

Charlie Brooker on Brain Gym **Germaine Greer** Laurie Anderson

Monday 07/04/08 theguardian

A place called home
Immigration to Britain since the 1940s:
a G2 special

g2



Kwai Li
Hong Kong, 1964



Margaret Coyle
Ireland, 1974



Rebecca Hossack
Australia, 1981

12A *

Rebecca Hossack



1980s: Australia Rebecca Hossack

When she arrived in London after a tearful flight from Melbourne, Rebecca Hossack felt as miserable as the despondent British faces she saw everywhere: "I was utterly wretched. I felt so alone," she says. "I couldn't understand why everybody was so cold, and not smiling."

Seven years after she arrived, Hossack opened an art gallery, which became the first to seriously show Australian Aboriginal art in Europe. She now runs several galleries, which continue to show contemporary non-western and western art. Her early experience of London may sound Dickensian, but it was October 1981 when Hossack dutifully pitched up, aged 24, on the instructions of her parents, who wanted her to complete her legal education by going to the bar. "My heart felt sick because the one thing I loved in the world was Australia. It was my passion. Australian literature, Australian pottery, I am in love with it still," she says. Her dad "believed in the old country. He was still of that generation when England was really, 'Wow!'."

At first, the spirited Hossack meekly submitted to her parents' ambitions. They devised a weekly budget of £12 a week, which meant she washed her hair with soap, lived on eggs on toast and stayed in a hostel near King's Cross, her freezing room six flights of stairs from the toilet.

Within days of starting her law course, she secretly rebelled, taking an art history course at Christie's instead. After studying, reality hit home: "I had no money to go back to Australia. I wasn't a lawyer, I had no qualifications." She

got a job in an old-fashioned bookshop where, unknown to the owners, she slept in the basement, going to the local swimming pool to shower each morning. She gradually got more involved in the art world, organising a final show at the Wapping arts community before the developers moved in. With no money, no contacts and no business experience, she borrowed £20,000 from the bank in 1988 and blew it on her gallery opening party. Then the recession struck. Five art dealers committed suicide in the year she opened, she says. Somehow, Hossack survived and thrived.

In the 1990s she became Australia's cultural attache in London, promoting arts and culture in a land that assumed down under was all Crocodile Dundee and Kylie Minogue. There is no attache post now and she feels her homeland has changed. "Australia is doing so well culturally. If anything it's in danger of getting a bit smug and complacent. People like me who live here are really frowned upon in Australia. We're looked upon as rather sad, like, 'Why would you want to be over there?'"

Having lived in Britain for half her life, she finds herself defending it to her friends. "Australians are really nice when you first meet them, all 'Hi, how are you?' but it can stay on that level for ever. Whereas English people, when they do let you in, and my theory is it takes three years, are really lovely. Friendship is more deep and genuine here because it's harder to have relationships – you can't just go and sit out in the sunshine and watch the harbour and have a few beers."

Hossack is a Conservative Camden councillor but not out of a sense of obligation that