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Beauty Exposed III 2016 (Sheep stomach, lamb intestine and turned wood)

## MAKING BEAUTY: ELPIDA HADZI-VASILEVA

DJANOGLY GALLERY, NOTTINGHAM LAKESIDE ARTS, UK, UNTIL 30 OCTOBER 2016.

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It was a serendipitous moment for Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva in 2007 when, during an artist residency in northern France, she stepped into a butcher's. On sale were sheets of pigs' caul fat, the thin membrane encasing the animal's internal organs. To Hadzi-Vasileva's surprise, the patterns bore a striking resemblance to the intricate designs made by lace-makers in Valenciennes, whose lace-making tradition dates back to 1760. The artist had been drawing the designs of its lace-makers during her residency at L'H du Siège, a contemporary art gallery.

"I stood talking to this butcher, trying to figure out what this caul was, because he didn't speak English and I didn't speak French", recalls Hadzi-Vasileva, laughing. "It was completely cleaned and white. I bought a small amount and, when I poured water on it, it almost blew up like a balloon. The whole pattern came to life."

The discovery led Hadzi-Vasileva to make her installation, *Butterflies in the Stomach* (2008) – a 250m<sup>2</sup> labyrinth made from suspended sheets of stretched pigs' caul fat, a sausage-like odour emanating through the space. Three other projects using pigs' caul fat have ensued: *Inherent Beauty* (2010), comprising delicate membranes fixed onto black tiles; *Haruspex* (2015) – a project for the Pavilion of the Holy See at the Venice Biennale; and *Fragility* (2015), a commission from Fabrica Gallery in a deconsecrated church in Brighton. Her current exhibition, *Making Beauty*, at Djanogly

Gallery in Nottingham features reconfigurations of the two latter projects and her newest pieces resulting from research carried out with gastroenterologists. Hadzi-Vasileva, who represented Macedonia at the Venice Biennale in 2015, has manipulated numerous animal viscera, preserving and exploiting it to awe-inspiring, wondrous effect.

Born in Macedonia in 1971, Hadzi-Vasileva moved to Britain when she was 19 during the outset of the Yugoslav Wars. Her intention was to stay for six months and apply to art school in Serbia. But she ended up doing an art foundation course in London and studied at Glasgow School of Art before earning an MA in Sculpture from the Royal College of Art. Her early pieces, such as *Re-evolution* (1996), the installing of a pine tree at the Mackintosh Museum in Glasgow, and *Ambush* (2000), which exposed the roots of two living trees and led visitors two metres underground in the New Forest, Hampshire, were concerned with physical space. This propelled her to reflect on the internal space of human beings' and animals' bodies.

Her first animal waste project was *Epidermis* (2001), made during a residency in Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland. After learning that salmon came to breed there each year, she contacted a nearby salmon factory asking to use some of its remains. This culminated in Hadzi-Vasileva making sculptures using 2,500 salmon skins and 1,500 bones. "This got me into looking at how much waste we produce in our culture and food," explains Hadzi-Vasileva. A decade later she used salmon refuse again for her commission, *Reoccurring Undulation* (2011), for Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne. Exhibited like a tapestry, the floor-to-ceiling piece was made out of 960 salmon skin tiles painstakingly arranged to form a landscape-evoking pattern.

In 2011, Hadzi-Vasileva became the first "artist-in-restaurant" at *Pied à Terre*, a Michelin-starred restaurant in London. A collaboration with the chefs culminated in her exhibition, *The Wish of the Witness*, featuring 10 sculptural and installation works made primarily using raw materials from the kitchen. *Witness of Virility*, created out of 80 sheep's testicles that had been cleaned, preserved and sculpted into delicate lightbulb-like pieces, was installed on the restaurant's ceiling. Other pieces were made from quail beaks, rabbit jaw bones, fish skins and bones. Purses fashioned from sheep's testicles exemplified how these salvaged materials could be recomposed into beautiful, intriguing objects.

For her installation *Silentio Pathologia* for the Pavilion of the Republic of Macedonia at the Venice Biennale in 2015, Hadzi-Vasileva considered the medieval plagues in Europe in connection to modern illnesses and diseases. Visitors walked around, looking through holes, in a space consisting of silk and silkworm cocoons, live rats, rat skins and curtains of steel sheets. The rat skins were sourced from animal feed suppliers as their meat was part of the diet of carnivorous birds, mammals, reptiles and snakes kept in captivity. "The animal foods were the kind sold in pet shops and zoos but were past their sell-by date," says Hadzi-Vasileva. "Humans protested against live animals being sold for snake food so dead animals are sold now. In order to create something good, we've created a lot of waste."

