

Fitzrovin'

The established gallery trade struggles to avoid being subsumed by the concrete and smoked glass emporiums which now dominate the art world. But one gallerist has adopted the ethical stance of a traditional dealer and redefined it for modern times. The result? A thriving business with galleries in London and New York.

TEXT JENNIFER SHARP PORTRAIT DAFYDD JONES



REBECCA HOSSACK at the Affordable Art Fair 2014

ART14: THE FAIR IS WINDING down and most gallerists, wearing signature black, look jaded. But things are different at Stand F11. Rebecca Hossack, a slim, striking figure, easily 6ft tall with long blonde hair, wears a brightly coloured dress, decorated plimsolls on her feet and maintains her usual irrepressible manner. The walls are crowded with work by different artists and Iain Nutting's scrap metal gorilla sculpture jostles for floor space with a serene white sofa that's art not seating. The sheer mixture is intriguing, democratic and fun. It sums up Hossack's unique contribution to the contemporary art scene – not bad for an Aussie girl from Melbourne who arrived here in the 1980s with plans to be a lawyer.

While there is a small gallery at 28 Charlotte Street, her London headquarters are in Conway Street, occupying a severe modern building with exhibition space on three well-lit floors, enlivened by a fire-engine red metal spiral staircase. There's also a roof terrace, densely planted with flowering cherry, silver birch and scented jasmine, and a long metal fire escape engulfed in potted shrubs and vigorous tree ferns.

It's part of the charm and undeniable strength of the gallery that she embraces talent as varied as collagist Peter Clark (with recurring themes of animals and football) tinsmith Lucy Casson, and digital print-maker Phil Shaw, who creates spoof library shelves with witty titles. There are complex textile pictures by Karen Nicol, dramatic animal heads made from plaster, wire, paint and hair, ironically mounted as trophies, by David Farrer, and a set of playing cards by Holly

Frean, illustrated with wry sketches of her favourite artists. And, of course, no Rebecca Hossack show would be complete without the presence of the Aboriginal art that she has done so much to promote in the UK.

The top floor is an eclectic mix of ethnic paintings and artefacts, all unique and beautiful: a scooped out wooden boat, the now-familiar dot paintings and totem figures with emblems of snakes and crocodiles. One item is not for sale, a painted door by Clifford Possum that captures the dreamlike transcendence of the very best Aboriginal painters. It was a gift from the artist who was deeply grateful for Hossack's work on behalf of him and his people. She twice took Possum to meet the Queen (his work hangs in her private collection) and when he was commissioned to design one of the BA taillins (in their ill-advised ecumenical moment) she secured first class travel for him for life.

This was in the early Nineties when she was Australian Cultural Attaché in London, meriting a signed photograph from Barry Humphries (or rather his alter ego the monstrous Sir Les Patterson), with the affectionate message: 'all the best Becky from your unworthy predecessor'. It was a role she

threw herself into with the same gusto that pervades her whole life. A quick précis shows an astonishingly varied timeline.

In 1982, the young Hossack left strict, bourgeois Melbourne with degrees in law and fine art and arrived in London to train as a barrister at Middle Temple. That didn't last long. Her overwhelming interest was in the art world and she started working as an artists' agent until, more by chance than

'I had no friends, no money, I had nothing, but I was determined.'

planning, she opened a gallery in Windmill Street, then a run-down part of London. Her 1988 business plan wouldn't stand up to modern scrutiny.

'I didn't have a penny other than what I'd earned back home working as a waitress,' says the doctor's daughter. 'I had no friends, no money, I had nothing, but I was determined. I borrowed £20,000 from Barclays and the opening show was *Hearts of Oak* with

paintings by Paul Moriarty. Then we held the first ever exhibition by Simon Costin who created scenarios and tiny animals dressed in clothes under glass domes. They were absolutely wonderful. The £20k didn't go far, we spent it on the opening party with champagne and gold printed invitations and a beautiful book for Simon with hand-tinted illustrations. But instead of sliding into bankruptcy, the gallery took off. Hossack's approach was a breath of fresh air in the traditional art world staffed by snooty upper class blokes and girls in pearls who made the tea. This new gallery was recruiting a new breed of collector. 'The first sale was to Linda, my hairdresser from Vidal Sassoon,' says Hossack. 'She had short spiky red hair – you couldn't imagine her in Cork Street – but she still loves that painting.'

The following 25 years have been spent discovering and nurturing talent such as Karen Nicol who was teaching textiles at the Royal College. 'She had made chairs for the White House and clothes for the couture fashion houses like Chanel and Clements Ribeiro,' says Hossack, 'but I said to her "You're an artist" and she said "No, I just embroider cardigans"'. Hossack points to a monkey picture made of richly embossed, stitched and tattooed suede leather. 'Karen's work is amazing. We held her first show about three years ago and the pictures were inspired by a trip we made together to the zoo.'

