

## ELPIDA HADZI-VASILEVA: INSIDE BEAUTY

4 APRIL 2021 · PAUL CAREY-KENT



*Witness of Virility*, 2011. Pied à Terre, London, UK. 80 sheep testes light bulbs mounted on black board. 16cm, 220cm x 12cm. Image credit: Sean Gibson + Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has a straightforward acceptance of the visceral realities of the body – more what one might expect of a surgeon than an artist. This might well be due, she speculates, to a mixture of her personality and upbringing in the agricultural Macedonia of the 1970's-80's. Based in Britain for 30 years now, that lack of squeamishness has seen her work with all manner of internal organs, which must be cleaned and prepared through the physical engagement of toxic, noxious and arduous processes. Perhaps it's no coincidence, she notes ruefully, that assistants have tended not to stay with her very long. But such materials as sheep's testicles, cow's stomachs and pig's hearts have brought her into continuing contact with an interesting mix of scientific disciplines: medical, biological, zoological and anatomical.

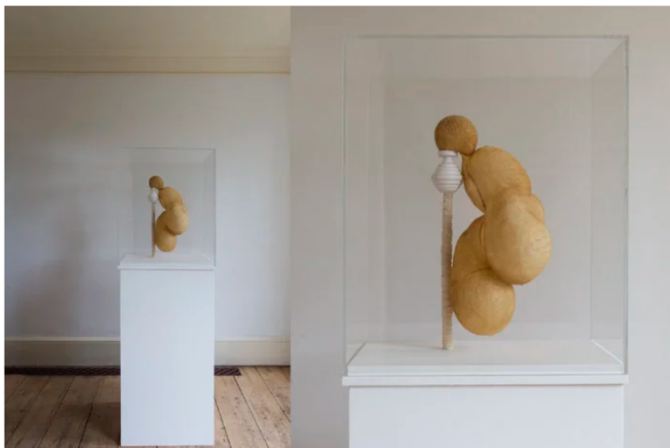
Testes seem a logical place to start, in art as in life. In 2011, she spent eight months as artist in residence at *Pied à Terre*, a Michelin starred restaurant in Charlotte Street, London, which serves the internal skin of sheep's testicles as a delicacy. Hadzi-Vasileva says she was concentrating on 'observing the beautiful ways of presenting things on a plate and how that related to my artwork', but it was a very male environment, and one in which plenty of teasing occurred.

The head chef made it a running joke to question her about whether she'd worked with testicles, and how 'lots of different animals can give you some really good sizes'. By way of getting her own back, Hadzi-Vasileva sourced some from a taxidermist – though 'it's not easy to get hold of them as most male sheep are castrated when very young'. She turned one into a purse – the first of several she has made since – which she presented to the head chef. After that she got the cooks to save the kitchen's scrotums, and proceeded to make *Witness of Virility*: a light work which turned eighty sheep's testicles into bulbs that rather celestially illuminated the restaurant for the following six months.



A year later, incidentally, Damien Hirst installed his 'Cock and Bull' at *Tramshed* restaurant - a cow and cockerel preserved in formaldehyde. Hirst seeks the immediate impact of the animal exposed in a way which no longer occurs in day to day life. Hadzi-Vasileva's investigation of body parts is subtler: 'I like it that people don't know what they're looking at... I like to play with that whole idea of drawing people into something attractive to eye - then, when they realise what it is, they pull back.'

The series *Beauty Exposed*, 2016, is made from sheep stomachs. It arose from work at the other end of the food chain: a year-long collaboration with digestive disease specialists at the University College Hospital (London), University of East Anglia (Norwich) and University of Nottingham, carrying out research into Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Hadzi-Vasileva has had stomach problems herself, so there was a personal aspect to her observing colonoscopies and endoscopies. 'Some of the experiments', she explains, 'would blow air through the patients, and observe under a microscope how it passed through'. That inspired the inflated sculptures which 'take a slightly comical form, in a delicate balance suggesting the fragility of life - how quickly something can go wrong without us knowing. Often you don't even realise you have an issue until something happens, when medical checks reveal it.'



