acrylic paints and brushes and encouraged them to put their ancient "sandpaintings" on to canvas.

Since then these huge, rather chaotic-looking paintings have been seen by some as constituting a new school of Australian abstract art. But despite the preponderance of highly-coloured dots, squiggles, circles and broken lines, abstract is the



Billy Stockman, one of the earliest and better known modern Aboriginal painters, at work on the typical dreamtime painting *Carpet Snake Dreaming* at Papunya in 1987

is that they come out of a cultural tradition which is over 50,000 years old, maybe more. And although they look abstract, even psychedelic, they are *highly* representational. For example the Balgo Hills paintings here deal with very specific

things. "I found myself in a system founded the art establishment in western galleries. When the huge "Dreamings" exhibition toured the US in 1988, American art scribes tied themselves in critical knots, unsure whether to evaluate the pictures in visual or anthropological terms. Since then a consensus seems to have

begin to evaluate the work," she says, ruefully. "As a consequence, once they had covered one exhibition, they would reply to my latest press release 'Oh well, we reviewed your last show so we've already done Aboriginal arts'. By analogy, you wouldn't say if you'd reviewed a Francis

often not knowing what the paintings are worth, but just trying to get what they can. The artists themselves have responded to this uncertainty by setting up cooperatives to fix prices and regulate quality. But there has still been massive over-production and given the conventional career

abstract art. But despite the preponderance of highly-coloured dots, squiggles, circles and broken lines, abstract is the one thing they are *not*. They are in fact ideograms, or religious maps. The artists transpose on to canvas the traditional designs created on the ground at sacred ceremonies: mosaics of stones, bark and twigs which are ritually erased by milling feet. They all relate stories of the "Dreamtime" of Aboriginal mythology, when ancient beings roamed the world singing the landscape and everything in it into existence. Today, as the artists sit outside working on the paintings, they sing and chant the songs and stories associated with these myths, in a totally unconscious synthesis of landscape, narrative, nature, art and soul.

"The paintings do look incredibly modern, it's true," says Hossack, "But the fact

can art scribes tied together in conceptual knots, unsure whether to evaluate the pictures in visual or anthropological terms. Since then a consensus seems to have emerged, that they can only really be

viewed with a blend of both. But there's still huge difficulty, says Hossack with the whole area of Aboriginal aesthetics. She feels that people still find it hard to assess dot and circle paintings and this has led, she claims, to an extremely patronising attitude in some quarters.

"I've found an extraordinary inability, especially amongst British critics, even to

to my latest press show so we've already reviewed your last show so we've already done Aboriginal arts'. By analogy, you wouldn't say if you'd reviewed a Francis Bacon exhibition that you had 'done' Brit-

'Aboriginal art became rather trendy, but much of it was commercial work, the sort of thing that could be picked up in tourist shops in Alice Springs'

ish art. They seem to think that all Aboriginal art is homogenous, but in fact it's highly individual, just as Impressionist paintings are highly individual, although the artists were clearly working within a recognisable school."

The last two years have seen a frenzy of buying, with dealers and investors jumping on the trendy Aboriginal bandwagon,

"I think that for the average Aboriginal paintings, the market has gone very flat. But the great painters are really holding their prices at auction, and the resale value of paintings by say Clifford Possum or George Tjangala is now in five or six figures, because painters like these are undisputably great."

□ *Concourse Gallery, Barbican Art Centre, Silk St, EC2 (071-638 4141) To 4 Sept. Mon-Sat 10am-7.30, Sun 12-7.30; free.*

... and Iain Gale finds the traditions of 18th Century portraiture perpetuated in the work of the Aboriginal photographer Michael Riley, at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery

The society photographer



Photographs by Michael Riley, left to right: Ken, Lyall and Carmine, Maude Cutmore and Maude Wright (the photographer's grandmother)

The result is that in such works as Riley's portrait of *Lyall and Carmine*, we have a disturbing recollection of Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, although Lyall wears a bush hat and sits on a plastic chair rather than a bench in a country estate. Lyall's pot-belly might be that of Hogarth's *Captain Coram* — here,

however, an ironic reflection of the perceived Aboriginal lifestyle of beer and indolence. There are single portraits here, too, of matriarchs and "warriors" like *Maude Cutmore*, a middle-aged woman seated in her best dress next to her symbol of office: her best handbag. In another photograph a middle-aged man grins

from his wheelchair while in a third, the sitter, *Ken*, is pictured cross-legged, gazing from behind prized mirror sunglasses, for all the world as much a "thinking man" as Joseph Wright's *Brooke Boothby*. Elsewhere, a mother and her six children bear an outward resemblance to a family portrait by Lawrence or Romney coupled

with an essentially Hogarthian, mewling, puking realism. Such a resemblance only serves to emphasise the reality: that these children are not Hogarth's affluent, rosy-cheeked *Graham Children* at play, but six people doomed to a miserable existence in the enforced squalor and redundancy of life as outcasts.

Family ties are of paramount importance to the Aborigine, as they were to eighteenth century sitters. Two siblings embrace with the same unrestrained, innocent enjoyment of physical contact as that enjoyed by the sitters in a child portrait by Raeburn or Romney. Brother, sister and mother link arms. *Ruthy*, the photographer's aunt, holds before her a photograph of her own aunt.

While such works are open to the criticism that they are contrived, they nevertheless seem truer to life than the shocking, photo-journalistic shots by other, white, photographers, such as Nicholas Adler. His portraits, emphasising disease and disability, become less a catalogue of injustice than a cabinet of curiosities, and grouped together in his recent book *Portraits from an Uninhabited Land*, appear tastelessly sensational. Riley's subjects, unlike Adler's, retain the honest realism of the portrait in the tradition of Goya, Courbet and Degas. Portraiture is a social phenomenon whose roots lie in the need to acknowledge wealth and merit. Hogarth understood this. And, in perpetuating this tradition of formal portraiture for the poor and wretched, so, too, does Riley.

□ *Rebecca Hossack, 35 Windmill St, W1 (071-409 3599) 6-31 Aug. Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm.*

□ *Portraits from an Uninhabited Land* is published by Bantam