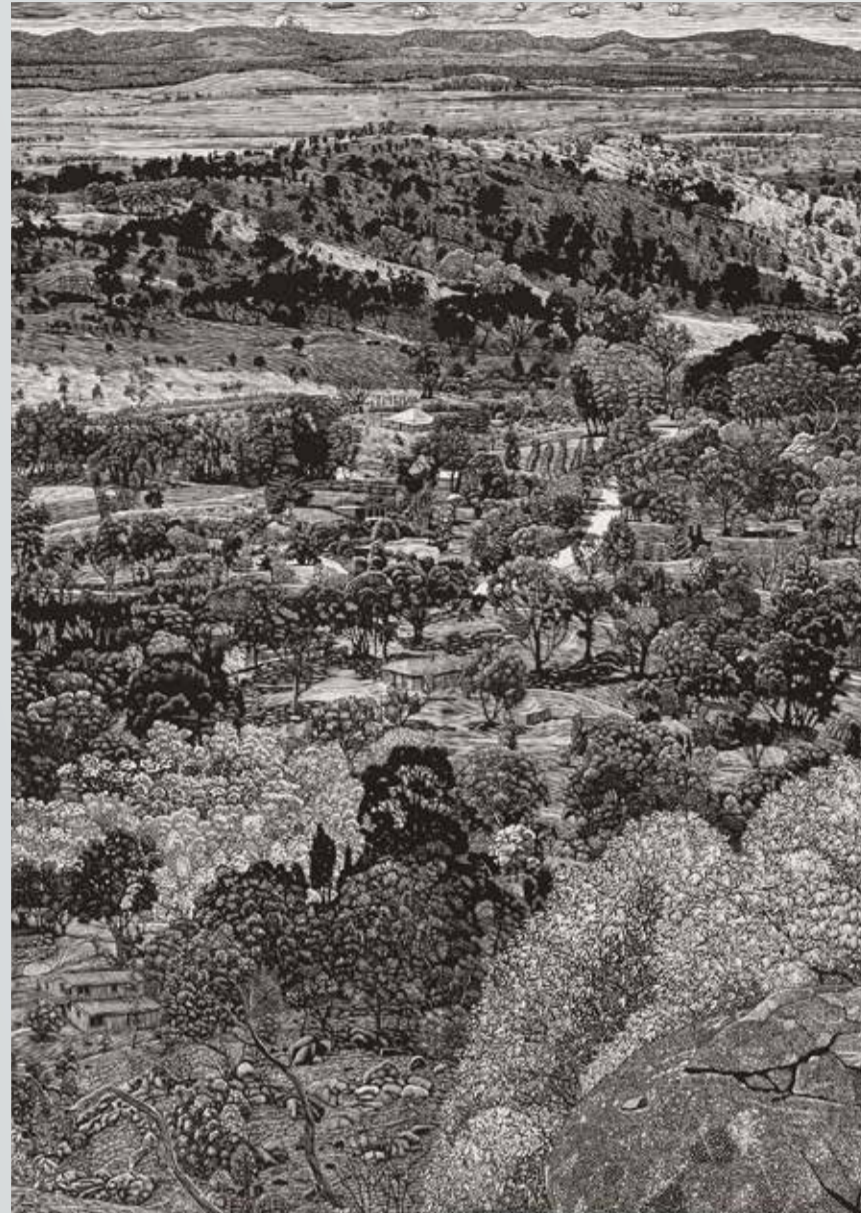
Rebecca Jewell, now artist in residence at the British Museum, was studying tribal headdresses and doing precise academic drawings when Hossack first met her. Jewell is now a successful artist etching exquisite Audubon-type birds on to feathers. 'I said to her "Push it, push it",' says Hossack, 'and now she's doing so well.'

Hossack's enthusiasms extend far beyond her business. She has been a Camden councillor and campaigned for the beautification of the borough, running marathons to raise money for extensive tree planting, and fighting developers to create allotments and houses for local people rather than rich foreigners.

PHIL SHAW London New York Paris Moscow, 2014. Eight Colour Pigment Based Archival Print on Hahnemühle Paper. Each shelf is made up of colour co-ordinated books representing stations along a metro line in each city: top shelf is the London Underground Victoria Line; the second shelf is the IND Crossstown Line that runs through Brooklyn; the third shelf shows the Paris Métro Line 1; and the fourth shows the Sokolnicheskaya Line on the Moscow Metro.