*Making Beauty* at Djanogly Gallery assembles new and old works, including a reconfiguration of *Fragility*. "At the church, you had this amazing height and beautiful surrounding space while this time it's in a lower-ceilinged white cube," Hadzi-Vasileva says. The installation of sheets of pigs' caul fat occupied the church's volume with diaphanous, floating effect, in an exploration of the light described by survivors of near-death experiences. At Djanogly Gallery, by contrast, Hadzi-Vasileva has created an immersive piece where the veiny sheets are hung in undulating, staggered drapes. "Now it's like you're walking through the bowl or the stomach or the intestines and is more claustrophobic", she adds.

Also reconfigured is *Haruspex* (2015), commissioned by Vatican Museums for a group show in the Pavilion of the Holy See at the Venice Biennale. Hadzi-Vasileva was invited to respond to a text, *In the Beginning ... the Word became flesh*, in St John's gospel, the meaning of which she discussed with a professor at King's College. "Because I grew up under a communist regime, I wasn't brought up to know religion", she admits.

Reflecting on immortality and how eloquence emanates from flesh, Hadzi-Vasileva made a canopied space from pigs' caul fat, which was criss-crossed by ropes woven from sheep's intestines. In the centre of the ropes was a textured form made from the omasum, the third stomach of a cow known as "the bible" due to its page-like folds. "I wanted to capture something around the idea of the centre – how we all come from and end up at one point," she explains.

The artist also used a cow's stomach for *Bad Hair Day*, which was exhibited in *Heft: Weight and Touch* in contemporary sculpture at Winchester Discovery Centre in 2010. Suspended from the ceiling, it is a multi-layered, engrossing form, reminiscent of innumerable folded sheets.

"Elpida's work is compelling on a number of levels," says Neil Walker, Djanogly Gallery's curator. "You can't help but experience wonder at the transformation of her raw materials. But this isn't just clever craftsmanship. Her works carry multiple layers of allusion and meaning that respond to the specific challenges of a commission or site, be it a chic London restaurant or a medical research laboratory."

Hadzi-Vasileva's latest project, *Making Beauty*, has been made possible thanks to funding from the Wellcome Trust. It is a collaboration with scientist Dr Richard Day at University College London (UCL), clinician Professor Alastair Forbes at the University of East Anglia and Dr Giles Major, clinical assistant professor at Nottingham Digestive Diseases Biomedical Research Unit. After two years of attending operating theatres, speaking to patients, witnessing endoscopies and studying MRI scans, Hadzi-Vasileva has made a series of work to do with the stomach and the bowel. "It continues her exploration of the hidden – often taboo – aspects of the body in a way that is both personal and political, particularly in relation to our attitudes to food", says Walker. "On another level, you can see her responding imaginatively to the aesthetics of medical imaging and groundbreaking nano-technology."

The artworks range from a large drawing made in copper wire based on images of bowel mobility to a sculptural piece of a cow's stomach that visitors can put their heads into, with a soundtrack of internal, human noises inside. "I've been working with a designer at UCL with 3D printing on spheres of beautiful textures and patterns [using pig's and cow stomach]", Hadzi-Vasileva says. The scientific bent in her work married with an aesthetic sensibility enables Hadzi-Vasileva to unearth elements of beauty in the most unexpected of situations.



Epida Hadzi-Vasileva, *Making Beauty Sculpture* (2016), installed at Djanogly Gallery, photo Nick Dunmur, courtesy Epida Hadzi-Vasileva and Djanogly Gallery



Bad Hair Day 2008 Omasum (Cow's Stomach) and Metal L'H du Siège, Valenciennes, France (Oct 2007 - Jan 2008) Photo: Epida Hadzi-Vasileva



Epida Hadzi-Vasileva, *Hanuspex*, 2015, Holy See Pavilion, 56th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, courtesy the artist



Golden Jaw 2011 Twelve Rabbit Jaw Bones Gilded with 23.5ct Gold. 30 x 30 x 8cm. Pied à Terre Restaurant, London Residency (2011). Photo: Epida Hadzi-Vasileva