

## LOCAL PROFILE

## Great Plains

*REBECCA WALLERSTEINER* celebrates 25 years of colour and creativity with pioneering Australian art dealer Rebecca Hossack

EVEN ON A DRAB, autumnal afternoon, meeting Rebecca Hossack is an immediately cheering experience; her personality is just as colourful and effervescent as the paintings she exhibits.

A former Australian Cultural Attaché, Hossack has just returned from visiting her New York gallery, which opened in 2011. She is currently a Director of LAPADA (the association of art and antique dealers) and specialises in aboriginal art and up-and-coming artists. At the forefront of the London and New York art scene, this year she celebrates 25 years since opening her first gallery in Fitzrovia and the expansion of her business into Kensington and Chelsea.

We meet at the Australian-owned Gail's Artisan Bakery on Portobello Road, known for serving the best 'flat white' coffee in London. Hossack is holding an exhibition of paintings by West Kensington-based artist Piers Bourke, whom she represents, on the walls here. As we sip our (excellent) coffee, we admire Bourke's bold depiction of a purple telephone booth – rather like a psychedelic TARDIS – which explores the optical effect of colour. "The main aim of my gallery is to show the great diversity of contemporary art", says Hossack. My favourite picture must be his blown-up stamp with the Queen's head in a vivid pink, created to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Her Majesty's Coronation this year.

Born in Melbourne, Australia, Hossack has always hated greyness, preferring sunny skies, light and colour.

Tall, slim and fair, she has an inexhaustible childlike enthusiasm and energy for life. She arrived in London in 1980 to study law but soon realised that she was passionate about art. She astutely spotted a gap in the market for Australian Aboriginal art, which was largely absent from the London gallery scene.

Bravely borrowing £25,000, Hossack then launched her first gallery in Soho. "When [it] opened, Australian art was virtually unknown and we were taking a huge gamble. Two days after we signed the lease in 1988, the stock market crashed and the recession hit, so I had many sleepless nights during those first years."

Thanks to her ingenuity, the business thrived and Hossack soon opened another two galleries in London and a third in New York. Her newest joint venture is with the Australian co-founders of Gail's Bakeries to hold exhibitions for 16 of her artists in their shops – three of which are situated in the borough at 138 Portobello Road, 209 King's Road and 341 Fulham Road. The company prides itself on being additive and preservative-free and I can testify that Gail's freshly-baked bread must be the tastiest available in the area. In fact, Gail's flat white coffee was so good

that I couldn't resist returning for another the following Saturday; I wasn't surprised to find the shop packed, with a queue of customers snaking into Portobello Road. It is well worth queuing for the excellent walnut bread and caramelised garlic sour dough.

"We're delighted to be marking our quarter-



century by showcasing some of our favourite and most imaginative artists at branches of Gail's, who have catered for the Serpentine Gallery and Frieze Art Fair," says Hossack. The local artists she has chosen to exhibit include Piers Bourke, Hepzibah Swinford, Holly Freaan and crochet artist Kate Jenkins.

So what qualities does she look for in artists? "Originality, imagination and hard work," she replies, waving her hand at Bourke's colourful Pop-Art inspired Royal stamp. She has an abundance of these qualities herself. "I slept on the floor of the bookshop where I was

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working when I first arrived in England in order to save the rent to buy art," she explains. Luckily the owner never realised. Hossack has shown Bourke's work at exhibitions around the world, taking it to Sydney this month, as well as the Hamptons Art Fair in October. "In terms of activity, no one can outdo Rebecca," says Bourke.

Hossack also represents Notting Hill-based Hepzibah Swinford, a self-taught painter of flowers who will also be displaying her work at Gail's. Swinford captures the beauty and sheer variety of flower forms in her colourful paintings, which are kaleidoscopic explosions of naïve colour. It therefore doesn't surprise me to hear that celebrities including Graham Norton, Alan Carr and Jack Dee have bought her work.

Hossack was first to discover the talented luxury ethnic jewellery designer Pippa Small, whose shop on Westbourne Grove sells her exquisite designs. Both cultural nomads, they share a fascination and concern for indigenous peoples and their plights. "As food and music from all over the world are discussed, over the past 25 years I've often asked myself why this interest and curiosity in the creation of other cultures doesn't extend to the art world," comments Hossack. As London's most prominent indigenous art dealer, hers was the first gallery in Europe to exhibit Aboriginal painting. "I love to spend time with Aboriginal people and I admire their humour and originality. Their art is the human spirit being generous and kind; we could do with more of this in the Western world."

Hossack is happily married to well-known biographer Matthew Sturgis, author of an excellent book about the life of artist Aubrey Beardsley. Tall, lanky and sensitive, Sturgis is currently writing a biography of the flamboyant writer



This page from top/ Meissen Flowers, Hepzibah Swinford; Royal Stamp image, Piers Bourke

Opposite/ Purple Telephone Box, Piers Bourke

Oscar Wilde, who for many years lived at 34 Tite Street in Chelsea. "Matthew likes to do the cooking!" smiles Hossack. She asks Matthew to search her luggage for a present for me and I'm extremely touched when she gives me a beautiful, perfectly rounded stone with a quartz-like sparkle, which reminds me of Henry Moore's sculptures. She tells me, as I'd expect from an eagle-eyed art lover, that it caught her eye on a beach in Vancouver. ■

Rebecca Hossack took part in the British Art Fair (11-15 September) at Kensington's Royal College of Art