

Rebecca's

As our first cultural attache to the UK, Rebecca Hossack proved there was more to Australia than Paul Hogan and Sir Les Patterson. Her next agenda: to make London more like Melbourne.

Rebecca Hossack has two Aboriginal burial poles in her basement: one for herself and one for her husband. When she dies, Hossack says, her bones will be bleached on the roof of her London house, placed in her burial pole and sent back to Australia. The pole will be buried near Gembrook where her parents have a farm.

So much for death. In the full flow of life, Hossack is gregarious and irrepressible, dismounting from her bicycle in a tumble of smiles and giggles. She is dressed in floating blue layers, with turquoise toenails and fingers showcasing an array of ethnic jewellery. Hossack cossets and charms in equal measure and sitting within her orbit is immediately cheering. As her friend, the writer Jill, Duchess of Hamilton, puts it, "I enjoy being with her. She has tremendous energy and enthusiasm and kindness."

At the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London's Fitzrovia, an area famed for its arty and bohemian associations (Dylan Thomas and Augustus John drank in the pub a few doors down), Hossack surveys the current exhibition by Akash Bhatt, a young British artist from Leicester. A visitor to the gallery peers at one of Bhatt's delicate interpretations of a Cuban street scene. "Isn't it lovely?" calls Hossack. "That's my favourite."

Minutes later, when another prospective customer expresses interest in a different painting, Hossack enthuses again. "I love that one – it's my favourite." Flattered that her

artistic appreciation is on track, the woman buys the picture. It's not that Hossack is out to make fools of her customers – it's just that her loyalty to her artists and love of their work means that all the paintings are her favourites and why shouldn't she share her passion with the rest of us?

These powers of persuasion will do wonders for Hossack after her triumph in May's local government elections in which she was voted in to north London's Camden Council as a Conservative councillor for the ward of Bloomsbury – once the stamping-ground of Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Vanessa Bell and the rest of the Bloomsbury set. Hossack is the first Tory councillor to have been elected in this Labour stronghold for 20 years and she is thrilled, although admittedly a little daunted at the prospect of the next four years. "I didn't expect to win and when they announced the result, I was shocked and my legs went very shaky," she recalls. "Then I took a deep breath and said to myself, 'Well, I've been elected and it's going to be a huge amount of work but I'll put my heart into it and I'll try and make things better for people.'"

Hossack was born in Melbourne in 1955. Her father was a surgeon and her mother raised Rebecca and her three younger sisters. The family home was a big white house with a tower in Hawthorn and Hossack remembers an idyllic childhood of sunny afternoons idling by the Yarra after school. From her father she inherited a love of art, from her mother a love of embroidery and a passion for pugs.

After a stint at St Catherine's in Toorak and a year at Methodist Ladies' College in Kew she went to Geelong Grammar at 17, just when it was turning co-educational. Taking a shower in the boys' school at 3am one morning was Hossack's undoing and she was expelled, although quickly reinstated after winning a poetry prize. She studied law at the University of Melbourne and then transferred to the Australian National University in Canberra, gaining a degree in art history before returning to Melbourne to complete her law finals.

After graduating, Hossack fell in with her parents' wishes and opted to study for the bar at London's Middle Temple. In October 1980, after a tearful goodbye to her boyfriend, Demons footballer Steven Smith, she arrived in London. The chill of autumn was in the air and she didn't own a coat. Home was a shabby hostel near King's Cross station. She knew no one in

London and even if she had any friends, her budget of £20 a week didn't leave much spare for socialising. "I remember freezing in my crummy bed with its thin blanket and thinking, this is what it's like to be grown up – this is life now and it's horrid."

She wasn't even convinced that law was her destiny. Art was what interested her but she wanted to please her parents. However, in one of those life-changing moments that define what we eventually become, a fellow student asked her what she really wanted to do and Hossack's response was instant – "look at pictures". The girl told her about Christie's, the prestigious auction house, and Hossack was on her way. "It sounds ridiculous but I'd never thought about doing something with art before and no one had ever suggested it but it made perfect sense." Hossack hadn't yet paid her law school fees and, without telling her parents, swerved the Middle Temple and enrolled in a history of fine art course at Christie's.

