



Richard Davey *An Intimate Gaze*

Dr Richard Davey is a writer and curator, who has written extensively on contemporary artists. His catalogue essays include Anselm Kiefer for the Royal Academy of Arts in 2014, and the essays for the Summer Illustrated 2015, 2016, 2017.



Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva *Gill's Slits* 2011
skate bones, metal, perspex box
45 x 45 x 50 cm photo: Nick Dunmur



Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva *Prototypes for Making a Machine to Reveal Beauty* 2016
3-D nylon prints mounted in perspex boxes 8 x 8 cm photo: Nick Dunmur

By the Thirteenth Century Western European society had become a highly structured and hierarchical feudal system. From the King to the serf, everyone knew and understood their place. But there were times when this order was challenged. In cathedrals and castles the Christmas festivities saw a 'Lord of Misrule' appointed, whose job was to ensure that the status quo was temporarily overturned. For a few weeks the first became last and the last first, with junior clergy taking on the roles of senior clergy and boy choristers being elected bishop.

Court Jesters, with their bald heads, gaudy coats, multicoloured breeches and three pointed hats also ensured that subversion was woven into the fabric of society. These may have been the forerunners of the modern clown, entertainers of the king and court, whose humour and buffoonery were believed to aid digestion. But, they also used barbed words and knowing comments to prick the vanity of the pompous, topple the pretensions of the nobles and undermine the accepted order. This unique privilege to speak truth to power was symbolised by their bauble, a mock royal sceptre topped with an inflated pig bladder.

The Macedonian artist, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, is the natural successor to these figures: an artist of misrule, a visual jester whose work turns conventions upside down. Her often delicate, occasionally disturbing, invariably challenging works, undermine the aesthetic status quo and prick the vanity of traditional artistic values. She may not carry a bauble, but she has made one, *Beauty Exposed III*, an inflated sheep stomach and pig intestine, hanging light as air from a turned wooden stick, its delicate form a defiant manifesto challenging the viewer to see past their revulsion at her choice of materials to their purely formal qualities.

Until relatively recently the mess, stench and visceral reality of life were part of everyday experience: butchers hung tripe and carcasses in their windows, sewers were open, death was visible. But now such things have been shielded from our view. Meat is packaged to disguise its source, bodily functions are hidden behind the silence of embarrassment, and death tends to be whispered about. So when Damien Hirst and Marc Quinn wanted to shock the public with their art they had to do nothing more than confront the viewer with the normally unseen - intimate body fluids and dead animals: a head of frozen blood and the intestines and internal organs of a dead cow and calf.

Hadzi-Vasileva's intention in using animal intestines and internal organs, as well as fish skins and other animal body parts, is not to shock, but to confound our expectations, transforming these biological materials into abstract visual forms that challenge us to set aside our initial shock and revulsion and see them differently. The outer sacs of sheep testicles, some still complete with wool, become ladies' purses. Caul fat is turned into a translucent fabric, its delicate, foliate filigree of blood vessels reminiscent of handmade Japanese paper. The blood and fluids of a cow's rectum become an abstract smear of colour, an expressionist brush stroke sliding down the paper.

To use these fragile substances, Hadzi-Vasileva needs to clean and prepare them first. The processes are toxic, noxious and arduous, demanding repeated physical contact and intense visual scrutiny of things that are usually untouchable and unseen. This close attention has had a profound and at times physical affect on Hadzi-Vasileva. Constantly handling stomachs, intestines and skin, studying them and intimately examining them, has opened these objects up to her

gaze. She has come to see their intricate patterns and varied textures, their translucent surfaces and complex structure. Unfolding them, inverting them and inflating them allows initially small, apparently solid objects to expand into delicate, attenuated materials.

The aesthetic gaze seeks after surface beauty and ideal form, but Hadzi-Vasileva's gaze is subversive, making visible the usually invisible, turning the inside out and exposing those functions we would usually hide. Under the scrutiny of her intimate gaze the normally invisible, interior landscape of the body is revealed. What she shows us defies our expectations, challenging us with unexpected beauty.

In the weightless 'baubles' of the *Beauty Exposed* series, we encounter the beauty of the ephemeral and fragile; the beauty we find in blossom and snowflakes, whose momentary, fleeting presence captivates us before they evaporate into nothingness. For, despite their solid, rounded forms, these inflated intestines are essentially fragile objects, nothing more than air, which have to be held down and precariously balanced so that they don't topple over. Prick them, and they would evaporate before our eyes. Their existence a reminder that life is a fleeting moment of coagulation, a point of physical being surrounded by the immaterial.

Hadzi-Vasileva is drawn to objects which initially appear robust, but when studied appear to dissolve before both sight and touch. At a cursory glance, *Gill's Slits*, which is made from skate bones, seems to be both complex and solid. But closer examination reveals an almost transparent, lacy surface that defies our visual grasp, so that what was solid melts into air. These bones transcend their physical origins, becoming a transient blossom waiting to fly away on the breeze. Only the presence of small

metal crocodile clips, clinging defiantly to their edges, prevents this from happening. This delicate structure, however, hides a toxic secret, for over time the bones will slowly begin to emit ammonia, poisoning the air around it.

Caul fat, the thin lacy membrane surrounding the internal organs of cows, sheep and pigs, also occupies the border between the material and immaterial. Carefully handled and worked by Hadzi-Vasileva to form thin sheets, its delicate structure shimmers before our gaze. One moment our attention is caught by the network of white blood vessels that spread like roots across the surface, the next, we are transfixed by the thin membrane that connects them, an ineffable presence, translucent as gossamer in the light.

On occasions, Hadzi-Vasileva has formed large, immersive architectural structures from these delicate sheets, inverting reality by allowing what is normally inside us to physically surround and enfold us. In the *Bibles* series, however, she has stacked them into solid blocks, making a cultural reference to the name 'butchers' bible', which is sometimes used to refer to the cow omasum, or third stomach, with its many book-like folds and leaves. But the Bible is more than a book of many pages, it is a place where life and the numinous unite; a boundary, like caul fat, between the material and immaterial.

We find the beauty of intimate infinity throughout Hadzi-Vasileva's work, from *Dentelle 1* and *Bad Hair Day* to *Prototypes for Making a Machine to Reveal Beauty*. Here are small objects unfolding into expansive forms, apparently solid surfaces dissolving into canyons of limitless space as they are probed and unpicked by our inquisitive gaze. They

take us from the physical - an object of beauty, to the ineffable and intangible – the territory of the sublime.

Hadzi-Vasileva is an artist who continually confounds our expectations. She is a moment of misrule in this sanitised world, offering us unconventional ways to see the body and its natural functions. Her works take us from the intimate to the infinite, the inside to the outside, weight to weightlessness, hard to soft, balance to instability, and from revulsion to wonder. She uses materials that we would normally shy away from, objects we would usually find disgusting and offensive. She pushes our boundaries, challenges our assumptions and mires us in the stuff of life. She doesn't shock us with gross details, instead she consistently challenges us to see the inner landscape of the body as a place of beauty.

On the front page:

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva *Beauty Exposed II* 2016

sheep stomach, pig intestine and turned wood 52 x 30 x 35 cm
photo: Nick Dunmur

ELPIDA HADZI-VASILEVA
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DANIELLE ARNAUD
123 Kennington Road
London SE11 6SF
Tel +44 (0) 20 7735 8292
www.daniellearnaud.com