

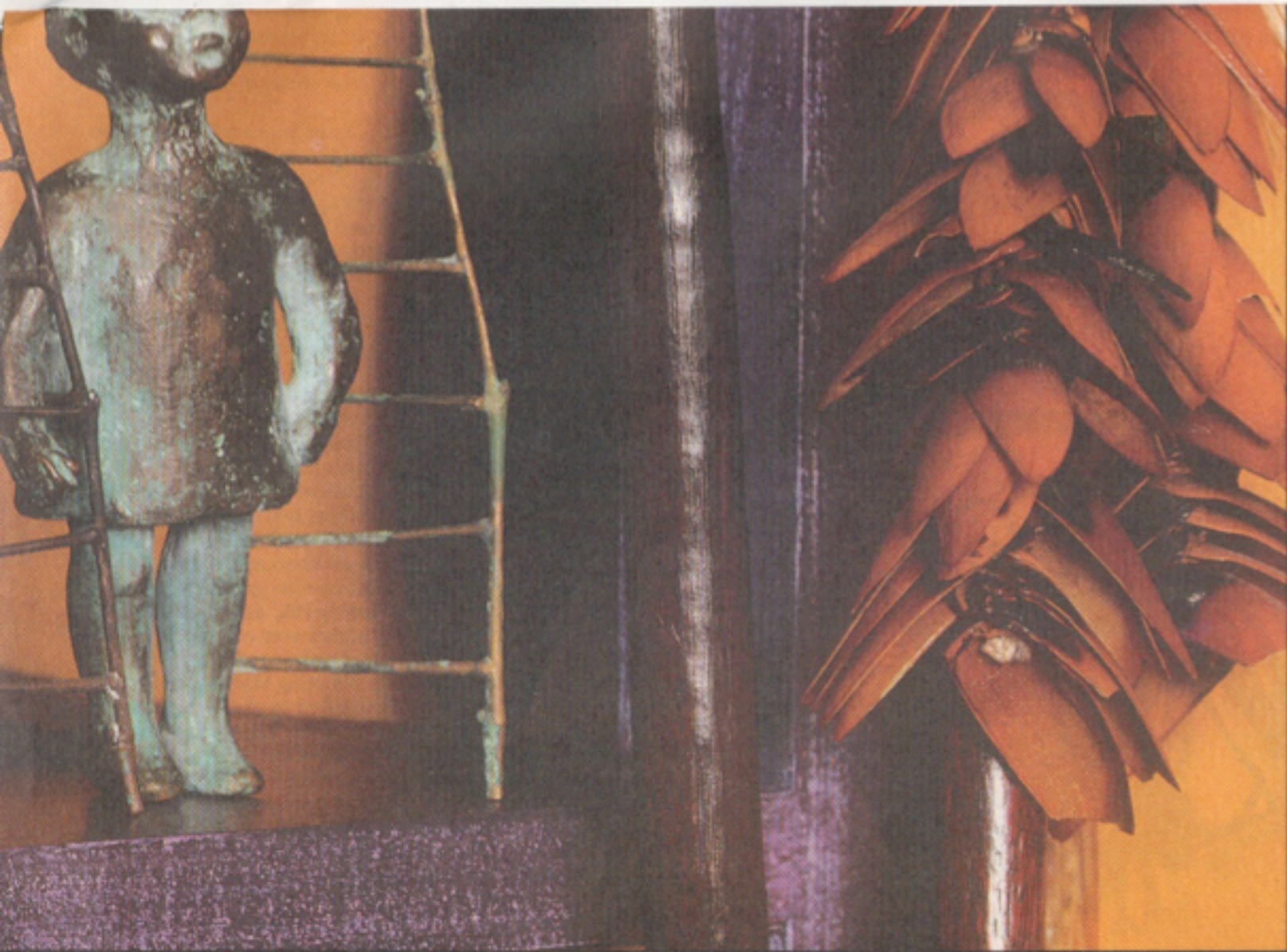
'A shrine to individuality' is how art dealer Rebecca Hossack describes her London flat. Virginia Ginane enters her kingdom

Return of the native

REBECCA HOSSACK pours fine China tea into shapely cups as a summer storm cracks the London sky. The very visible Cultural Officer at the Australian High Commission and the owner of an eponymous art gallery in Windmill Street, London W1, Hossack is a blonde, statuesque Antipodean, who today is proudly sporting her latest acquisition, a string of glossy, heart-shaped Hawaiian nuts. Camouflage is anathema to the woman who has staked her reputation as a dealer on her love of African, Aboriginal and hand-crafted art, and apparently to her sitting room, too. "This is a shrine to individuality," she declares of the eclectic profusion in her refuge above the gallery. "That sounds very pretentious, but I realise there is not one single thing in this room that hasn't been hand-made. Nothing is mass-produced."

