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## Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva: 'I am driven by making the impossible possible'

The artist, who makes beautiful works of art using waste products from the meat industry talks about God, gastroenterology and pigs' guts



by CASSIE DAVIES

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, who was born in 1971 in Macedonia and now lives in Brighton, works across a range of mediums, from sculpture, installation and architectural intervention to video, photography and sound. The Djanogly Gallery in Nottingham is currently presenting the artist's first major, solo UK exhibition, which includes a reconfiguration of *Haruspex*, first shown last year at the 56th Venice Biennale.

*Making Beauty*, the title of the show at the Djanogly Gallery, exhibits Hadzi-Vasileva's exploration into unconventional and discarded materials. For the show, the artist uses waste products from the meat industry to create her work, making beauty out of what was once underappreciated. She spoke to Studio International via email to tell us more.

**Cassie Davies: For the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), you were asked to respond to, and interpret, the biblical theme, "In the beginning ... the word became flesh." How did *Haruspex* come about from this?**

**Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva:** *Haruspex* – like a lot of my recent work – is constructed from waste products from the meat industry. It was developed through research in collaboration with the architect Pero Bojkov and long conversations with Ben Quash [professor of Christianity and the arts at King's College London]. Our conversations looking at the world and its relation to God are thus mapped with the help of the bodies of animals, in complex and overlapping semiotic configurations that push some things and people outwards and bring others to centre-stage, and that provide some of the most important raw materials for cultic practice.

I chose to use animal viscera very deliberately in this work, drawing attention to the corporeality of the incarnation – when the word (God) came in human form (Jesus). The caul fat of the pig creates the canopy and walls of my "tent of meeting". Once a membrane for the pig's gut, it is now the membrane of a sanctuary-like space, which may repel or may protectively envelop. This is then criss-crossed by ropes woven from the intestines of sheep, to bind in two possible ways: by connecting and supporting, or by constraining and entrapping. Finally, supported by these ropes, or caught in them, is the suspended heart of the piece, which is literally made of stomach: the fascinatingly layered "omasum", also known in butchery terms as the Bible.

One of my inspirations for this work is the quadrantal structure of the van Eyck brothers' *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, which forms part of the great altarpiece in Ghent. There, diverse groups of people are drawn, as though from the four corners of the Earth, to



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venerate the Agnus Dei, who is raised up in the centre of a paradisaal space. But in Haruspex, the animals have given way to one another, changing places and disrupting expectations. The Lamb is no longer the centre; pigs are no longer wholly outside. The work questions some ethical challenges as a result. The possibilities it explores for the redemption of flesh do not stop at the ambiguous beautification of animal body parts. They seem to challenge human exclusions, and to ask what new relationships are possible across religious and political divisions. Part of what may need to be redeemed in the redemption of flesh is the way that flesh has been used as weapon and boundary-marker, as Christians used it in the legend of St Mark's translation to Venice. (Legend has it that, in the ninth century, the relics of St Mark the Evangelist, the patron saint of Venice, were smuggled out of Muslim-controlled Alexandria, covered by pieces of pork. There is a mosaic image of the legend on the exterior of Saint Mark's Basilica. The idea was that this protective layer would deter the Islamic guards from searching the cargo too carefully.)

Jesus himself seems to have shared the attitude to swine of his fellow Jews. But, controversially, he also associated with the unclean. His identification with sinful flesh culminated in a "cursed" death outside the city, "on a tree" (Galatians 3:13, referring to Deuteronomy 21:23).

The goat sacrificed yearly by the Jews on the Day of Atonement [as well as the other goat sent out of the city to carry their sins away with it – the scapegoat (Leviticus 16)] were conduits for sin to be expelled from the social body.

The title of the work comes from the traditions of Ancient Rome, when a haruspex was a person trained in the inspection of the entrails of sacrificed animals, for omens.

**CD: I'm interested in the materials you use. In your exhibition at the Djanogly Gallery, Making Beauty, all your work is made out of waste products from the meat industry. What interests you about these materials?**

**EH-V:** I am certainly interested by the idea of waste products and that material's lifetime. In the past, I have worked with precious materials as well as discarded ones, but at present, waste materials have been my main material choice.

I am concerned with sustainability and the environment and, while many of my works could be considered as a form of up-cycling, I wouldn't necessarily consider my practice to be about recycling, as a lot of the material I use is used in many other ways, from food to health. I'm much more interested in the meaning behind the material, its fragility and how something so delicate is so critical and can be preserved and made to last. I am driven by making the impossible possible.

