

Resilient Rebecca has a brush with fame

An Australian art dealer is making a dramatic breakthrough in a cut-throat world, writes **PETER ELLINGSEN** in London.

AT THE corner is one of Dylan Thomas's old watering holes, and across the street is the row of still elegant terraces where Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury set met and plotted their love affairs. Rebecca Hossack notes the literary terrain with a wave of the hand. It is the backdrop. Here, inside a brightly lit shop, where she shows some of Britain's most adventurous artwork, is the heartbeat.

Things are quiet now, but this is the place where Australian Aboriginal art was first shown in Europe, and the Melbourne-born Hossack has every reason to be immensely proud of that.

Not only has she survived in a cut-throat world and taught the Poms a thing or two about their own painters, she has put Aboriginal art on the European map – and, incidentally, put one of its leading exponents, Clifford Possum, inside Buckingham Palace. That was in 1990, two years after what the *Economist* described as a “sensationally good show show of Australian Aboriginal painting”.

Possum arrived in London from Alice Springs expecting to meet the Queen, but when Hossack requested an invitation, the Palace demurred. That night she shared her disappointment with a client, Bambi Harewood (the former Melbourne model), and the next day her husband (Lord Harewood) rang and said: “I’ve spoken to my cousin [the Queen] and she would be delighted to meet Mr Possum.”

The turnaround is one of many serendipitous incidents that have kept Hossack, 38, in London for 12 years. The 1988 breakthrough showing of Pupunya artists, shortly after she took a gamble with her own gallery, Fitzrovia, in central Windmill Street, initially was a disaster.

“No-one wanted to know – it was just colonials,” she says. Then Julie Christie walked in and bought a painting. Tina Turner’s Australian-born manager, Roger Davies, and the Australian writer Robyn David-



Rebecca Hossack . . . pleasing London palates.

mises the British image of Australians, what *The Independent* newspaper calls the “can-do nature of Antipodean women” (the men are said to display “unbridled machismo”).

Like many of the 200,000 Australians and New Zealanders in Britain, she arrived with high hopes and “just a bag,” and overcame a city that can be bleak and uninviting. Her original plan was to supplement her Melbourne University law degree with a year at the English Bar, but a chance meeting led to an art training course at Christie’s. After a year, she won a Guggenheim scholarship in Venice, where she rubbed shoulders with landmark art (one of her duties was to clean Braucussi’s bronze sculpture with Brasso), before returning to London. It was 1984, and London’s art community was being moved from its docklands home by Rupert Murdoch’s printing presses.

Hossack staged a final showing of their work, “The Last Wapping Show”, for which she gained a Business Sponsorship of the Arts award, and the confidence to open her own gallery. It was a shaky start, but “fate” kept her going.

As the recession bit in 1991, and business dwindled, she and her three staff wrote letters, printed brochures, and “refused

UK resistance to Aboriginal art with a sale, the first to a British public museum, of a work by Emily Kngwarreye.

Her enthusiasm for Aboriginal art and the painting and sculpture of other native people, including the Kalahari bushmen, and artists in Ethiopia has given her a particular niche in London’s art world.

“It is called the last great art movement of the 20th century,” she says. “Aboriginal art is now influencing Western art, which is badly in need of some direction.”

She handles the work of Jamie Boyd, Arthur’s son, and includes among her clients the rich and famous, but it is Aboriginal art, a favourite of well-known figures such as Malcolm Williamson, the Master of the Queen’s Music, that is her passion.

“Artists thought they had reached the end, but now the energy is coming back. That’s why Aboriginal art is so important,” she says.

Hossack seems to have survived on optimism and bravado in a city that is not known for either. She has not, she says, made much money, and occasionally wonders what life would have been like if she had stuck with law, but there are no regrets.

“I don’t know why I stay,” she says. “I suppose I have started