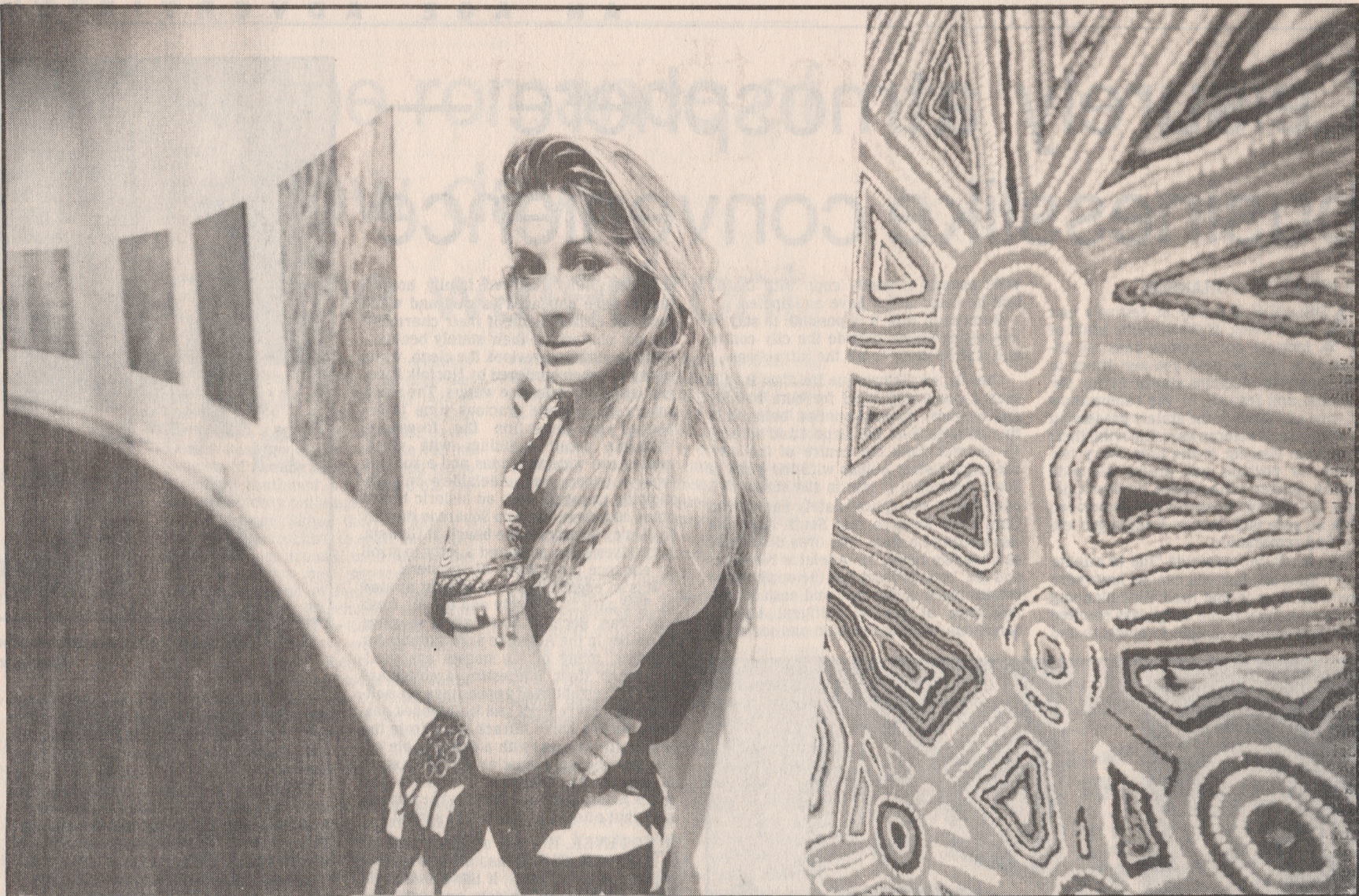


# ARTS EXTRA 9

Picture: ROB LEESON



Rebecca Hossack: "Leading galleries in America have taken the trouble to educate themselves about Aboriginal art and Britain should too."



