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If they can make it there ...

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Art ... Natasha-Johns Messenger has a green card. Photo: Justin McManus

Aussie expats flourishing in the Big Apple's creative circles tell Stephen Crafti how they got their big breaks.

The "I Love New York" T-shirt, with its iconic heart motif, sums up the Big Apple experience for many creative people. Getting a green card to work in New York is akin to winning the lottery. And finding the right door to open in this city of "rooms within rooms" can take years.

"I'd like to find a T-shirt that says, 'I love and hate New York,' " says Natasha-Johns Messenger.

It's not that the installation artist and filmmaker hasn't been successful since arriving in New York from Australia in mid-2006. She has a green card and recently installed one of her artworks at the MetroTech Centre in Brooklyn, commissioned by the New York Public Art Fund.

"It's just a more challenging place to live than Australia," she says.

"You can't just hop into your car to get supplies. Even groceries have to be carried up flights of stairs."

Johns-Messenger was well known in the Australian art scene for her installations that use mirrors to manipulate space but she felt it was time to dive into a bigger pond. Her first foray into New York was made possible by an Australia Council for the Arts grant, which allowed her to set up a studio for six months. "It was a great opportunity to meet a lot of curators, as well as other artists," she says. More recently Johns-Messenger completed an installation that will be erected at the annual flower show in The Hague in the Netherlands. Made from steel, glass and mirrors, the three-piece interactive work, titled Through to You magnifies its lush surrounds. Johns-Messenger is also enrolled in a masters program in film at Columbia University, considered one of the most prestigious film schools in the world.

"Film is one of the most rigorous art forms. I'm interested in creating narrative films," says Johns-Messenger, who has made some experimental films since enrolling. "I want to shift people's perceptions, whether it's looking at a floor in a new way or viewing a certain space captured with film. It's important to expose the subtext."

Johns-Messenger could have spent her first year in New York knocking on doors and mixing with the "right" people. "There's always a party to go to here. But I prefer to focus on my work and hope that it touches people, whether it's a curator or someone who walks in off the street."

And instead of wearing out soles knocking on doors, she has found the most fruitful encounters occur when she is approached directly, often by a curator or gallery owner. "Here, everyone wants to be an artist or a writer. It's more important to understand why you are making the work in the first place. Hopefully, that piece will lead to the next exhibition."

LIKE Johns-Messenger, Tony Newsham, executive vice-president of Comme des Garçons, one of the world's most coveted fashion labels, focuses on work rather than pursuing the New York social scene. "If I've made a name here, it's because of my job, not because of which party I might have attended," says Newsham in Comme's spacious studio-warehouse in Chelsea.

Newsham has come a long way since leaving Australia at the end of the 1990s.

Baby boomers will fondly recall his Trellini stores in Melbourne and Sydney, which traded from 1977 until closing in 1996. His Sydney boutique in Elizabeth Street, opposite Hyde Park, was designed by architect Daryl Jackson and, with its feature moat, set a benchmark in retail design. As well as selling Trellini's men's label, Newsham was the largest stockist of Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto men's clothing in Australia.

But the upmarket fashion retailer lost everything during the recession that started in the early '90s, including his business and home. "I came to New York with very little. I'd been a buyer for Club Med boutiques after Trellini and I was thinking about returning to Australia," Newsham says. "Comme were looking for someone to look after their New York accounts and I was put forward by the then president of Club Med USA."

Newsham spends three months of each year overseeing accounts in Australia, New Zealand, Mexico and Brazil. Four trips are made to Paris each year and four to Tokyo. He also looks after stores in the US, including Saks Fifth Avenue, Barneys and Bloomingdale's in New York, along with the Comme flagship stores. "It's not dissimilar to running your own business. It's just considerably larger," Newsham says. "Comme des Garçons extends across 16 brands including Comme des Garçons, Rei Kawakubo, Junya Watanabe, Homme Plus, Tao and other brands . . . When we receive a new collection, there can be 350 pieces." Newsham needs to understand what is appropriate for customers. "What sells in the States might not be right for Australia and vice versa," says Newsham, who credits Comme's success to designer Rei Kawakubo's creativity. "Rei doesn't take prisoners. Her designs are driven by creativity, not by being a slave to fashion trends."