The room is an intoxicating cocktail of tropical hues and things that could be behind glass in the Museum of Mankind. Lipstick pink geraniums crowd the window sills between paw-paw-coloured walls. Mathias Kauage's vividly depicted memories of receiving white inoculations as a native child in Papua New Guinea share space with Robert Campbell Junior's image of Albert Namatjira painting in the wilds of central Australia.





An aged oak chest bears relics of ancient and other civilisations. There is a feathered South American headdress, now an heirloom, which was originally given to Hossack's late friend, Sally, the Duchess of Westminster (who opened The Rebecca Hossack Gallery in 1988) by the late writer Bruce Chatwin. There are Ethiopian plates for stretching lips; Aboriginal message sticks conferring safe passage on the bearer; little black figures roughly hewn from animal dung by a Falasha Jew; emu feathers gathered by Aboriginal women for ceremonial dances; and a head carved from a bowling ball and marrowbone by a contemporary Scottish artist.

Books on poetry, art, travel and cooking brim from purple bookshelves in each corner of the room. Paintings by Aboriginal, African and Persian artists line the walls; an 18th-century Westmoreland oak desk elegantly conceals any trace of clutter; and ageing tribal rugs are patchworked over dark-oiled oak boards. But it wasn't always like this. The theme was once pure magnolia, declares Hossack – off-white walls and beige carpets – when she took on the lease of the gallery space and flat in 1987.

She spotted the building when she was out cycling. "These are 18th-century artisan cottages," she says of her home in this little pocket of hairdressers, cafés and galleries squeezed between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. "Fitzrovia is full of them. I love the area – pretty well everyone in this street is Italian or Greek so there is a really Mediterranean feeling. We are literally the geographic heart of London, and yet it is like a small village."

The influence in the street may be European, but in this room there is more than a hint of her home country. "It wasn't very nice, so I painted it bright colours to remind me of Australia," recalls the law graduate who arrived in London from Melbourne in 1981 to further her studies, but turned instead to the study and then the business of art. Once the carpet was stripped to reveal the wooden floor, the room began to evolve, though it was light on both content and design. Hossack, now 41, hadn't planned to stay in London long, and had brought little with her. "I arrived here with the

Continued overleaf

Global shelf life: four African bushmen's tobacco pouches, left, bronze sculptures by Anna Corbera and an Ethiopian spear, right

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Art of colour: top, Rebecca Hossack in front of a painting by Papua New Guinea artist, Mathias Kauage, Below: Kauage's portrait was painted by his son, Djonny Boy. The metal Haitian voodoo sculpture was made from an old rusty oil drum by Gabrielle Bien Aimée

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button hook, that's all," she says plucking from a table of curiosities the antique silver implement designed to unfasten buttons on 19th-century boots. "I mean, why did I bring this, and leave all the useful things behind?"

In the same impulsive spirit, there has never been any scheme for her home. "Nothing is planned, there is no interior design, no grand plan, it's not meant to look like anything. It's chaos," she says, "the result of hundreds and hundreds of excursions to markets. But everything means something in here, and I could tell you the story of how I got every single thing in this room." Her father brought her the walking stick from the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea; the sacred Aboriginal log was a gift from Lord McAlpine. She took it to a party after he had given it to her. "I was just carrying this log. Everyone thought I was really mad, but it's beautiful. I love that log. I keep thinking if there was a fire, I'd take that and all my Falasha figures."

"People would go mad living here," admits Hossack, "because everything is a work of art." And because among the sacred stones from the Ganges, the spears, the snakes and the sculptures, there is no sign of that most contemporary art form, television. The Christmas before last Hossack and her husband, the writer Matthew Sturgis, threw the TV out the window, Italian style. "We've become rather like pensioners," she says. "I sit here and do my sewing and Matthew, well, he just sits really, and we listen to Trollope on those book cassettes read by Timothy West. So we have an hysterical time."

