Left, Ndidi Ekubia at work in her studio. Opposite, *Sparkle Vase*, 2012

Ndidi Ekubia

Born UK, 1973

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Ndidi Ekubia's 22cm-high sculptural *Sparkle Vase*, which she made in 2012 and the Victoria and Albert Museum purchased the following year, may be made of silver (its base bears both the Britannia standard mark for 958/1000 and the Diamond Jubilee mark denoting the year of its creation, as well as the artist's own initials), but its multifaceted surface looks almost like fur: the fineness of the chasing cries out to be stroked. So it comes as no surprise that Ekubia cites 'organic natural forms' as inspiration – hence her use of motifs that evoke woven fibres or plaits.

'I am excited by the sensual and rich forms that can be created in metal,' she has said. The distinctive patinas found on Benin bronzes have also influenced her work. She draws on her own Nigerian heritage, too: 'My artistic landscape has been determined by bold African shapes, textiles and food,' and the 'passionate family conversations' she recalls from her childhood in Manchester.

As a student of 3D design at the University of Wolverhampton in the early 1990s, Ekubia began to experiment with metalwork, pressing sheets of copper foil between pieces of carved wood to produce reliefs. But it was an introduction to the art of repoussé, in which tiny rhythmic hammer blows from a range of chisel-like bossing tools are used to work three-dimensional reliefs and fine lines into the underside of the silver, that convinced her to specialise in silversmithing, a training that culminated in an MA at the Royal College of Art.

Ekubia now prefers to work directly with hammers (a process similar to but less rarefied than chasing, which is the obverse of repoussé in that it is the outer surface of the metal that is worked), producing pieces that range from napkin rings, spoons, candle holders, bowls and vases to large sculptural pieces. The fineness of the detail is exquisite.

It is repetitive, painstaking work, noisy and intensely physical, requiring almost meditative concentration. Watch her at work – there's a film on YouTube – and she talks poetically of having to find her rhythm, of gathering her energy and her breath, of 'pushing doubt away, using my senses of sound and touch' until she and her tools become one and the practice takes over: 'Years of sweat and tears. Adjusting my posture. Reassessing the structure, the strength [of the metal]. Every hit counts as it overlaps. Harmony makes perfection.'

And so it does. Hence the number of British institutions in which her work is found, among them Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, the Goldsmiths' Company and Winchester Cathedral, for which she was commissioned to make an ablution cup.
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Portrait: Sophie Mutevelian. Photos courtesy of Adrian Sassoon Gallery, London