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CULTURE QUEEN

As a young girl in the Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn, Rebecca Hossack collected gumnut nouveau and embroidered her dresses with eucalyptus leaves.

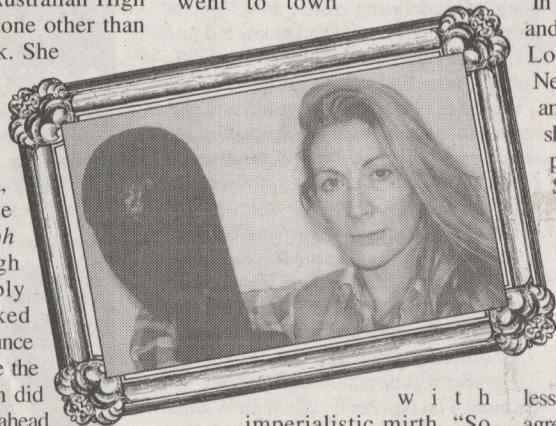
When her father advised her to find a passion in life, she told him she already had one: Australia. Hossack has maintained this nationalistic ardour over 15 years of London residency, exhibiting the ethnographic art of her beloved country in her two West End galleries, and being largely responsible for Britain's increased interest in Aboriginal art. Not that she'd admit it, however. Hossack points out that art from the likes of the Torres Straight Islands or Balgo Hills communities could be shown in a toilet and still sell. But what this tall blonde Antipodean has done, is provide a platform for artists whose work may have previously gone unnoticed.

So it seems only fitting that the very first "Cultural Development Officer" at the Australian High Commission is none other than Rebecca Hossack. She says it's her dream job. With a remit to raise Australia's cultural profile in Britain, this woman *The Daily Telegraph* called "one tough sheila" (probably because she asked them not to announce the position before the High Commission did — but they went ahead anyway) starts in December — although you get the impression that the tag just makes

official what Hossack has been doing for years. Mixing unbridled, knowledgeable enthusiasm with approachability and legal savvy (she's a qualified barrister as well), Hossack is in the process of developing a cultural strategy that will embrace all art forms.

Jim Payne, the High Commission's Public Affairs Officer, commented that: "We've recruited an arts professional for extra expertise with forward planning. Rebecca fits the bill perfectly". At her eponymous gallery in Windmill St, W1, Hossack treats browsers, customers, staff — and interviewers — as old friends, and takes the failure of a newly-installed phone system in her stride. "I'm just so thrilled to have the opportunity to display Australia's wonders," she says, her excitement evident. "We have so much on offer."

When the position was advertised, the aforementioned *Telegraph* and the *Daily Express* went to town



with imperialistic mirth. "So they do give a XXXX for culture" chuckled the former, while the latter wheeled out Australia's erst-

AUSTRALIAN-born London art dealer Rebecca Hossack was last week appointed Australia's cultural development officer in London. A self-confessed Australia addict, Hossack spoke to JANE CORNWELL about her mission, while JESSICA FITZPATRICK snapped the photos.

while cultural attaché, Les Patterson (aka Barry Humphries). "XXXX the lot of them" he allegedly spluttered. "They're a bunch of pooters and pillow biter."

Given that much of the British press sees yoghurt as having more live culture than Australia with its sun, surf, sport and beer, does Hossack think she's got her work cut out? "I think all these articles are slightly affectionate," she laughs. "I imagine it like a rite of passage, an older brother to a younger sister who is in the process of growing up. It's pretty tongue in cheek." The appointment is a timely one. "In the '60s it was very fashionable and sexy to be an Australian in London. There was Richard Neville and *Oz Magazine*, Boyd and all those fabulous Australian shows that Brian Robertson was putting on at the Whitechapel. So, since there's been a '60s revival everywhere else, I think that again it's becoming fashionable to be Australian."

Thirty years on, Australia has cemented a multicultural identity for itself. Increased self awareness often means less need to impress, and Hossack agrees that "the multi-racial aspect has really transformed any cultural inferiority complex Australia might have had. There isn't that

single adherence that we just have to impress the United Kingdom, although London is still an important business centre and culture follows money."

Rebecca Hossack arrived in London to study law in 1980, armed with two degrees and one overnight bag. "I had nothing — not a

sausage," she remembers. After an unsatisfying stint at the bar, she trained at Christies, who in turn awarded her a studentship at the Venice Guggenheim ("My first job was to polish the Brancusi"), and back in London she organised the first exhibition for artists in Wapping. "At that time — before the developers moved in — it was one of the largest artistic communities in the world." Riding her bike down Windmill St one day, Hossack noticed an empty — no premium — shop space for sale, and it's been an upward spiral ever since. A second gallery opened in St James Piccadilly in 1991, and an adjacent sculpture garden completes a wildly successful artistic trifecta.

"It has been hard though — but we've done it!" she says. "We did the first ever Aboriginal show in this country, and the *Kung Bushmen Exhibition* at the Barbican." Hossack's use of the

plural picks her out as a team player: though the galleries might bear her name, without her "brilliant staff" she doesn't know how she would have managed. Although one could predict, probably pretty well. Having exhibited all the different Aboriginal communities, Hossack feels that "Aboriginal" as a genre is no longer valid. "Now that we've moved on to individual shows, we try not to mention they are Aboriginal artists and just say they were born in Australia. The work can stand on its own two feet."



Work by Papua New Guinean and African artists has also proved immensely popular, and is indicative of the galleries' remit: to look outside the parameters of Western art. Rebecca Hossack is relishing the task of

enriching Britain with the vast array of film, literature, performance and visual art that has always been prolific in Australia. She says she is amazed at the number of ex-pat Australians who are "doing amazing things in the UK. It's brilliant — this isn't an easy country and they're everywhere you go. I think that coming from a country with such wonderful space gives you a lack of angst and a sense that anything is possible."

Which captures our new Cultural Development Officer to a T.