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## SPECIAL FEATURES

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# LIFESTYLE

Jonny Beardsall meets gallery owner and art dealer  
Rebecca Hossack, who has been instrumental in bringing  
many Aboriginal artists to an international audience

PHOTOGRAPHS HELEN CATHCART







OPPOSITE A Mimi spirit sculpture by Mick Kubaku and a basket woven from salvaged fishing nets, by Mavis Ngallametta, form part of Rebecca Hossack's collection of Aboriginal art in her house in central London. THIS PAGE Rebecca stands outside the house; the front door is decorated with Chinese characters in gold leaf, representing 'wisdom' and 'happiness'





**THIS PAGE** Outside her Conway Street gallery (above), Rebecca talks to gallery assistants (from left) Frances Foni and Kate Searles; inside (above right), exhibits include sculptures and paintings by David Whitaker. Rebecca cycles to her Charlotte Street gallery (below left and right). **OPPOSITE** Rebecca discusses a new work – a portrait of the artist's father – with artist and illusionist Derren Brown



**O**n the roof of the Rebecca Hossack gallery in Fitzrovia, London, the Australian dealer who introduced Aboriginal art to Britain in the Eighties has created a minor rainforest. But, given that she has a second gallery in Charlotte Street and another in an old civil-war munitions store in New York, you might assume she has scant time to enjoy it. 'I do, I do – this is my only garden,' she says, sitting under a canopy of flowering cherry, olive, silver birch, fig, night-scented jasmine and camellias with an understorey of agapanthus, kumquats and geraniums.

She lives with her husband, the writer Matthew Sturgis, who is currently working on a new biography of Oscar Wilde. They share a love of books and pictures, but because of her travels on the international art-fair circuit, her lifestyle is more frenetic than his.

Arriving in London in 1982, she was a reluctant trainee barrister, having previously studied art history, where her real interest lay. 'I was here under parental pressure, and with a covert mission to see the wonderful paintings in the National Gallery,' she says. 'In Australia, a van Eyck on a screen looks as big as a Tiepolo. I couldn't wait.'

A few days into a barrister training course, she applied to study fine art at Christie's. The next course was full but she took a last-minute place when a student from the Philippines fell pregnant. 'Funny thing... I was lecturing there 20 years later when a student stuck her hand up. She said, "I changed your life. You took my mum's place when she left to have me."'

In 1988, Rebecca was working as an artist's agent when she signed the lease on an empty shop in Windmill Street two days before the stock-market crash. 'I wanted to open a gallery. It was a sunny day. If it had been raining, I might have gone back to law,' she says.

Rebecca never looked back. She soon went on to show Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, who died in 2002, arguably the world's most famous Aboriginal artist. 'I twice took him to meet the Queen and his work hangs in her private collection,' she says. 'I also managed to get him free first-class travel on British Airways for life, after >











he was commissioned to design one of their aeroplane tail fins.'

Championing individuality, she was first to break down the barrier between art and craft in a gallery setting. 'I look into an artist's eyes and I just know,' she says. 'When I first came across the jeweller Pippa Small, I was bowled over and wanted to show her. People said, "You can't show a jeweller," but I argued, "Look at the colour and composition, not at the medium. She is a creative genius."'

She also introduced potter Ann Stokes, now 89, whose work is at the V&A and in many corners of Rebecca's house. Printmaker Phil Shaw is one of her more recent and brightest stars who, with collagist Peter Clark and draughtsman Laura Jordan, was among her artists showing in 16 Gail's Artisan Bakeries across London last summer.

Phil Shaw, who was running a university art department five years ago, created the thought-provoking print that David Cameron presented to the world leaders at the 2013 G8 summit in Northern Ireland. 'Rebecca changed my life completely and now she sells me around the world. She has this unflagging energy,' he says.

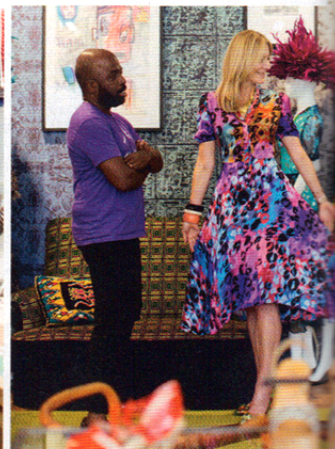
Rebecca loves to visit far-flung places and, every year, small planes take her to the most remote Aboriginal communities she can find in Australia and beyond. 'I'm truly happy then,' she says.