The stomachs of *Beauty Exposed* are delicately balanced on a medical tube covered with pig's and lamb intestine, with a wooden object - such as a curtain end or door handle - capping the end of the tube. 'I like the playfulness of combining unexpected materials and bringing in the domestic side', says Hadzi-Vasileva, mentioning that IBS is not classified as a disease, but as a dysfunction 'yet it can severely affect mental health and behaviour, leaving people housebound for fear of bowel problems arising when they are out.' She recorded patients talking about problems with their gut - you can hear the recording on Hadzi-Vasileva's website, in *Rendition of Self*, 2016, part of her *Making Beauty* exhibition at Djanogly Gallery in Nottingham: 'Heartburn... coughed up brown blood... old lady things... precautionary stomach surgery... eating socially is difficult... pipe inserted... complex long-term conditions... not allowed to use disabled toilets'. Some patients, Hadzi-Vasileva says, manifest no symptoms - but they are thinking about them, and that can lead to the body developing the symptoms they are worrying about. Yet though it is easy to assume that the brain controls everything, she says it is 'much more complicated than that. The gut can also control the brain.' This is shown by experiments when pills are used to induce changes in the gut while the brain is plugged into a monitor - 'there are moments when the brain sends signals to stomach, but also moments when the stomach sends signals to the brain. Your intestine has layers of hair-like fibres internally which act as sensors and send more signals than any other part of the body: so it's back and forth - troubles with the gut send signals to the brain, and the brain thinks about the problem.' Research has identified the importance of gut-microbiota in influencing these bi-directional communications between the central and the enteric nervous systems (Ridaura & Belkaid, 2015; Al-Asmakh *et al*, 2012; Labus *et al*, 2017), and suggested that IBS arises from the disruption of these complex relationships: a better understanding of the alterations involved might provide new targeted therapies.



*Prototypes for Making a Machine to Reveal Beauty*, 2016 3D nylon prints mounted in perspex boxes, 80mm diameter, 3/10. Image credit: Bernard G Mills + Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

*Prototypes for Making a Machine to Reveal Beauty*, 2016, emerged from a residency in medical research labs considering nutrition, our gut and how microscopic devices can fix problems. Dr Richard Day (Professor at University College London) specialises in developing bio-medical micro-particles to help patients who have suffered bowel or internal organ failure. He has designed microscopic structures which can be combined to make a 'glass scaffold' that is built into the body to replace tissue removed during corrective surgery (Ghanbar, Luo, Bakhshi, Day & Edirisinghe, 2013) Hadzi-Vasileva made prints highlighting the aesthetic arising, and also planned to make a two metre 3D version, so that 'the particle is human sized and you can experience the internal space of the body being regenerated'. She only got the funding for a prototype, but you can imagine the effect of encountering it full size.





Hadzi-Vasileva is struck by how beautiful stomach tissue looks, with a velvety texture visible under strong light, when the internal veins are also exposed. And the same can be said of the rectum, which has a similar signalling power into the brain. She sat in on bowel cancer operations at Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital. That inspired her to obtain different animals' rectums from slaughterhouses, which otherwise immediately discard them. *Bos III*, 2016, is one of five monoprints made from the rectum of a cow: according to Hadzi-Vasileva 'the rectum's internal cavity looks very different from any other animal's, and is unusually long – going further into the stomach – I presume that's linked to their stomachs having four compartments. My installation *Haruspex* 2015, used the third stomach, the omasum, which acts as a filter and is so delicate it looks rather like the pages of a book – butchers call it 'The Bible.' 'I didn't do anything to the body parts', says Hadzi-Vasileva, 'but used the original fluid with black ink, or the animal's blood to yield red.'





In recent years, people have become more conscious of what they eat, and of the whole idea of good and bad bacteria and their effects. Hadzi-Vasileva has been looking at how bacteria can very quickly grow on surfaces, including tissues. As she explains: 'during lockdown I decided to use up everything' – she has four freezers full of animal parts in her studio in Horsham, Sussex – 'and not acquire any new stuff. Unsure what to do with pigs' hearts, I left them overnight on paper and the next day I found the resulting marks were interesting.





