



Francisca Onumah has created her own language of mark-making that draws on textile textures and motifs, eschewing the polish and perfection of classic silversmithing. Malaika Byng meets an artist forging her own path. Photography by Owen Richards

BENEATH THE SURFACE





Pinch, previous page: photo Jerry Lampton | Trouser brooch: photo Ashley Eastwood

With their delicate furrows and dimples, the surfaces of Francisca Onumah's vessels look almost skin-like as they catch the light. Arranged in groups, her anthropomorphic pieces lean into each other, as if in conversation. The Sheffield-based metalsmith revels in imperfections, sometimes exaggerating the seams of the metal sheets rather than polishing them away, treating them like beautiful scars that reveal the stories of a life. This gives her vessels a warmth and humanity that belies the coldness of the copper and silver in which they are made.

'I'm drawn to both the strength and vulnerability of metal,' says the 29-year-old artist, whose work is featured in a trio of exhibitions early this year at the Crafts Council Gallery and Jerwood Arts in London, and Harewood House in Yorkshire. 'Silver is rigid and requires a lot of effort when it comes to mark making, while copper is softer and takes textures well. I like the interplay between these characteristics.'

Onumah's vessels, sculptures and jewellery are marked by her own experiences. For *We Gather* at the Crafts Council Gallery – a show featuring five female makers who explore their Black and Asian heritage, whose work shares a commitment to craft's cultural value – she has created a trio of vessels pinched in at their necks, and one bows its head,

as if in pain. 'I wanted to make pieces that communicate the emotions of being put in an uncomfortable situation – when it feels like you are being pressured to speak,' she says of the works titled *In Our Skin*. She is referring to the aftermath of the death of George Floyd in 2020, when the Black Lives Matter protests swept the world. 'I was asked a lot of generic questions about how to fix the problems. It's a complex subject, and it takes a lot out of you.' *In Our Skin* is weighed down by the burden of representation.

She starts by hammering and punching patterns into sheets of metal, before hand-raising them around metal stakes, using a rawhide mallet 'as if it's a raising hammer' in order to retain the textures. Sometimes she oxidises the metals to enhance the patterns. Her language of mark-making draws from many sources. 'I'm often influenced by the textures and fluidity of textiles like African wax cloth and kente cloth,' she says.

Onumah was born in Ghana, where she lived until she was eight. She remembers her father, an agricultural economist, returning from his frequent travels with suitcases full of elaborate textiles to be worn as Sunday best. For *We Gather*, she looked at adinkra symbols from Ghana, which are often used in fabrics, pottery and architecture: 'I've abstracted them, creating different patterns across each vessel.'

Previous page: 'Pinch' vessel and beakers, oxidised copper. Above: *In Our Skin*; each of the three vessels, in oxidised copper, has a different patination. Right: drawing guidelines for the raising process. Bottom right: wide 'Trouser' brooch, silver-plated copper



As a child, Onumah was obsessive about drawing. She remembers sketching houses in the sand outside her grandmother's home, with her older brother. She later switched the sand for sketchbooks when the family moved to Kent. At the same time, she made her first forays into sculpture, making medals out of foil, wire and scraps of fabric for her brother's re-creation of the Olympic Games.

Onumah continued drawing while studying for her BA in Jewellery and Silversmithing at Birmingham, but became frustrated when she couldn't translate these 'random patterns' into jewellery. 'In my third year, a friend said, "Why don't you play around with texturing metal, like you do with your drawings?" After that, I became fixated with using different hammers and techniques to create marks.' These marks are ambiguous, often suggesting rugged terrains, bark or the textures of ceramics. Even their forms bring to mind iconic ceramic works – her 'Trouser' brooches have echoes of Hans Coper's *Spade* series of the 1960s and 70s, thanks to their flattened cylindrical tops and scarified surfaces.

Silversmithing traditions are synonymous with polish and perfection, so it took courage to take a different path. 'Looking at the work of silversmiths like David Clarke made me realise there was a more expressive way forward,' says Onumah. 'He has rebelled against conventions, doing things that you're discouraged to do when training, such as using materials like salt to erode the silver.' Silversmith Junko Mori, a judge for this year's *Jerwood Art Fund Makers Open*, says: 'By resisting the urge to polish and smooth her work, Francisca has developed a bold aesthetic that makes her stand out.'

After finishing her Jewellery and Silversmithing MA in Birmingham in 2015, she spent a year in London working for a start-up jewellery business before moving to Sheffield to pursue her own practice. The city's Yorkshire Artspace





gave her a subsidised studio space at its Persistence Works complex, where she is still based, and access to equipment and professional guidance. Last year, she was mentored as part of the Crafts Council's Hothouse programme.

Onumah's highly expressive works are a far cry from the factory-made silverware that put Sheffield on the world map. The city is known for Sheffield plate, developed for cost-cutting reasons in 1743, and later for the electroplating method invented in Birmingham, which Sheffield adopted and made famous. Ideas about mass production might seem anathema to a designer-maker, but Onumah finds much inspiration in the city's silver trade.

For *Jerwood Art Fund Makers Open*, she has teamed up with fellow silversmith Helena Russell, on a commission that explores the past, present and future of the silversmithing industry in Sheffield. The project's starting point was tools collected from local companies that had shut down in the city by Robert Lamb, a silversmith in his 80s, who began working as an apprentice as a teen. 'Many had been rusting away in boxes, so we decided to make work with them that celebrates silversmithing in Sheffield,' says Onumah.

The tools will be displayed alongside those that were beyond repair, which the duo are transforming into abstract sculptures – the holes of a hammer head will be filled with silver and a gold ingot 'to highlight the beauty of imperfections', for example. Meanwhile, the vessels will take cues from a specific tool: the 'packing hammer', made from layers of materials like leather and fabric, and used to stretch metal without marking. The results will be silver and copper vessels, layered inside each other.

While developing their idea, Onumah and Russell spent time in Junko Mori's studio in Wales. 'We had fun,' says Mori. 'Silversmiths are nerdy about their tools. I believe they shouldn't always be used for their intended function – you can develop new ways of using them to create your own visual language. That's exactly what they're exploring.'

As part of the project, the pair have documented the stories of three Sheffield silversmiths: Robert Lamb, David Allison, a silver spinner in his 60s, and third-generation silversmith Kurt Calow, who is in his early 20s. 'We asked them about how the industry has changed and where they see it heading,' she says. 'Bob and Dave worked for companies that closed, so they had to adapt and become jobbing silversmiths, diversifying their skills. All three agreed that silversmithing is becoming increasingly design focused, with more collaboration between technicians, artists and designers. It's an exciting time.'

In March, a series of Onumah's vessels will go on show at Harewood House in Yorkshire, in *Radical Acts*, the second Harewood Biennial devoted to craft. Curator Hugo Macdonald was drawn to the way she subverts what silverware traditionally stands for. 'Francisca treats precious materials un-preciously, so they become valuable in a different way,' he says. For Onumah, a self-proclaimed introvert, it's a quiet form of radicalism – one written across the surfaces of her works with growing conviction.

franciscaonumah.co.uk. 'We Gather' is at the Crafts Council Gallery until 5 February, craftscouncil.org.uk; 'Jerwood Art Fund Makers Open' starts in London on 28 January, jerwoodarts.org; 'Radical Acts' at Harewood House opens in March, harewood.org



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