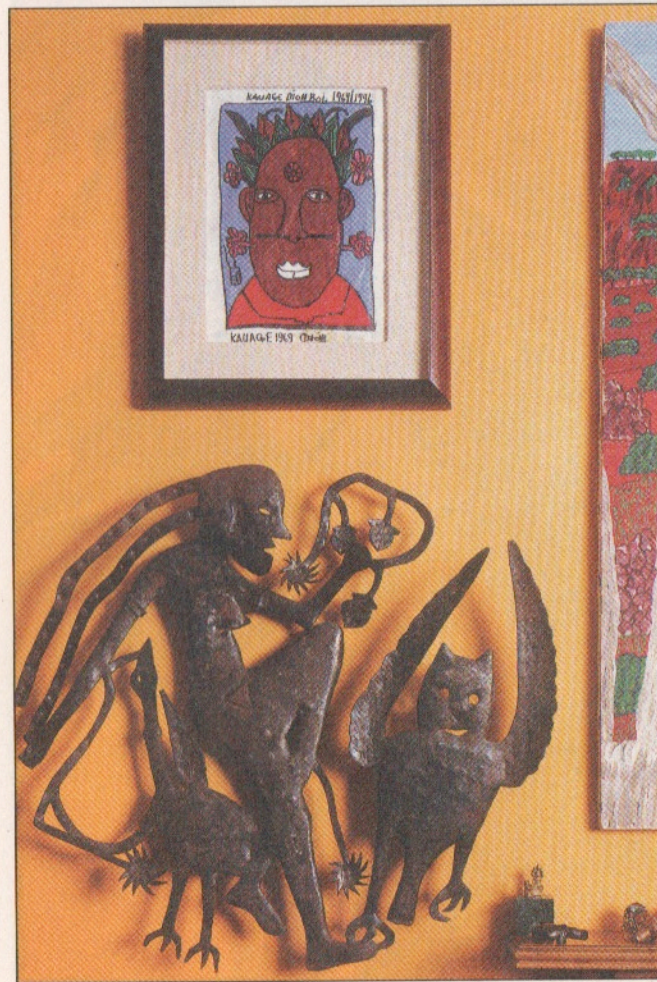
One suspects that this is more a dream of domestic dullness than a reality. Hossack's life is a blaze of nights out promoting Australia and the artists she represents at her gallery, about whose special gifts she is evangelical. "I do believe you have to nurture the individual creative person, and that's what we try to do in the gallery. These artists are so precious, because they're still testimony to the individual spirit and the individual desire to use the hands and to make things and to embellish things."

"Contemporary art," she believes, "is now so cerebral that it's not so much to do with the hands of the maker." She quotes a Russian artist she saw exhibited at the recent Venice Biennale, who slammed "the disregard of individuality" which has rendered post-modern art "anonymous".

The move in art from the hands to the mind traverses what Hossack describes as "a basic human urge to use our hands, an urge like eating and sleeping". The betrayal deepens her passion for all things hand-made. "I mean, why would somebody make this little beaded purse?" she asks in wonder, caressing a very bright floppy pouch. "Look at the work in it, the tiny little stitches!

I mean, why bother?" It is, of course, the bothering which gives some meaning to life. It's the predominance of mass-production which really drives her to distraction.

"This is a funny bag I found the other day, made out of a snake or a lizard," she says, fondling a small flat circular piece of handcraft. "Compared to a Chanel handbag, wouldn't you rather have this. It's so charming. Why do all women want to have fake gold chains and all look the same?" she pleads, scything an entire culture in



one. "I always say I'm a woman born out of her time, then Matthew points out all the other things – the painless dentistry, going to the cinema, hot baths – luxuries which I love."

Hossack has found within her private collection, garnered from up to 30 countries, endless links between objects. Patterns and designs in Aboriginal paintings are repeated on an African bushman's tobacco pouch; the sculpted simplicity of two lovers in bed has been created both by an Ethiopian artist working in a grass hut and by Dora Holzhandler in a studio in Holland Park. "The same idea," says Hossack incredulously. "The universal thread constantly amazes me."

Even the dots from the Aboriginal paintings are echoed on the exuberant sofa upholstered in licks of pineapple, orange and cherry. Its bulk defies logic in this tiny room, but size was not a problem for the four beefy Maoris who turned up early one morning to deliver it. Free delivery had been offered by the nearby shop, which had already dropped the price fast to clear the item which was rather too wild for most people's taste. Hossack's only doubt was whether it would fit: "So at 7.30 in the morning these boys came, cut the window out and hauled the sofa up by hand using a strap. The window was put back and they were gone by ten to eight." As the sofa waited below for haulage, somebody walking past commented, "Oh they're getting rid of that. I don't blame them," recounts Rebecca. "It was obviously meant to come to us."

Meanwhile to Sturgis, the flat was also meant to come to them. "The reason we're here in a small central London place is that Matthew believes his songline [a kind of psychic map] extends from Camden Town, where he was born, two miles down to here and round to Cleveland Street, about 200 yards away where he has his flat and does his writing. And that is his songline, and he won't go off it. Even if he goes south of the river he gets very nervous. I say, 'Oh Matthew, can't we go to Notting Hill,' and he goes, 'No'."

But she has come round to Sturgis's way of thinking. "I do believe you have to stay and confront a place and that a place gets a spirit, and slightly reluctantly I'm adopting Matthew's songline. But that's right, I'm his wife. I promised to obey when we got married," she says with no small irony. The flat, after all, is above her business – the ground floor, glass-fronted gallery space with its stark white walls and uninterrupted polished concrete floor. If the sitting room is a place to calm the spirit, this is the place in which to breathe, like a lung.

"I don't think I could handle it if I didn't have the gallery," says Hossack. "Some nights you crave a big white space. It's quite nice just to have ... nothing. You know how they say inside every fat person there's a thin person. Well, I reckon inside everyone like me, there's a minimalist a trying to get out." □