Christie's was a revelation for Hossack, whose experience of art history back home had been limited. "In Australia, you see these great paintings on a projector or a slide so you don't know that a van Eyck is six inches square and a Poussin is four metres. Melbourne has a fine collection but it's not comparable to what you can see in this country," she says.

After completing the course, Hossack was awarded a fellowship to work at the Guggenheim museum in Venice. "On my first day, I was handed a bottle of Brasso and told to polish the Brancusi!" she chuckles.

Back in London, she found work in an antiquarian bookshop. There was no question of returning to Melbourne; going back would have meant catching up with friends who had moved on and while £50 a week in crumpled notes didn't represent the apotheosis of her career, at least London gave her the opportunity to indulge her cultural proclivities. By day, she'd attend free lectures at the National Gallery, the Tate and the V&A and at night she'd read the shop's art books, flitting between Botticelli and Donatello. Money was still tight so, unknown

Right
Rebecca Hossack outside her home in Bloomsbury. "There's a lot I can do to make London nicer for people."

to the owner of the bookshop, she slept in the basement, unfurling her eiderdown after everyone had left for the day.

When the bookshop closed – "they were more interested in keeping books than selling them" – Hossack found work as an assistant at a Knightsbridge art gallery and from there she became the agent for painter Andrea Tana, the mother of a friend. As Hossack's reputation began to grow, she was approached to organise the final Wapping art show in east London – a last hurrah before property developers razed the artist community's studios.

The Rebecca Hossack Gallery opened in 1988 with a £20,000 overdraft and no business plan. It was one of those places that attracted publicity from the start – no doubt mainly due to Hossack's verve and tenacity. Although she says she's never been commercially astute, Hossack did have an eye for what would cause a stir. Feathered aeroplanes; fish made out of tins; salami donkeys – all years before Tracey Emin had even chosen the thread for her infamous tent.

Today, Hossack's customers include designer Paul Smith, singer Tina Turner and ex-Body Shop supremo Anita Roddick. The gallery champions young British and white Australian artists, such as the Melbourne-based painter David Bromley, but the Songlines season, which runs from June to September each year and features pieces by Aboriginal artists, is especially dear to Hossack's heart. She started exhibiting Aboriginal art early on – Clifford Possum had an exhibition in the gallery's first year – when everyone told her it wouldn't sell, that the grey light of London would do nothing for the vibrant colours and textures and that she'd be bankrupt in two years. But Hossack didn't much care for their opinions; she loved the art and that was all that mattered.

She met Possum in a creek bed in Alice Springs in 1989 and invited him to show at her gallery. He accepted, on condition that he got to meet the Queen, and although Hossack had no way of granting him his wish, she breezily agreed. A year later, she collected Possum from Heathrow Airport →

Right
Hossack with a Balgo Hills painting at London's Barbican Arts Centre in 1994.



and they drove past Buckingham Palace, which excited him even more. At that point, Hossack realised the enormity of her empty promise. "It was really thoughtless of me to raise his expectations and I felt like I had joined the ranks of so many other people who had let Aboriginal people down."

The next day she rang Buckingham Palace, but to no avail. She got a similar response from the Australian High Commission and by the time of Possum's private view that evening, she was in despair. She poured out her heart to a sympathetic guest, all the while summoning the courage to tell Possum that his longed-for meeting wouldn't happen. But the next morning her sympathetic listener called to say he'd spoken to his cousin and the meeting with the Queen was on for that afternoon. The man was Lord Harewood, his cousin was the Queen and a few hours later Hossack and Possum were meeting HM herself. Decked out in a morning suit, with paintbrushes stuck in his top hat and possums painted on his white tennis shoes, the artist was in his element. "He called it his number one day," says Hossack.

Last January, she visited the Spinifex community in remote Western Australia – "the temperature was about 130 degrees; my whole face burnt off" – before showing their work in London: striking canvases telling the stories of their land and people. "I'm never happier than when I'm with Aboriginal people," Hossack says. "They have the force of life in them, something we don't have. They have something special."