James Mayor of the Mayor Gallery, London



DAVID FRAZER *Waiting for Rain, 2013. Woodcut Print*



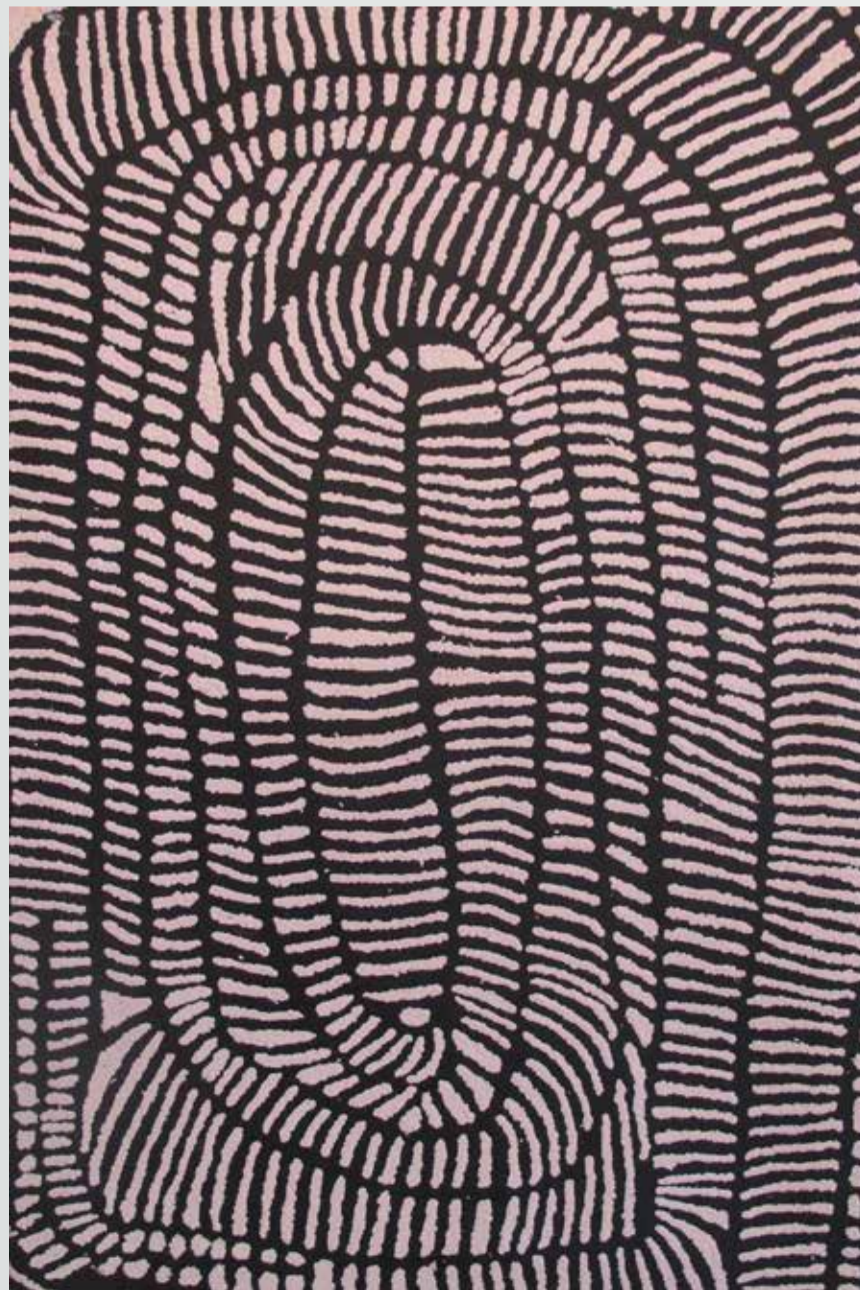
ILONA SZALAY *Dream, 2013. Oil paint and resin on wood board*

Along with other residents, she vigorously promoted a return to the name Fitzrovia, used in the 1940s by local literary notables such as **Julian MacLaren-Ross**, the poet **Tambimuttu**, who coined the term, and **Dylan Thomas**.

She is a director of **LAPADA** and a tireless world traveller, promoting her own artists with 18 international fairs a year and a



KAREN NICOL *Saffron, 2013. Velvet and Embroidery*



NANYUMA NAPANGATI Untitled

terrifying schedule. 'I've had 80 days without a break,' she says, 'with shows in Singapore, Shanghai, Seattle, Vancouver, Toronto...'. The list goes on. She has a gallery in New York occupying an old Civil War munitions store and still manages to go back regularly to Australia. Last year she took a three-day bus ride from Perth to see the ancient petroglyphs on the Burrup Peninsula with the earliest carvings of a human face in the red iron-oxide rocks.

