

FIRST PERSON CESA MILTON

‘I made a thousand cups’

This is my first attempt at pottery. I was walking through the British Museum when I saw a Mycenaean cup. It was 4,000 years old, paper thin and exquisite. I wanted to see if I could imitate

it, so I signed up for an adult education course near Marylebone and began to try.

I decided to keep everything I made so that I could see my progress. When I got to about 150 cups, I found I hadn't really made any and got very disheartened. Then Craig, my tutor, said: "The Japanese say that to make one cup, you have to make a thousand", and I cheered up and thought, "Now that's a project."

It took me about two years to finish. I'm a London-based artist and this was one of my longest projects. I went in to the pottery studio twice a week and I didn't get bored for one minute. It did get quite expensive, though, as I had to pay for firing, at 30p to 50p per cup. At one point I had to choose between making my cups and buying new clothes. Of course, I chose the cups.

By the end I was getting the hang of it and they were slightly neater. But I'm still not consistent. A lot of the cups have no bottom or have collapsed. And, since they're only bisque fired, if you put water in them, it just soaks into the clay. So they're essentially useless. But they all belong together. They're like a tribe or family. A complete set. Every single one I made is kept here in my sitting room – even one or two that broke and one that a friend, who shall remain nameless and may no longer be a friend, trod on.

I'm not sure what I'm going to do with them. I'm told there was once an emperor who wanted a perfect cup. So he ordered a thousand potters to make a cup and then he chose the best one and destroyed the rest. I could do that, I suppose. But it does seem a bit sad, after all my work. Ideally, I'd like them to go on a grand tour. In reality, though, I don't think



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they'll be moving out of here any time soon because I don't know where else to put them.

The cups are made of three different clays – stoneware, stoneware buff and terracotta. I tried all three so I could experience the difference. I found I preferred stoneware because terracotta gets extremely messy. For the last three I used porcelain, which was wonderful. Porcelain feels cool and silky and is so responsive to your touch. It's so much finer than the other clays that, if you work it right, you can actually see through it.

Friends visit and laugh. I think that's lovely. I like it when people come and see what I do. They often say that my work should be in a gallery, which annoys me because I think my flat is a gallery and I like showing my work here.

I only started thinking of myself as an artist when I was 50. I'd been drifting along, doing secretarial jobs and bringing up children while all the time I was thinking, "I wish I could paint, but I can't." Then one day I realised that simply meant I couldn't paint like a great painter. But I could

easily paint like me: really badly. So I began. And if I had any negative thoughts, I just painted more and worse. That was wonderful. It disengaged my critical faculties and gave me permission to start. And now I'm not critical of anything I do. Ever.

I'm having my next show here in September. I'm inviting friends and I've even written to the emperor of Japan to ask him if he'd be interested in seeing the cups I've made. I haven't heard anything yet, but he can only refuse.

I never did make my perfect cup. I don't really believe in perfection. I like the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* – perfect imperfection. I'm hoping friends will come and think, "I could do that" and go off and try. That would be great. It takes more energy not to do something than to do it. That's why you have to do it – and risk doing it not very well. Because then you'll find out you love it, no matter what anyone else thinks. **FT**

As told to **Blanche Girouard**
Portrait by **Sophie Green**



The **biggest Starbucks drink** was served in 2014 in a 4.7 litre cup. The latte, made at a Starbucks in Florida, had **101 shots of espresso**, 17 shots of vanilla, six shots of mocha, and some matcha powder. Despite this, **the oversize beverage** cost coffee fanatic Bill Lewis nothing, as **he paid through a reward programme**. Otherwise, it would have cost him \$83.75 (£64), making it **the most expensive Starbucks drink sold**.