

Interpretation of dreamtimes in Fitzrovia

THERE was nowhere else for the *beau monde* to be on Thursday evening other than the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in Windmill Street, Fitzrovia, where, of course, I joined them for the private view of "Songlines XVII" – Aboriginal art by eight artists from Fitzroy Crossing in remote north-western Australia.

There were queues down the street as people crammed into the small gallery with its display of vibrant Mangkaja art. "I wanted to recreate the Australian atmosphere," said the eponymous Rebecca. "And with 45-degree heat I thought they'd be feeling at home. But they're complaining." One of the artists, Stumpy Brown, made her feelings known vigorously, sitting down on the stairs and fanning herself.

For the artists it was the first time they had left Australia, even though Ms Hossack has been showing their work for a decade. Fitzroy Crossing was a cattle centre which became a focus for deracinated Aborigines seeking work in the 1950s. They used art as a means of asserting and reclaiming their cultural identities and traditions.

Explaining the diversity of the art – from the bold-dotted whirlwinds of Tommy May to Nipper



REX FONTAINE

Rogers's delicate depiction of a girl hunting, Rebecca said: "What people don't realise is that there are so many different types of nations. These artists alone come from three different tribes – the Banuba, the Walmajarri and the Wanjunka. We should see Australia not as one nation, but like Europe, with many, many nations. There are so many distinctive styles. Yet people insist on seeing black Australians as being all the same."

The art goes back 40,000 years, but it is only since 1972 that Aborigine artists have taken on the Western medium of painting on canvas. Traditionally it was done on skin or on to earth. Ms

Hossack is frustrated at what she sees as the patronising attitudes of many critics. "The Australian critic Robert Hughes said that this was the last great art movement of the 20th century, but the British critics are much slower than their European counterparts to realise this," she added.

This was a theme followed by Germaine Greer who had come to open the private view. "I don't really feel entitled to open this exhibition," she said. "I want to disclaim the right to speak for Aboriginal people. When I grew up in Australia I never saw an Aborigine. I didn't understand the real situation.

"What is extraordinary is that the Aborigines have had to learn our languages to explain their state of mind and suffering. But it is within our gift to put right this wrong," she added, putting up a spirited plea for Australians to sign a treaty to give them the right to the land.

"It is a symbolic gesture, but Aboriginal people understand symbols. Australia belongs to the Aborigines and people of European descent and others are there on sufferance." Later I caught up with Tommy May and his work *Walpapukal*. He explained to me that *Walpapukal* was "a country where in the



Bearding the artist: Janangoo Butcher Cherel, with Rebecca Hossack, at her gallery's exhibition of Aboriginal painting

PHOTOGRAPH BY MYKEL NICOLAOU

garrangkarni (dreamtime) the snake smelt the wrong people passing through the country. He got up angry and made a big storm and the *willy willy* (wind) lifted all the *waparu* (headbands) off the men's heads." The wind was represented in vibrant browns, whites and yellows

whirling over the big canvas. "We paint stories," Tommy said simply. "It's different to you. We paint the dreamtimes."

He had been over in Britain for nearly a week and said he was thoroughly enjoying it. "We have been running around the city on buses and taxis and

trains," he added. The thing he had enjoyed most was the trip he and his fellow artists had taken to Whitby. Why Whitby? "To see where Captain Cook came from," he said. Now, he felt, they understood more. "We don't feel angry any more. We understand he was just a man like us."

manhood, which, as with most men, has been exaggerated over the years. "At one stage it was only 19ft and he had a clear navel. But at some point it was enlarged," says Mr Papworth comfortingly. He adds a sigh. "The problem is no one ever wants to ask me about

weeks it took him to march from Scotland to London. "I can't read music." It all started at the rally in Hyde Park when he was pushed on stage to sing the songs. "I looked down and saw 125,000 people, and the first note was a pathetic little whimper. Then I got my courage up." The songs went down a treat and the Alliance decided to