Blood flowing through my heart 15, 2020



Blood flowing through my heart 1, 2020

I printed succeeding impressions till the juices stopped flowing, and also drew on top, elevating the beauty of the patterns.' Next day, though, she noticed that the shapes and colours had shifted, and realised that was caused by bacteria. She systematically tracked the changes, which 'because I layer the prints, sometimes happened inside the layers like mushroom spores.' Once the bacteria have died in the air, the image stops moving, providing an endpoint to the curious collaboration that leads to the final states of the print series *Blood flowing through my heart*, 2020.

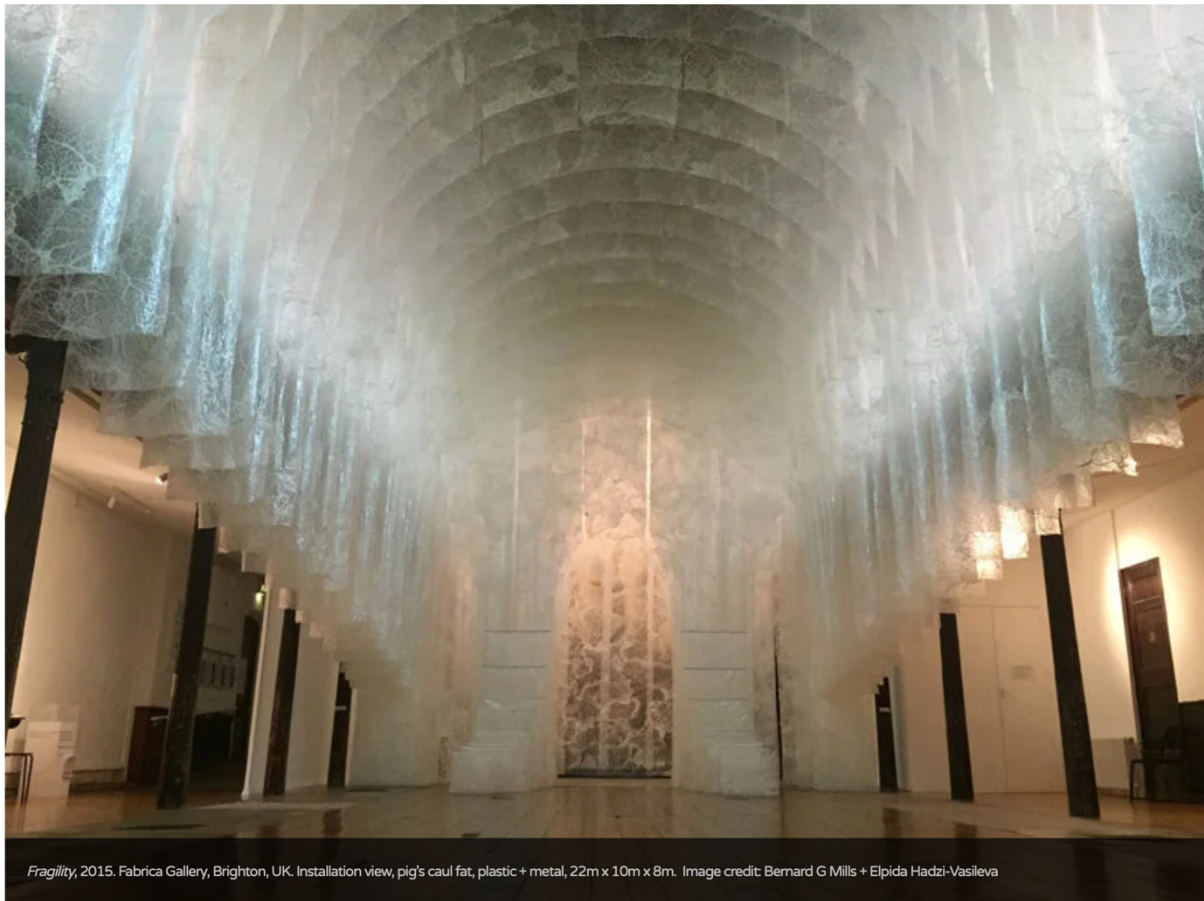




The last surprising art material we discuss is offal – specifically, caul fat, the thin membrane which surrounds the internal organs of cows, sheep, and pigs. Hadzi-Vasileva is ‘interested in how humanity has rejected so many things as inedible, but more and more they are being eaten again. Caul fat would have been used traditionally to wrap a joint, cooking it in the fat. People thought it was unhealthy, but it’s coming back into the culinary industry – and actually it has many nutrients, and is good for you in moderation.’ Hadzi-Vasileva’s 250 square metre installation *Butterflies in the Stomach* was made in Valenciennes, on the French side of the Belgian border, in 2008. Arriving there, she’d been fascinated with ‘Dentelle de Valenciennes’, a painstaking way of making lace by hand. A worker typically produces around 2 sq. cm per day: ‘The price obtainable’, says Hadzi-Vasileva, ‘is out of all proportion to the labour required, so it’s a dying industry.’

She’d started to make similarly exacting drawings based on the lace patterns when a butcher’s window caught her attention – ‘it reminded me of home – you point at whole cow in Macedonia and ask for the bit you want’ – and she was struck by the comparable laciness of caul fat. But she found it impossible to work with until she ‘gave up in frustration and dumped it in water – then beautiful air bubbles appeared, and the caul came alive – now it could be manipulated.’ Taxidermists said caul fat couldn’t be preserved, but that just increased Hadzi-Vasileva’s determination to do so, and she got to a point where she could stabilise it long enough to exhibit it. Subsequently, Hadzi-Vasileva has used caul fat again (*Fragility*, 2015; *Haruspex*, 2015) and it also features in a planned concept for Chengdu, China.

