



TECHNICOLOR DREAMTIME

Hot hues blaze through the Georgian house in Fitzrovia belonging to gallery-owner Rebecca Hossack and biographer Matthew Sturgis. The colour comes courtesy of the Aboriginal artists that Rebecca represents – so, too, does the aura of myth and magic. Text: Annabel Freyberg. Photography: Simon Upton





Opposite, from top: this tiny head, sandwiched by books, is by Papua New Guinean artist Akash Bhatt, a 1960s Port Keats shield hangs near Ann Stokes's recessed fish by the bathroom. Main picture: a heart-shaped love goddess by the Haitian artist Constant overlooks the Eero Saarinen dining set



'EVERYTHING IN THIS HOUSE,' says Rebecca Hossack, 'comes from someone we know and love – every picture, every sculpture, every plate. And on the rare occasion we don't know the maker' – she gestures towards a curvy turquoise-glass decanter – 'it came from a shop whose owners we know and love.' These are bold claims, and an extraordinary feat of friendship and acquisition given the quantity of artefacts and pictures on every surface and scrap of wall. But then Hossack, a lawyer-turned-gallery-owner, one-time Australian cultural attaché in Britain and newly elected Tory councillor in the London borough of Camden, is a woman of full-blooded energy and passion. It was she who introduced Aboriginal art to Britain more than two decades ago and she has championed it – and much else besides – since 1988 from her gallery in Windmill Street, Fitzrovia (she also has another space in nearby Charlotte Street). You would expect her to live in a dynamic environment that reflects her multifarious interests.

And she does. Hossack's husband, the writer Matthew Sturgis, is another Fitzrovia of two decades' standing. His books on fin-de-siècle subjects hint at a more crepuscular aesthetic, but that's little in evidence here. After marrying in 1991, the couple lived in the rented flat above Hossack's gallery. Then nine years ago, on his way to play football in Regent's Park, Sturgis spotted a 'To Let or For Sale' sign in what he calls 'the shabby end of Fitzrovia' – where Boy George once lived in a squat. The couple soon acquired half a Georgian terrace house: the basement, ground and first floors. 'Even half a house was enough to live in,' Sturgis comments. He wrote there while building work was going on, finishing his biography of Aubrey Beardsley, then starting on Walter Sickert, who had once dwelled in the same street. 'It was nice to feel his ghost stalking along,' he states.

The house dates from the 1780s, but by the time Hossack and Sturgis arrived 'there wasn't a scrap of anything original – just a small built-in cupboard beside the basement fireplace,' says Sturgis. 'It had been incredibly mucked around, housing a law school then a mini-cab office, so it was littered with self-closing fire doors and loos jutting out into the back yard. It was an odd mix, with some rooms knocked through and some divided up.'



This page, from top: an Egyptian magic scroll covers a pillar; in the 'earth room', bark paintings surround a Westmorland secretaire; a Japanese bamboo light stands by the basement stairs and handrail, both sheathed in leather by Bill Amberg. Opposite: the walnut-veneer kitchen cabinets are topped by an iroko work surface that butts up to Ann Stokes's tiles



The curved aeroplane painting that dominates the top-floor sitting room shows Papua New Guinean artist Mathias Kauage on his way to meet the Queen in Glasgow. In the foreground, Verner Panton's long-tube lamp – his last light design – looms over an original wirework Eames chair and a red-lacquer table, made to measure by Designers Guild







The plan was to make the ground floor and basement into a sitting room, kitchen and dining room – as it is today – and the first floor into a bedroom and study. However, they had hardly finished the ground floor and basement when the expanding family who occupied the top two floors announced that they were leaving. The housing market had meanwhile boomed, so Hossack and Sturgis had to pay more than double what the bottom three floors had cost to secure the rest of the house.