**CD: What is the process for a piece such as Fragility, made of pig caul fat?**

**EH-V:** One of the aspects that particularly interests me about perishable materials is the idea of a material's lifespan. It was a long process: it took two years to plan and 10 months to make, with the help of two or three assistants. In collaboration with Bojkov, Fragility was designed to be hung in sections, using a mathematical grid and templates to shape and form the piece. The process for the raw material is first collecting it fresh from an abattoir, then washing it in cold water and soaking it overnight in salts. Then carefully (due to its fragility) dividing it into sections and placing it into buckets that contain a mixture of chemicals. The material is then left for four weeks to preserve, with daily rotations of the material within the buckets to ensure that every part gets soaked by the chemicals. Everything is timed, calculated and labelled. Once the material is preserved, it's washed again and taken out in sections to be stretched on to fine plastic sheeting. The plastic sheeting allows for the material to be lifted and then hung; without it, it would be too fragile to be manoeuvred. The panels are left to dry for 24 hours, then the process is repeated. It's a very repetitive process, but it's one that doesn't allow any mistakes.



InFragility, I used the delicate and vulnerable material of pigs' caul fat very intentionally to explore the fragility of life itself. The use of animal viscera is designed to inform the way a viewer thinks about the work, as it invites audiences to consider the physical relationship between their own body and the material of the work, which is what I hope gives the artwork potency.

**CD: You have worked extensively with medical research departments in London, Norwich and Nottingham. Could you tell me more about your research, and how this has influenced your work?**

**EH-V:** A year-long research project funded by the Wellcome Trust [in 2014-5] gave me a unique opportunity. I was allowed to participate with Dr Richard Day and Dr Caroline Pellet-Many at the laboratories at University College London (UCL). I also shadowed gastroenterology clinical staff in wards and outpatient clinics at Norwich Medical School at the University of East Anglia with Professor Alastair Forbes, to understand the critical impact of nutrition on patients, the difference between healthy and unhealthy guts, the role of bacteria, people with various bowel diseases and intestine failure, either as an illness or self-inflicted. I've worked closely with Dr Giles Major and his patients at the University of Nottingham at the Digestive Diseases Centre, observing their research into Inflammatory bowel disease and interviewing patients to understand their history of symptoms and their impact. This has also introduced me to Dr Alex Menys at Motilent and his innovative use of MRI images to develop improved motility analysis.

The research aims to explore highly regarded medical research activity, and expose it to larger public awareness – considering nutrition, healthy diet, our gut and how highly specialised manufactured parts, which are invisible to the eye, can fix problems. The artworks I have produced aim to balance the fragility of our bodies, and reflect on the delicate nature of these new medical components.

By working closely with medical researchers, I borrowed models of innovative therapeutic devices, such as microscopic sphere-based scaffold and drug encapsulation/delivery technology, to inform my work. These prototype spheres are intended to improve healing, while the prototype scaffolds are, for example, used to restore continence to the sphincter muscle.

I was also very interested in looking at how patients struggling with digestive diseases are impacted by their conditions. I am drawn to the areas of life that have almost become taboo, because people are too uncomfortable to talk about them openly. I felt it important to show how dealing with disease is so much a part of many people's everyday life experience, and to question our natural assumptions about what is defined as beautiful and what is considered ugly. For example, if you didn't know what you were looking at, you might find images of disease inside the body beautiful.

**CD: Fragility (2015) was first installed at Fabrica, a converted Regency church in Brighton. You have reconfigured it for the Djanogly Gallery, along with Haruspex. How does place and context affect your work?**

**EH-V:** I am very interested by the idea of place. The starting point of any of my site-specific installations is the context in which the work will be installed. In the case of Fragility, the space I was occupying was the converted Regency church in Brighton (the Fabrica gallery). Exploring the phenomenon of near-death experience in the context of the building could not be ignored. I decided to echo the structure of the work's setting, reflecting the architecture of the church. I made Fragility out of pigs' caul fat – a delicate, translucent material, which gives light shone through it a diffused effect, similar to that described by those who have had near-death experiences.

