



## WE ARE SHADOWS

Unit 2 Gallery faces the Whitechapel Art Gallery, currently being enlarged after taking over the old Whitechapel library, whilst further east down Whitechapel Road undeveloped ‘grey’ areas dissolve into conformity as the ‘High Street’ encroaches on Starbucks, Argos and Tesco Metro.

A narrow passage adjacent to the London Metropolitan University building, home to Unit 2, leads into White Church Lane; opposite is St Mary’s Clergy House, an attractive 19th century building adjoining the former Post Office. These back onto Itchy Park – now Altab Ali Park – commemorating a local Bangladeshi youth murdered in 1978. The park was originally the church yard of St Mary Matfelon, named after the family who funded the building of the church in the 14th century, which was demolished in 1952 following World War II bomb damage. The outline of the church remains, described by paving slabs set into the grass, and outclassing a plethora of public art. The immediate vicinity of Unit 2 demonstrates the changing face of Whitechapel, echoed in a more famous building in Brick Lane itself: the London Jamma Masjid. The mosque on the corner of Fournier Street and Brick Lane was originally built in 1743 as a Huguenot chapel serving the weaving community who settled in neighbouring Spitalfields. Between 1815–19 it was used as a chapel by the Society for Propagating Christianity among the Jews; it became a Methodist chapel in 1819, and in 1897 converted to a synagogue for Eastern European Orthodox Jews. A mosque since 1975, it has reflected the demographic of the Brick Lane area for over 200 years.

An inscription on the sundial on the wall of the mosque dates from its Huguenot origins: *Umbra Sumus* – trans.: *We are shadows* – an abbreviated form of Psalm 144: *Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow*. Elpida has taken this quotation as the title of her exhibition.

Elpida makes site-specific installations. When the venue, inside or outdoors, has been established, her project begins with initial research into that particular location. If the artwork is the consequence of a residency, Elpida’s preference is to be embedded in the community, working as an insider. Such projects require funding and tend to operate beyond the margins of the art market. In between projects, Elpida needs to earn a living and the on/off nature of her working practice is frustrating but gives it an added intensity.

Elpida’s degree show at Glasgow School of Art in 1996 was an indication of an early talent. A Scots pine, from its tip to its roots, was suspended through all three floors of the Macintosh Building, accessed by the stairwell – the ambition and execution were impressive. It was a clear statement, needing no explanation: a measuring device for the building, an emblem of the locality, yet rooted in her upbringing in rural Macedonia – and with a sense of theatre.

A follow-up to this early work came in 2000 with a residency in the New Forest, working with structural engineers, geo-technical engineers and the Forestry Commission. *Ambush* was an exposure of two living Western Hemlock tree roots excavated and accessed via walk-through tunnels, which could also be seen through three glass windows on the forest floor. Above ground the glass reflected the upward extent of the trees and sky – simultaneously ‘as above, so below’.

*Buttermilk* (2000), made from one ton of packs of butter, was shown at Artsway in 2000. Inevitably, after some weeks the butter began to go rancid, a process of decay beyond the control, but not the curiosity, of the artist. The process of mummification, tanning and preservation is age-old. By halting the corruption of the outer layer (the skin or epidermis), Elpida obtains the material for her work. This process is crucial – it is both time-consuming and timeless; not for Elpida the food-processing machinery, but armed with knife, scissors, needle and twine she scrapes away fat, meat, flesh, scales, and sews the pieces together. Whilst we see only the cleansed and pickled article, with its residual smell, Elpida endures weeks of repetitive and nauseating labour. But the repetition also brings imaginative space, to open up possibilities, to allow the work to evolve accordingly. *Epidermis* (2001) is one such work, made for the Berwick Gymnasium, where Elpida was awarded a residency in 2000. Over two thousand farmed salmon were skinned, the skins preserved, stitched together and suspended in circular shoals at varying heights in the space. The line markings in the Gymnasium dictated the hanging of these intricately woven tapestries.