ART: LOUISE BELLAMY, LONDON

# Striking while the iron is hot

A labor of love has finally turned the tide for this overseas art exhibitor.

**R**EBECA HOSSACK has been exhibiting Aboriginal art in London for years. The British critics, she said, have been prejudiced against her exhibitions, dismissing them as "too colonial". But the tide has finally turned and her labor of love has paid off.

This month she set up the largest exhibition of Aboriginal art ever mounted in Britain. It opened at the Concourse Gallery in London's labyrinthine arts complex, the Barbican.

Now the critics and public are swarming to view the 300-odd works which cover the entire spectrum of Aboriginal art from ochre paintings, acrylics, oils, bark paintings, screen print through to photographs.

The show, called 'Songlines', after Bruce Chatwin's novel of the same name, comprises works by Aborigines from the Balgo Hills, an isolated region 850 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. Powerfully positioned at the entrance to the exhibition is a spectacular painting by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. Painted on a sphere-shaped canvas, it depicts the Earth's colors, underground streams, a central waterhole and associated wildlife.

Some of the comments in the visitors' book betray the ignorance about Aboriginal art that Ms Hossack has been trying so hard to counter. One

traveller from Wales remarked: "I instinctively like it but I don't understand it, which maybe doesn't matter too much." A Londoner wrote: "I'm not sure what I saw but I really enjoyed it."

Ms Hossack has every reason to feel vindicated by the overwhelming response to the exhibition, but she modestly describes its success as a relief. "I've been so critical of the critics in the past. They'd come to one of my shows and then refuse to come again, arguing they'd covered Aboriginal art. It's like saying: 'I've reviewed a Francis Bacon show so now I can forget about British art.'"

Melbourne-born, Ms Hossack studied law at Melbourne University before arriving penniless in London in 1981 to pursue postgraduate legal studies. After a year of living in hovels she did a Diploma of Fine Art at Christies. She then won a scholarship to work at the Guggenheim Museum in Venice "where I was paid a lot of money to polish Brancusi's" before returning to London to pursue what had become a passionate interest in the visual arts.

In 1984 she was curator of 'The Last Wapping Show', an exhibition of works by artists living and working in studios on the docks. She then won a major award for encouraging business sponsorship in the arts. In 1988 she took over the lease of a shop front in Windmill Street, London, and opened the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. Since then she has been devoted to exhibiting Aboriginal art and the work of young British artists.

On 4 September Lord Harewood is opening Ms Hossack's second gallery in Piccadilly, opposite the Royal Academy. The new gallery will be devoted to Australian, Indian and Lebanese art.

Ms Hossack is modest, determined and, above all, dedicated. Despite rubbing shoulders with the hoi polloi of London's art and business worlds for the past decade, she has retained her Australian accent and a refreshing honesty and confidence.

She has no time to sit back and enjoy the attention 'Songlines' is getting. "Right now I'm busy trying to persuade the Tate to buy an Aboriginal painting. Leading galleries in America have taken the trouble to educate

themselves about Aboriginal art and Britain should too," she said.

"I must strike while the iron is hot. I hope it will be easier now that I have the approval of the British art establishment."

The Concourse Gallery is an elegant space. It is long, narrow and shaped like a boomerang. The paintings on show are diverse but have one thing in common: their details of environment; rock holes, claypans, sandhills, spinifex grass, spiders, snakes and soil.

The Balgo Hills has, due to its isolation, maintained a traditional culture and withstood alien influences and commercial exploitation. As recently as November 1988 communications there were restricted to radio-telephone. This, combined with the fact that the area has a severe three-month wet season, has enabled the Balgo Hills Aborigines to live in harmony, a peace very much revealed in their work.

Ms Hossack is open about her lack of interest in conceptual, cerebral Western art. Standing next to Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's spherical work she said: "Isn't this just so exciting? Art should be something from the spirit."

"Finally, the British are saying: 'What a brilliant idea.' They were patronising and now at least some of them are pleased."