While Hossack's previous flat had had nothing but hot-coloured walls, here she used Dulux brilliant white throughout to create a sense of space in what might otherwise have seemed poky. 'It was a place of awkward spaces, angles and ledges,' she explains. 'So we played with them and made vistas through the rooms.' The house today is airy and bright. A striking, light-creating feature is the series of ceiling-to-knee-height slits that allow you to look through solid walls into the rooms beyond (and give Hossack shelf space for objects of suitable dimensions). Her desire for slits in the dining room was the only thing she and Sturgis disagreed about during the renovation. Happily, he is now convinced. For a while Hossack stifled her desire for another aperture between the dining room and the front door, but not for long – and so the pattern repeated itself throughout the house: 'My desire was to have no walls or ceilings.' On the top floor, she has cut five rectangles into a wall that looks on to the terrace, re-creating a postcard sent to her by Jonathan Jones, Aboriginal curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. As Sturgis points out, Hossack 'treated the house more like a sculpture than architecture' – so the whole thing is a work of art, too.

One of the most dominant domestic presences is the fantastical naive potter Ann Stokes (*WoI* May 1990). 'The house is a shrine to her,' Hossack claims. 'There isn't a room which doesn't contain her work.' Stokes is the creator of the crocodile centrepiece in the book-lined dining room, of the brown, black and white tiles encircling the kitchen – to say nothing of Australian animals on cups and plates – and of several mirrors in the bathroom. Her tour de force, however, is a wall of exotic fish outside the bathroom, with their own dramatic light system.

This page, from top: the rusty-red *Rainbow Serpent*, by Long Tom Tjapanangka, hangs above a Jewish Berbers' rug from Morocco; in the slit fits a *yawk-yawk*, or Aboriginal mermaid, by Owen Yalandja; Camden Council insists the terrace be turned back into a room. Opposite: the curving Nigerian stool echoes *Blake's Bicycle* by George Wyllie





'All my life I dreamed that when I had my house I'd have a floor-to-ceiling tank full of tropical fish,' Hossack explains. 'So I asked the builder to make shelves and boxes and Ann Stokes created the fish to fill them.' Other favourite artists on show include the painter Jimmy Farrelly, the sculptor and former customs officer George Wyllie and, of course, a whole gang of Aboriginal artists – everyone from Narritjin Maymuru (the great bark painter) to Jimmy Pike, Clifford Possum and Long Tom Tjapanangka.

There are two sitting rooms, at opposite ends of the house. The basement, with Bill Amberg leather flooring, is pleasingly cosy and brown-hued. Half is what Hossack calls her 'earth room' – everything here is natural, from paintings on bark to ochre-covered shells, baskets made of pandanis grass, antique wooden chairs from Rebecca's Welsh great-aunt Cecily and a Westmorland writing bureau from the Sturgis family. The other end is a more modern seating area arranged round a pebble gas fire cut neatly into the wall, with a Robin Day sofa in two parts and 1950s table and lamps – a night space. By contrast, the summery and brighter top-floor room has white floorboards, a glossy red table, a red sofa and chair, and a pink armchair.

The bedroom was a 'low, not very attractive room', according to Hossack. 'I wanted to make it feel like a ship's cabin, shutting out the rest of the world.' She therefore lined it with rough-hewn builders' planks – the cheapest form of panelling available – which she painted the palest Farrow & Ball blue. The delicate but vivid textiles on the bed and the yellow feather sun above it create a jolly yet soothing atmosphere. The carpenter throughout was Joseph Whittaker, the son of Robert Whittaker, one of Hossack's artists.

It was a huge task which took some four years in total, and the result is stunningly fresh, modern and original. It shows off some amazing art, yet feels like a home rather than a showcase, albeit one dotted with magical and totemic pieces. Hossack points to the beaten metal talismans on the back of the front door that she bought from a Berber artist in Marrakesh and declares: 'I believe in the magic of a home, in protective spirits' ■

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This page, from top: a chair bequeathed by Rebecca's Welsh great-aunt Cecily sits across from a Cyril Brown painting showing emu's footprints; Rebecca's boudoir contains wood fish given by Sally, Duchess of Westminster; Matthew Sturgis and Rebecca Hossack. Opposite: a feather piece by Simon Costin contrasts texturally with the unplanned boards