After 11 years at Comme, Newsham still works long hours. "I've always sold myself through my work," says the executive, who has only been interviewed twice (including this interview) in more than 30 years in the fashion industry. JEWELLERY designer Nora Kogan has also made New York her home. In her 30s she travelled the world looking for direction. "The grass always looks greener somewhere else," says Kogan, who returned to Australia at the end of the '90s to study jewellery design at Collingwood TAFE in Melbourne. She might have remained in Australia but fell in love with a New Yorker – now her partner. "I'd just finished my jewellery course, so I wasn't coming here with years of experience," says Kogan, who now has her own boutique in Brooklyn. St. Kilda Jewelry – named after the Melbourne suburb where, with her late parents, Kogan arrived from Russia in 1977 – is filled with exquisite diamond-and-gold rings, earrings and bracelets. Traditional with a twist, many of the designs include

serpents and skulls.

Kogan now employs four full-time staff and wholesales to more than 130 stores worldwide but she didn't find the entree to New York "a walk in Central Park".

After arriving in 2002, her first job was at a large jewellery company.

"It was disastrous. It wasn't the work, as a quality-control manager, it was the environment. It was just toxic," she says of the office politics. "After six months I quit. I was at the end of my tether."

Rather than return to Australia, Kogan found a lower-profile job in the jewellery business. "I needed money, so I took a job as an errand girl on 47th Street. I learnt more about the jewellery business in a week than six months in the previous job. I learnt from contractors and suppliers how to do things on a shoestring."

Kogan could have continued in this job had a sales assistant in one of the stores not noticed a ring she was wearing. "I'd made it myself," Kogan says. "It was quite a simple design, with a diamond at the centre."

The resulting commission led to a considerably larger one for the head of a publishing company. Soon after, Kogan took a booth at a trade show. "My first show took \$US25,000 in orders. I had 15 stores on my books."

Every year Kogan's business tripled. And last year St. Kilda Jewelry opened. Cushions on the shelves of the Brooklyn Street store are adorned with koalas and the Sydney Opera House. Displayed on a black wall is a painting by an indigenous Australian artist. And emblazoned in fluorescent lights is a sign saying "good times for a change", reflecting Kogan's attitude to life.

PAINTER David Rankin and his partner, writer Lily Brett, were both well established in their respective fields before they moved to New York in 1989. Rankin was represented by Macquarie Galleries in Sydney and his works were in private collections in Australia and overseas. Brett, a poet and novelist, had had several books published.

"It was David's idea to move to New York," Brett says. "At that stage, I wasn't thinking about a career here, I was more preoccupied with getting adjusted." Rankin felt he needed to move to New York to grow as an artist. "I wanted to experience new challenges," he says. "You know it's time to move when people come up to you at a party and remark how successful you are."

When the couple and their three children arrived, New York wasn't the mellow place it is now. As Brett recalls, "The place was riddled with drugs and it felt quite threatening." They arrived just before Halloween. Every second face was painted in a macabre manner. "I thought it was a fashion trend specific to New York," Brett laughs.

Rankin had lined up a gallery to represent his work and is now represented by the prestigious Andre Zarre gallery in Chelsea.

In the past two decades Brett has written numerous novels and books of poetry, including *Too Many Men*, *What God Wants*, *Just Like That* and the hilarious *You Got to Have Balls*. The last is about a man in his 80s who comes to New York to try his hand at running a meatball restaurant. As with most of her books, the characters are loosely based on family and friends – in this case her father, who left Australia in his 80s to join Brett and Rankin in New York.

Rankin has loved every minute of being in New York; Brett took a little time to settle in. "I was initially told that I wasn't a true New Yorker until I'd bitterly complained about the city," says Brett, who, in the early stages, thought the change of location was a temporary one. "I didn't want to take David's dream away."

Rankin now has two studios, one at home in the couple's loft-style Soho apartment and one within a short walking distance. And Brett, who modestly speaks of her success as "luck" rather than talent, is read by thousands of people around the world.

Although Rankin and Brett continue to see New York as an "endless discovery", they recall the disheartening statistics they read in *The New York Times* soon after they arrived.

"The census stated that 350,000 people classified themselves as artists," Rankin says. "That didn't include the 50,000 artists from abroad who regularly come to New York to find work."

But he took the advice of new-found friends and colleagues. "I was told that you need two of the following in New York to make it as an artist: museums that take your work; great reviews; and being on the radar of major collectors," says the artist, who can now tick all three boxes.

Adds Brett: "I think we've just both been lucky enough to have a great life here."

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