

Exhibition

Art with guts

Making Beauty by
Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva is at
The Djanogly Gallery,
Nottingham, UK, until
Oct 30, 2016

On entering Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's newest exhibition, you are instantly struck with a distinct sense as to why she was hand-picked to produce work for the Vatican last year. From moving through the relatively sterile and minimal surroundings of the Djanogly Gallery, you become suddenly engulfed by a dimly lit, organic cathedral of long, repetitively placed curtains of living lace. Long arches of various sizes, with shapes cut through provide the structure of the ethereal room contained within.

The hanging sheets make this spectacle at first appear to be some kind of chaotic and shimmering lace, but on

closer inspection you suddenly find that these are in fact amalgamations of plastic and pigs' omentum, or caul as it is colloquially known. The omentum cuts through with a bright white, almost root-like pattern, with threads of varying thickness and length stretching over. In the spaces between the threads, a translucent material allows glowing light through. All of this brings together the elements of anatomy, architecture, beauty, and religion into one space quite flawlessly.

Elpida, who originates from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (now Macedonia), is currently based in Brighton and is certainly no stranger to using obscure biological materials in her work. She has previously produced numerous commissions, including *Epidermis*, a sculpture using salmon skins, bones, and fishing wire to bring together themes of the fishing industry and the armed forces. Another of her pieces, *Resuscitare*, uses several felled trees gilded with gold and placed in an existing circle of beech trees, gilded with Dutch metal, allowing the organic materials to eventually decay, whilst the metal gilding permeates. Throughout these works she has achieved a remarkable feat, conveying how biology and architecture relate to one another; *Making Beauty* only serves to solidify this.

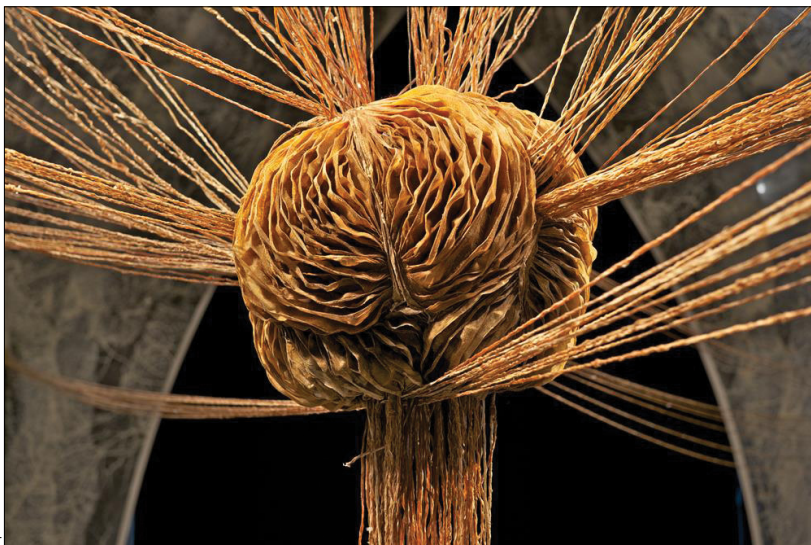
Deeper down this curtained hallway you are led into the centre piece of the exhibition, the *Haruspex*. The space now opens up and visitors are surrounded by the veils of caul, stretched out to form the walls of the room. From one of these walls pierce numerous ropes, all leading to a rugae-laden sphere, which takes in the ropes and lets them fall from it in an arranged fashion.

Haruspex takes its name from the diviners who used the thrown entrails of animals to make predictions. This name takes on a further meaning in the exhibition, as it translates from Haru (for intestines), and spex (meaning to observe), which is exactly what is happening with this work. The sheets of omentum encapsulate you, the ropes that lead into the sphere are entwined sheep intestine, and the sphere itself is created from part of a cow's stomach called the omasum. The centre omasum is noted for its folded, page-like appearance, and due to this also goes by the name "bible"—once again, religion flirting with the biological materials.

Leaving this centre-piece, we move into the next room, which is more macabre than ethereal until closer inspection. The first instalments that catch the eye are the set of inflated and illuminated pigs' stomachs, light-emitting diodes placed inside them making them act like a set of bizarre anatomical lampshades. The embalming technique used on these organs gives a papyrus-like, paper-thin quality to the tissue, showing now the themes of fragility and strength that Elpida has explored before.