In 1993, Hossack was approached by the Australian High Commission to be Australia's first cultural attache to the UK, a role made famous, of course, by the Barry Humphries character Sir Les Patterson. In those days, Australian culture was an oxymoron in Britain. How the British press hooted at the idea of an attache promoting the twin Aussie arts of beer-drinking and barbecuing. In Hossack's toilet there is a framed cartoon from the London *Evening Standard* in which three "candidates" for the post, Sir Les Patterson, Dame Edna Everage and Crocodile Dundee,

are shown waiting outside "Keating House" with the caption: "Oh jeez, it's going to be a difficult decision – they all look good to me!" Barry Humphries, a close friend of Hossack, says: "I retired Sir Les as soon as I discovered that the real cultural attache was a totally gorgeous woman. Rebecca did a great job. She's very bright and she brought glamour to the role – everyone talked about her. She's the heterosexual thinking man's Kylie Minogue."

The job was intense, seven days and seven nights a week. Hossack initiated readings by Australian writers, organised art exhibitions at Australia House and travelled up and down the country spreading the word. When her contract ended four years later, she was secretly relieved: it meant she could return to her first love – her gallery. However, fellow Australians in London didn't take it so well.irate letters bombarded the newspapers from, among others, Humphries, Clive James, Kathy Lette and her husband Geoffrey Robertson, QC. The general feeling was that losing Hossack was an unmitigated catastrophe.

"I didn't want any fuss but people were very sweet and took it upon themselves to protest. It was really touching," says Hossack.

Hossack is not your typical stuffed-shirt Conservative councillor. Her agenda is to make Bloomsbury more like Australia, which she says means planting more trees in the streets. "If I'd stayed in Melbourne there's no way I would have gone into politics because, as far as I'm concerned, Australia is perfect and there's nothing I could do. But here there's a lot I can do to make London nicer for people."

She also campaigned to give rebates to owners of electric cars and protect local shops against the might of the global chains.

"I'm not a greedy Conservative bastard. I can't define why I am Conservative – I just feel it, which isn't very political."

It's this disarming lack of guile that will endear Hossack to the residents of Bloomsbury, according to Lynton Crosby, the Australian political guru who was Conservative leader Michael Howard's campaign director in the UK's last general election. "In politics today, people respond to characters," he says. "Rebecca is a change from the bland white-bread politicians. She cuts through. She's organic multi-grain with a thick crust."

Hossack is married to English writer Matthew Sturgis and lives in Fitzrovia in the shadow of the London landmark the British Telecom Tower. She doesn't have children – "the world doesn't need more people at the moment" – but with her work (she is preparing to open her third gallery), her friends and council responsibilities she'd be pressed to find the time to devote to them.

She travels home to Melbourne, where her parents still live, every year. "When I go to Melbourne, I get a huge pain in my chest – it's like being in love and being rejected. I just feel so happy there. I know that if I was in Australia, I'd wake up with more happiness in my heart but I'm learning more by living in London," she says. "Sometimes I think about my longing for Australia and ask, 'Why did you do this to me?' but I never fight it. I believe in fate." (m)

"She's very bright and she brought glamour to the role ... She's the heterosexual thinking man's Kylie Minogue." Barry Humphries

thestory

Rebecca Hossack. Born in Melbourne, the eldest of four girls. Attended St Catherine's, Methodist Ladies' College and Geelong Grammar. Studied law at the University of Melbourne and art history at ANU.

1981 Moved to London to study for the bar. Abandoned law for a diploma of art history at Christie's. Studied at the Venice Guggenheim.

1988 Opened first gallery in London.

1989 Staged first *Songlines* show of Aboriginal art at her gallery.

1990 Took artist Clifford Possum to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen.

1991 Married writer Matthew Sturgis.

1992 Opened sculpture park in St James, Piccadilly.

1994 Appointed cultural development officer at Australian High Commission.

1997 Budget cuts at the High Commission see the position abolished. High-profile Australians in London lead a storm of protest.

2000 Opened Charlotte Street Gallery.

2006 Elected to Camden Council as a Conservative member for Bloomsbury ward – the first in 20 years.