More recently, at L’H du Siège, Valenciennes, in northern France, Elpida made a work, *Butterflies in the Stomach* (2008), which combined the lace-making tradition of the area and tripe, a food which although still eaten in that part of France is more or less regarded in this country with revulsion. Tripe is the honeycomb-textured stomach of a cow, and caul, the membrane with its islands of fat, bears a strong resemblance to lace, which Elpida with characteristic sang-froid dried together to form curtains which re-configured the space. An image of the work conjures up clamminess, the impossibility of avoiding touching the stuff, as well as marvelling that this is the stomach and musculature of an animal – a silk purse from a sow’s ear.

In these works there is a strong connection with drawing. Over the years, Elpida’s unexpected materials (watercress, fish skins, amongst other organic membranes) and equally unorthodox processes have strong affinities with textiles, carpets and lace; in her hands they have a manipulated and drawn quality. Drawing is also what she does in those in-between times, keeping in touch with the ideas which connect the dreaming with the future work.

## CHICKEN CURRY AND RICE

Unit 2 Gallery is housed in an indeterminate modern building; its frontage and source of daylight is a window onto the street with security bars describing the width of the space, which is long and narrow with a shiny lino tiled floor. The space is devoid of character, seeming not quite a shop and not a white cube space either, its anonymity lending itself to being transformed. Second-guessing an artist's exhibition is invariably a risky business. Elpida's materials are halal chicken skins and rice – the veil has been mentioned to this writer – and there might be some exudations and odour. The title of the exhibition may be an indicator. The skins will have a translucency and play with light. There will be shadows. What is guaranteed is a raw experience.

What drives Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva? She has an almost sacrificial capacity for hard work, combined with a rare lack of squeamishness. There is an intense desire to find a fragment – somewhat like a fractal – that can be duplicated and endlessly spun into material. That it is not computer-generated is essential: it is messy, unpredictable and awkward, but the results can be simultaneously awesome and provocative. Elpida came to this country in 1992 from Macedonia, once part of former Yugoslavia and a small country with a rich culture. Although touching on political issues (the veil and animal husbandry are just two examples), Elpida's installations manage to avoid that area of confrontation, relying instead on the visual and the visceral, and in doing so, inviting access by way of a generous response to the host venue.

September 2008

Alison Wilding is an artist based in London



*Butterflies in the Stomach*, 2008

pig caul fat, plastic, 110 kg of caul fat, 250sqm  
inside view, L'H du Siècle, Valenciennes, France





*Bad Hair Day*, 2007  
Omasum (cow's stomach) & metal, 52 × 50 × 50 cm  
L'H du Siège, Valenciennes, France



*Ambush*, 2000  
mixed media, 27 × 15 × 2.8 m  
The Rhinefield Ornamental Drive, The New Forest

*Butterwall*, 2000  
butter, metal, timber, tray, 3 m × 3 m × 50 cm  
ArtSway, The New Forest



# WE ARE SHADOWS

*A new installation by Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva*

3 October – 1 November 2008

*Artist talk:* Saturday 11 October, 2pm

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva was born in Macedonia in 1971. She graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 1996 and was awarded an MA in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London in 1998. Since graduating, Elpida has exhibited internationally including at the 51st Venice Biennale; L'H du Siège, France; Kilmainham Gaol Museum, Dublin. She has also taken part in a number of European residency programmes including at ArtSway, Irish Museum of Modern Art and Berwick Fellowship and is currently artist in-residence at Gloucester Cathedral. She has also worked on a number of public art commissions including 'Life Cycle', Bristol; 'Re|Sort', Fabrica Gallery; 'Ambush', The New Forest. She lives in Brighton.

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*We are Shadows* is a Unit 2 commission.



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Administrative support: Reuben Thurnhill  
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front cover:  
*We are Shadows*, 2008  
chicken skins  
cleaning and preservation of the work

below:  
*Brick Lane*, 2008  
Photograph taken by Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva







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