The rights of indigenous peoples matter to her. In May, she walked up Ben Nevis with fellow art dealer Ghislain Pascal, raising £20,000 for the human-rights organisation Survival International. Last year, she took a three-day bus ride from Perth in Australia to see the ancient petroglyphs on the Burrup Peninsula. 'In the red iron-oxide rocks are the earliest carvings of a human face,' she says. 'It is a place few Australians have even heard of and it's being destroyed by the shameful activities of mining companies.'

Rebecca's home is a five-minute walk from her gallery in Conway Street. Along the way, you pass some of the 70 maples and silver birches that she helped to fund by running the New York marathon in 2006 for the tree-planting initiative Street Tree.

While the façade of the five-storey house is painted in Farrow & Ball's moody 'Down Pipe' grey, the front door is fun, with Chinese characters painted by Rebecca in gold leaf representing 'Wisdom and happiness'. Inside, what you find on the white-painted walls would enthrall >

**THIS PAGE FROM TOP** Rebecca catches up with artist Holly Freen at Gail's Artisan Bakery on the King's Road. Rebecca's writer husband, Matthew Sturgis, researches at the London Library. Rebecca and singer Josephine Amankwah are both trustees of the ecological magazine *Resurgence*. Artist Phil Shaw shows Rebecca a new print at his studio. Rebecca tries on a dress by designer Duro Olowu in his Mayfair shop











an ethnologist and an art collector alike. A Tree of Knowledge, a traditional totem covered in twine handwoven from bark, hangs near a huge, framed linocut by Dennis Nona, a Torres Strait Islander artist, which represents the story of Sessere, a man who became a bird.

While the house has an exuberant vibe, it is devoid of domestic disarray, with barely a scuff on the chestnut-leather dining-room floor by Bill Amberg. 'We don't eat in very much,' says Rebecca. Nor is there a single family snap on show – not that there is room between guinea-fowl feathers from Papua New Guinea, Ethiopian scrolls, a chair from the Orkneys that resembles a woven beehive and an African carved cat with spiky teeth believed to absorb evil.

Over a door is a macaw headdress from the Amazon, a present from the writer Bruce Chatwin to Sally, Duchess of Westminster, who gave it to Rebecca. 'Bruce loved the gallery,' she says. 'He'd often sit at the table just outside.' On a shelf stands a cartoon-like sculpture by Lucy Casson of three dogs with shrew-like faces dancing in a kitchen, each made from discarded metal, wire and fabric.

Upstairs, Matthew's 300-year-old wardrobe has, inside it, a delivery note dated 1716 to an address in Tower Hill. Rebecca's cupboard is more colourful, bursting with dresses in bold prints by the Nigerian-born designer Duro Olowu, whose clothes she adores.

Matthew's workroom is lined with books and offers few views to distract him. He used to paint but has not picked up his brushes since 1971, when his beloved Arsenal won the FA Cup. His primitive painting records the moments after Charlie George scored the winner. 'I was in a Greek restaurant the other day when I spotted Charlie. I thanked him for scoring the winning goal, nipped home and brought the picture back for him to sign,' says Matthew, beginning to tingle again at the mere thought of it □

**OPPOSITE** The couple's London house has a substantial collection of Aboriginal art, including paintings by Queenie McKenzie and Cyril Brown (top), bark paintings and hollow-log coffins from northern Australia (below left) and a ceramic tree by Ann Stokes (below right). **THIS PAGE** CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Two felt rodents, bought on a trip to Sweden, are the unexpected occupiers of an Orkney chair in the sitting room. A painting of a kangaroo by Koori artist Robert Campbell Jr contributes to the colourful atmosphere. Matthew and Rebecca have tea in Honey & Co in Warren Street



Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery: 020-7255 2828; [www.rebeccahossack.com](http://www.rebeccahossack.com)  
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