Fragility



Haruspex

Elpida also looks to the future and to research in gastroenterology and colorectal surgery, exploring modern materials, including those upcoming in biotechnology. She shows the complexity of these materials in magnified and printed sculptures of microporous polymeric spheres currently undergoing development for the purpose of modified drug delivery and reconstructive bowel surgery.

At one corner of the room we find *The Bible*; once again, a sphere of cows' stomach hangs down, this time with an opening on the underside, revealing speakers that emanate bowel sounds, and stories of bowel conditions.

Another piece reflects a similar theme, with copper wires stitched against a canopy, their pattern based on Elpida's analysis of the action of the bowel.

Elpida challenges the contemporary views that society holds on the gut in this new exhibition. With this, *Making Beauty* successfully manages to siphon off separate parts and aspects of the gut and show the beauty and fascination that they hold, whilst simultaneously showing the normality and variability that each one has.

Oliver Smith

Books

Microbes and the gut–brain axis

The fairly new field of neurogastroenterology and the effect that microbes in the ecosystem of the human gastrointestinal tract have on our emotions, behaviour, and health has been explored in a new book *The Mind–Gut Connection* by Emeran Mayer. After writing 95 book chapters and reviews, and co-editing three books for an academic readership, Mayer has now ventured into the popular science genre. The book promises to “teach us how we can develop a happier mindset” by offering practical advice and stressing the importance of instilling a sense of equilibrium between our mind, gut, and the microbes that dwell within. Before even beginning, we, as readers, are expecting great things from *The Mind–Gut Connection*.

Unfortunately, this expectation is not completely fulfilled. Mayer sets the scene with a long introduction to himself, the field, and the basic building blocks that he will add to over the course of the book. The language is dense, akin to reading an academic paper without referencing. And, although some of the analogies used are helpful, the sheer number of metaphors placed here and throughout the book is quite distracting—with references to war, the theatre, a motorway, the internet, fibre-optic cables, and an orchestra, to name just a few—and makes some of these sections cumbersome to read.

But get past the introduction, and the book is fascinating; Mayer tries to describe to a non-specialist audience how stressors and emotions are felt in the gut and relayed to the brain. It is at times unclear who Mayer's intended audience is, with some sections very detailed and eloquently guiding the reader through his ideas and findings gently, while at other times, leaps are made between concepts with little guidance and scant information to support the facts. This complaint aside, Mayer articulately expresses how stress, childhood

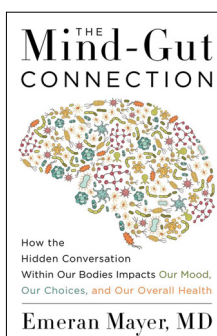
trauma, and maternal depression—among other events—can interfere with the microbiome and lead to gastrointestinal and neurological symptoms.

Mayer also presents patient-specific examples to back up the points he is making, in a way that is reminiscent of Oliver Sacks in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*. These examples are intriguing, with rare cases such as cyclical vomiting syndrome to more common cases such as a patient with Parkinson's disease, although these examples are also met with some frustration for the impatient reader, as the conclusion of these patient visits is often not realised for several pages after the description of the symptoms, if at all.

The association between emotion and our gastrointestinal system is hardly surprising when considering that phrases involving the gut are intertwined in our language, such as “gut-wrenching experiences”, “butterflies in the stomach”, and “stomach tied up in knots”—and Mayer does an excellent job of describing the circuits responsible for these. The stars of the show, however, are the microbes and their role and interaction with our enteric nervous system and also the brain, through the release of metabolites that are deposited and circulated via the blood.

Mayer dispels many dogmas from the ancient practice of cleansing microbial toxins, to fad diets and why they rarely work, and the potential link between the declining ecosystem surrounding us globally and the diminishing diversity in gut microbiota. A quote from David Relman (Stanford University, CA, USA), which Mayer uses in the book, was particularly thought-provoking: “the human microbiome is a fundamental component of what it means to be human”. Which begs the question—do we serve the microbes in our gut? Or do they serve us?

Christina Wayman



The Mind–Gut Connection
Emeran Mayer,
Harper Wave, 2016
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