Nowadays, every anatomy school uses plastinated body parts as a study aid, and plastination – which replaces the water and fat in flesh with special plastics, producing specimens that can be touched, do not smell or decay, and retain many of the properties of the original sample – might be the way to make caul fat permanent. The Chinese scientist Dr Sui Hongjin, who was behind the famous application of the process for the ‘Body Worlds’ exhibitions, is testing plastination of caul fat for Hadzi-Vasileva. *Butterflies in the Stomach*, necessarily a temporary installation at the time, was a hanging work which took the viewer on a spiral path as though travelling through a pig’s stomach – actually quite close to the human stomach’s shape. ‘The smell was powerful, so few could stay long, but three speakers inside the space played recordings of noises from my own stomach.’ Hadzi-Vasileva mentions that the levels of stomach noise vary ‘depending on your diet, the air you breathe, what you drink – too much beer makes it much noisier.’



*Fragility*, 2015. Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, UK. Installation view, pig's caul fat, plastic + metal, 22m x 10m x 8m. Image credit: Bernard G Mills + Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva



There is a fascinating attraction to how Hadzi-Vasileva shows us the unexpected beauty in matter from which we might instinctively shy away. She raises issues, too. Richard Davey (2017) identifies her aestheticising gaze as 'subversive, making visible the usually invisible, turning the inside out and exposing those functions we would usually hide.' That might connect to a plea for transparency and openness, both now and in how we present the past. The unexpected delicacy and fragility of life's internal architecture underlines both the transience of life and the role of medical science in maintaining it, as we read ourselves into Hadzi-Vasileva's animal structures. Next up is a residency at a cystic fibrosis unit in Nottingham: no doubt the outcome will be alluringly thought-provoking.



You can hear [Hadzi-Vasileva in conversation with Neil Walker](https://www.lakesidearts.org.uk/exhibitions/event/5435/in-conversation-with-artist-elpida-hadzi-vasileva.html), livestreamed from Lakeside Arts, [on 12th April at 1pm](https://www.lakesidearts.org.uk/exhibitions/event/5435/in-conversation-with-artist-elpida-hadzi-vasileva.html)

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And you can see much more of Hadzi-Vasileva's work on her website <https://www.elpihv.co.uk/>

'Elpida' means 'hope' in Greek, and <https://www.hopemade.art/> is a new website which makes her work available for purchase, in particular smaller sculptures and prints appropriate for private domestic settings as well as museum or corporate collections.