

## Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, Reoccurring Undulation VI Interviewed by Thomas Denman

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— Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva in front of her installation for Coastal Currents

Nothing could be more fitting to the name and location of the Coastal Currents Arts Festival than *Reoccurring Undulation VI*, a panel made up of 55 ‘tiles’ of salmon skin, arranged so that their conjoined lateral lines resemble the repetitive breaking of waves. The work, on display at the Shipwreck Museum, in Hastings, is by the internationally acclaimed, Macedonian-born artist Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, and was originally commissioned for Eastbourne’s Towner Gallery in 2011, where it was installed in full (960 tiles covering the walls). Over her two-decade career – which has included two appearances at the highly prestigious Venice Biennale, participating in the Macedonian (2013) and Vatican (2015) pavilions respectively – Hadzi-Vasileva has built an oeuvre of installations and sculptures using ethically sourced plant and animal matter, from rat skins and silkworm cocoons to the

testicles and digestive viscera of sheep.

Hadzi-Vasileva urges her audiences to think about how her work is made and what it is made of, since the materials, and the techniques used in handling and treating them, invariably constitute a significant part of its meaning and aesthetic force.

*Reoccurring Undulation VI* represents the undulating sea as much as the wavelike motion of salmon swimming; but understanding the materiality helps us appreciate the work on a yet deeper and richer level. As Hadzi-Vasileva explains, when the humidity in the room changes, the scales move up and down – they undulate – changing the skin’s texture and, thus, the way it catches the light. It is worth bearing in mind that these undulating, pulsing lines would have run parallel with the sensory organ (the lateral line) used by each fish to detect movement and vibration in the surrounding water. Knowledge of this biological fact galvanises the pattern on a number of levels – levels which themselves seem to undulate in harmonic correspondence. By way of these lateral lines, the sensory system of the fish is linked to its movement in the water, which is inextricable from the movement of the water surrounding the fish – and, on top of this, Hadzi-Vasileva’s artful joining up of these same lines is the basis of the work’s undulating pattern and formal expression.

The making of the work was repetitive and somewhat ‘undulatory’ in itself. First there was the painstaking process of trial and error to find the most effective method of treating the skins (so that they do not deteriorate and the colours stay fresh), a process which took no less than four months, and then the fastidious application of this method to the creation of each tile.

‘You have to be very methodical when you’re working,’ she says, ‘Everything is calculated, so that the same quality of fish is maintained throughout. You have to measure everything. If not you end up with different levels of colouration and dryness.’

She sourced the skins from a salmon farm in the Scottish Borders (which she had used before in a work consisting of 2,500 salmon skins, *Epidermis*, produced for the Berwick-on-Tweed Gymnasium in 2000, then shown at the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow). Over several months, she cleaned them by hand, removing the thin layers of flesh that remained underneath and storing them in freezers (her workshop resembles a scientific laboratory more than an artist's studio, she says, with all her materials and works-in-progress hidden away in containers). The skins then had to be tanned to preserve their colour and liveliness. This involved drying them with a substance that she made herself out of washing-up liquid, softening them with various oils and then immediately applying them to metal (zinc) plates before the skin had a chance to tense up: 'I tried timber plates first to keep everything natural. But the salmon has such a strength, when it dried, it twisted the wood.'

Catch the exhibition, while you can.

*Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, Reoccurring Undulation VI, 2 September–1 October 2017, Shipwreck Museum, Rock-a-Nore Road, Hastings, [www.shipwreckmuseum.co.uk](http://www.shipwreckmuseum.co.uk)*