

## Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva: Fragility, at Fabrica, Brighton

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Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's latest site-specific installation *Fragility* fills the former church that now houses Brighton's Fabrica art gallery with a series of delicate veils. Made of a curious ghostly substance that invites closer inspection, the veils are made of caul fat: a pale, web-like membrane from a pig's stomach, that fans of Berlinde de Bruyckere may enjoy.



Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, *Fragility*, 2015. Installation view, Fabrica, Brighton, 2015. Photographs by Tom Thistlethwaite, courtesy of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva and Fabrica.

Usually discarded as industrial waste, caul fat is here transformed by Hadzi-Vasileva into a translucent material via a complex chemical process similar to embalming, in the process inviting responses that range from aesthetic appreciation to visceral disgust. Visual pleasure is given partly through the careful arrangement of the site-specific work: sheets of the material rise from floor to ceiling along the nave, before congregating in a canopied area that, through a slit, invites a view of muted daylight light through the veined walls. However, as the staggered sheets approach the floor nearer the altar, there is a slightly slapdash, accidentally skewed quality to the hang of the installation. It is ultimately the material itself rather than the merits of the form that holds one's attention. Complex webs of fat recall delicate lace, marred only by the occasional patch of clotted blood, abruptly recalling the material's origin. There is a perhaps rather unexpected visual nod to craft practices, following 2008's *Butterflies in the Stomach* at L'H du Siege, Valenciennes, which connected the same material used in *Fragility* to Northern French lace-making and local food specialities. In the current work, small holes and inadvertent snags caused by the rigours of installation and the touch of curious visitors, which remind one of the work's short life-span. In moving through the church-like space, the visitor is encouraged to contemplate death and decay; Hadzi-Vasileva has compared the veiled light seen from the centre of the work to the light reportedly seen at the point of death.

Through Hadzi-Vasileva's use of materials, responses to the architectural space and its associations, and even evident that the work's title – *Fragility* – it refers not only to the work's material qualities, but to the precarious state of existence itself. *Fragility's* location encourages metaphysical contemplation, despite the church's deconsecration. Interestingly, the artist attributes part of her self-proclaimed 'obsession' with death and decay to her upbringing during Macedonia's period as a Socialist Republic, in which any religious belief – and, therefore, any discussion of an afterlife – was discouraged. Nevertheless, Hadzi-Vasileva was recently commissioned by the Vatican to represent work at the Pavilion of the Holy See at the 56th Venice Biennale, with a work entitled *Haruspex*. Hadzi-Vasileva remains a secular non-believer, preoccupied by her efforts to halt time through a body of work, which frequently uses death and its remnants as both raw material and subject matter.



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Previous works also utilise animal parts to respond to particular histories, locales, and communities: a characteristic installation in London's Pied à Terre restaurant featured sheep's testicles illuminated from within glowing from the ceiling, contributing to a somewhat grisly yet undeniably beautiful dining experience. Responding to the particularities of place, *Fragility's* quiet, contemplative quality encourages a certain serenity, whilst also reminding us of our existence as fleshy, corporeal beings vulnerable to the progression of time.

At points Hadzi-Vasileva's work may seem rather *too* literal – the equation of dead animal matter with wider rumination on human mortality is a rather obvious one, pace Damien Hirst. This quality of obviousness increases, given the questions of mortality or morbidity provoked by *Fragility's* location. With a little more critical distance, Fabrica's latest commission could have straddled the twin demands of intellectual as well as visual interest. However, obviousness does not preclude enjoyment, and as such the work's relative lack of nuance is redeemed – at least in part – by its quietly dignified beauty. And for a free exhibition tucked away behind the maelstrom of Brighton's North Street, you could do much worse.

By Isabella Smith