

Hell Wench

Appearing at the Olive Tree for the last time, Martha's ceramics are a must see.



“I call the cups voluptuous, I carve my pieces so your hand feels like it’s had them forever, as though it was your grandmothers and it’s been passed down.”

This Saturday at the Olive Tree Market sees one of its regular stallholders setting up for the last time. A favourite among the Olive Tree community Martha Casey-Knight, also known as Hell Wench (do business names get any better than this?) is packing her ceramics up for the last time and heading to Canada indefinitely.

Much loved for her incredible handcrafted ceramics and those designs of some of Australia’s most recognisable native birds, we caught up with Martha at her home in Cooks Hill to not only get a behind-the-scenes glimpse into her beautiful creative space but a tiny insight into an incredibly eclectic and fascinating life.



Thank you for inviting us into your home Martha, your studio and courtyard area is incredible, did you design the space itself?

When I was looking for a home I wanted a house with character and open space, and when we bought this it was overgrown and very suburban for my liking so I gutted it and started from scratch.

The mural was done by artist Ben Mellon, it took me about 4 months to hunt down the right graffiti artist, and the idea behind the artwork is to capture the grittiness and underbelly of Newcastle, which I love. Out near the airport, there is a pump station that has the smoke towers on it, and I really loved that, it's a part of Newcastle's history.

Together with the artwork, I have used materials on the studio from an old Singleton farmhouse that was being torn down, that's where the shutters came from. I sourced a lot of the wood from some homes in Cessnock that were demolished and most of the metal and sleepers came from the Newcastle railway. So basically it has the ghosts of past and a soul that speaks to me, and that's what it was meant to be.



Have you always worked in the art world?

I have a very eclectic work background, which includes working as personal security for AC/DC and Bon Jovi and as a bouncer at nightclubs in Perth. I also did some acting, I was a man-eating amazon in Wogs Out of Work and at one point I had a role in Prisoner. I have, however, been involved in creative pursuits my whole life, I studied media, drama at the University of Melbourne and I was a florist, so I am a creative person, always have been.

How did you come to start working with ceramics?

I've always loved ceramics and have always been drawn to it, my grandfather gave me some money when I was 17 and I used it to buy my first ever art piece which was a ceramic piece that I still have upstairs.

I have been making ceramics solidly for three years now and I am self-taught, however, I learned the technical side of things like throwing and hand rolling, and then I adapted my own style. I was fortunate that life allowed me to have a break and have a go that this all began. I am young at heart, bit of a gypsy, and this was a bit of a seachange. I am lucky that I have the support of my husband, daughter and my mum, of course, you can't do it without that support.



We love your business name, Hell Wench, what's the story behind that?

It's an interesting one. I decided to relocate to WA for some reason back in the 80's, I didn't know a soul and didn't want to put myself out there too much so I got a job in a bar and then I

applied for a job as a bouncer at a nightclub, I was the first female bouncer in WA (which is a whole other story). Anyway, on one particular night there were these five grommets who came into the nightclub, they were all a bit cheeky but one especially was a bit of a scallywag and he liked to have a chat, and he told me this story of how he was kicked out one night and ever since the bouncers always picked on him. So I said I'd ask the guys to let you have a good time, being his birthday an all. Six hours later he came running out saying he'd had a fabulous time and he came up to me and said 'you're a hell wench! I had the best birthday ever'.

Well, the expression on my face must have said it all and he went 'oh no hell wench is great, it means you're wild, free, true to nature and your word' and that stuck with me and Hell Wench seemed like the most logical name.

The name gets an interesting reaction from people, not sure what they are expecting, but it's become quite recognisable.

You have gotten yourself quite the following and ceramics have seen quite the resurgence in recent years, what do you think separates you from the rest?

I call the cups voluptuous as I want people to be able to hold them so you either get a warmth or a coolness. I carve my pieces so your hand feels like it's had them forever, as though it was your grandmothers and it's been passed down, and that's what my work is about, it's that tactile nature of clay and its why I use a combination of rough and smooth textures.



Your bird designs are just beautiful, who do you find coming to your store to purchase?

I like to create my pieces so they fit in any environment whether that's a warehouse or a brand new home which means my audience is so eclectic, I am always surprised by who I come across at my stores. From young girls with their mums to nannas.

One of my favourite stories was of this gentleman who bought one of the large cups and he had his morning coffee in it, then he had his muesli and yoghurt, then he had soup for lunch, and he kept sending me pictures throughout the day. For dinner, he had risotto and then some decadent ice cream mixture and then he finished off with a gin and tonic, which was my favourite. All in this large cup.



Your final Olive Tree is on the 2nd November, will it be sad to say goodbye?

It's really emotional, and the out pouring from local customers saying they need to get this and get that made before I go has been amazing. The Olive Tree has been fabulous for me, it's a great community and environment and I've established a really supportive and faithful following.

My style has changed so much in those three years and I wouldn't be where I am if it wasn't for my customers. It was actually a customer in Montreal who asked me to put handles on my vessels, it took me 6 months before I felt right about it, I follow what my instincts tell me but I am also open to suggestions. The handle cups were the turnaround, people received them so well that my confidence grew and I started to get expressive with my designs of the birds.

Will Hell Wench be continuing in Canada? Yes absolutely, the cups won't be going anywhere. I will also be launching my online shop so people can still purchase from anywhere. Hell Wench will evolve though, I plan on working with sculptures, welding, and woodwork as well as bringing some Canadian birds into the range.

As Martha packs her ports this also means parting ways with her incredible home in Railway St, Cooks Hill and on November 2nd the home will be going on the market. So if you would like to catch a glimpse of one of Newcastle's most interesting artist homes be sure to contact 0416739863.