Part of the joys and challenges of working with the medium of site-specific installation is that no one presentation is the same. I'm excited that I was able to show Haruspex for the first time in the UK

at the Djanogly Gallery. For those who saw my works at the Fabrica gallery in Brighton and the Venice Biennale last year, it won't look entirely the same, but it has been reconfigured to suit the unique requirements of the Djanogly Gallery space. My work always responds to place, so here, though retaining the interests and concerns of the original commissions, the works naturally change in a new environment.

Within a white cube gallery space, more formal issues come to the fore – use of space, the way the work sits within the space, the spaces in between the work and the building. I've tried to reinstall the works to bring a new and revised reading of them to the installation, focusing on the materials, encouraging the viewer to walk through and engage with the materials in a very intimate manner.

**CD: Animals are defining parts of religions – Islam and Judaism avoid pig meat, for example. Fragility is the entrance to your show at the Djanogly Gallery. The pig caul fat cannot be avoided! How do you think people with different religious beliefs will respond to your work?**

**EH-V:** I'm sure many people might have a problem with the animal materials – those with certain religious beliefs, and those with strong beliefs about animal welfare. I'm not intending to upset people. I understand there are different interpretations on wearing tanned pig skin. Some Islamic scholars and jurists allow it, while others do not. In the Torah, the concern is about touching – something I'd encourage visitors to the show not to do anyway, so I don't think the presence of tanned pig caul fat is necessarily a problem. For those who do object, I'm not setting out to upset them, but the work reflects my interest in topics, areas of life that people find it hard to discuss – death, disease and God are recent examples. Perhaps this comes from growing up in a country under communist rule, where lots of topics were out of bounds.

**CD: Your smaller, individual pieces take on very sculptural qualities, especially with your incorporation of other materials (timber, metal, plastic, clips). What is their relationship to beauty?**

**EH-V:** These smaller works offer me an opportunity to consider more domestic approaches – in scale and in form. In making the larger installations, I'm appropriating methodologies that use a lot of repetition, such as sewing or weaving. [Curator] Gill Hedley talks about my working methodology as approaching the "piece work" of workshops and early factories – highly repetitious – but I'm also really interested in craft and traditional approaches to working with materials such as wood. By bringing together the turned wood and battery clips with my animal materials, themselves formed into shapes, perhaps I'm trying to suggest that beauty exists everywhere – and that these opposites can complement each other.

**CD: You have completed many residencies. I'm particularly interested in your time in 2011 as artist-in-restaurant at Pied à Terre (a Michelin-starred restaurant in London). Could you tell me more about your time here, and the work you produced from it?**

**EH-V:** I was the first "artist-in-restaurant" at Pied à Terre, and it was a unique opportunity. I worked closely with 13 to 14 chefs in the basement kitchen – such a small space, but where huge things happen. My solo exhibition, *The Wish of the Witness*, was the result of in-depth research and close collaboration with the chefs; it was heavily influenced by the restaurant's daily routines, precisions and changing menus.

I incorporated 10 sculptural and installation works, made primarily with raw materials sourced from the restaurant's kitchen, which included: quail carcasses and wishbones, scallop skirts and corals, sheep testicles, fish skins and bones. Daily, I would go through the chefs' leftovers, ask for things to be saved and then take these back to my studio. I carefully cleaned and preserved these unlikely materials, transforming them into new, beautiful sculptural forms.

The objects in the exhibition sought to position themselves somewhere between the beautiful and the brutal, through a process of “recomposing decomposition”.

**CD: What will we see from you in the future? You have shown some works in progress at the Djanogly Gallery ...**

**EH-V:** The Making Beauty project extends beyond this exhibition. I will continue working with the University of Nottingham, the University of East Anglia and UCL in the future to develop the pieces in Making Beauty, but I’ll also be working on new opportunities that have opened up, responding to interesting invitations to exhibit and make new works in new places. I’m particularly keen to show the range of scale and diversity of works in my practice (beyond this fantastic opportunity to show two large-scale installations at the Djanogly Gallery), particularly works of a more domestic scale, which will be shown in January 2017 at the Danielle Arnaud Gallery in London. During my residency at Pied à Terre, I made a number of smaller domestic works, and following these large-scale installation works, I’m interested in following these up, making my work more available and accessible. Of course, I’m also really keen to respond to challenging locations, to expand the way my installations work in the public domain. There are other works, which, as for the Djanogly Gallery, I’d like to revisit, particularly Ambush, where I tunnelled under trees, installing viewing points under the ground to look up into the tree from below surface level.

*•Making Beauty: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva is at Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham Lakeside Arts from 20 until 30 October 2016.*