Hossack is married to the writer **Matthew Sturgis** and they live a short walk from her galleries. The five-storey house is painted white inside, an ideal setting for her own varied and flamboyant art collection, much of it ethnic and Aboriginal work. There is a vibrant basket woven from salvaged fishing nets by **Mavis Ngallameta**; an Orkney chair, home to a pair of felt rodents from Sweden; a traditional totem *Tree of Knowledge* covered in bark twine; and a huge framed linocut showing the story of **Sessere**, the man who became a bird, by **Dennis Nona**, a Torres Strait islander. There is also antique British furniture and eye-catching pieces by the self-taught potter **Anne Stokes**, born in 1922 and still thriving. Hossack has collected her work for years and has a huge collection in both her home and the gallery.

Hossack clearly loves technique and craft, virtues often overlooked in the modern obsession with conceptualism. 'It's ridiculous

how the market often doesn't value skill,' she says. 'At Bonhams, I saw the most beautiful *pietra dura* tabletop with an Annunciation scene that went for £80k. It was rare and unique and completely beautiful. Why wouldn't you buy that instead of just another mass-produced spot painting?' Don't get her started about the current state of the art world.

'It's all wrong, the manipulation of the market, it's nothing to do with loving the work. There should be a new word for art dealers like me who are not interested in money but like working with artists, and those people who see art simply as a commodity. That should be called investment. It's just for rich people who want to park their money somewhere safe. It's all about profit and tax deductions and pumping up the market. Most of that work never sees the light of day – it's kept in a bank vault. It's everything the true, original creative spirit is not. It's everything the real joy of art is not. **DH Lawrence** said art comes from here [she touches her diaphragm] – it's a physical reaction to the work. But these people are parasites on the body of art. They're horrible, they're fleas.'

As well as trenchant views on her own profession, Hossack is refreshingly free from the jargon of the art world. When told people often find curator essays in exhibition catalogues completely opaque, she explodes. 'Bullshit, bullshit! I really love language but these people don't know what they're talking about. Everyone is too frightened to say anything and silly rich millionaires are intimidated by it.'

But to get on in the art world must one adopt this parallel language, the Orwellian 'art-speak' that's the accepted style among experts? Hossack responds swiftly. 'It's a self-referential world, hermetically sealed against outsiders. They're just talking to each other, they're an irritant between the viewer and a work of art.' And she adds bitterly, 'few in the art press ever stand up to this nonsense'.

Certainly Hossack's own passionate enthusiasm for art is all about communication and permission. 'Everyone's a person,' she says, clearly meaning that everyone is entitled to an opinion, whatever the bank balance, and prices at her galleries have stayed reasonable, despite the accelerating madness in the contemporary art world.

Hossack gives her all for her artists. Phil Shaw, one of her most recently acquired stars, was teaching art in a university five years ago but in 2013, **David Cameron** presented his thought-provoking print to world leaders at the G8 summit. 'Rebecca changed my life completely,' he says, 'and now she sells my work around the world. She has this unflagging energy.'

Perhaps, but at times it can be wearing as she explains ruefully. 'When I get back from a trip, even before I'm off the plane, my artists are on the phone or texting: "What happened? What do you think? When can we meet?" I could be lying there bleeding to death and they'd all be clustering around saying "What do you think of this?" But artists have to be like that. They need to be nurtured.'

'I tell them to go away, be a scientist, be an engineer, do something with a bit of intellectual rigour.'

And so do clients, though Hossack's approach is more personal than the smarmy courtiers who have colonised the art world. As well as a Silver party to celebrate 25 years in London, she gave a small dinner for her 25 favourite customers. 'They were all very different, lovely country people, friends and neighbours, and people in hedge funds. Some have been buying from the gallery for years, some are very new clients and though none of them knew each other, they got on like a house on fire,' says Hossack. 'One couple gave me a lovely silver frame containing pictures of all the work they'd bought here over the years.'

How does she feel about the huge influx of young people into the art world; people who traditionally would have been drawn to the professions – doctor, architect, soldier, lawyer – not unlike her own background? 'There are too many artists,' says Hossack firmly. 'So many people come to ask for advice but most times, I tell them to go away, be a scientist, be an engineer, do something with a bit of intellectual rigour. Being famous and successful takes lots of really hard work. Because there's so much coverage in the media, they just think it's fun and easy and you sit around eating cakes all day...'

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LINKS
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REBECCA HOSSACK



REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY in Mott Street, New York; Charlotte Street and Conway Street, London W1