

INTERALIA MAGAZINE

An online magazine dedicated to the interactions between the arts, sciences and consciousness.

Paying attention to space

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva is a contemporary visual artist working across varied media of sculpture, installation, video, sound, photography and architectural interventions. Her materials range from the extraordinary to the ordinary and the ephemeral or discarded to the highly precious; they have included organic materials, foodstuffs and precious metals, such as caulk fat to gold leaf. Central to her practice is a response to the particularities of place; its history, locale, environment and communities. She is interested in how the exchange of knowledge might develop through collaborative working and in the contexts of landscape, heritage, science and community as offered by each location.

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

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in Interviews

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Gunna – Motectum, 2009, Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucester, UK. Chicken skins, Hand preserved and stitched dress, size 10. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

Richard Bright: Can we begin by you saying something about your background?

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva: I was born in North Macedonia, at the time known as Republic of Macedonia and was previously part of the Former Yugoslavia. Growing up in communism felt free and you were able to move across borders without many problems. I left Macedonia at age of 14 and when to study in Novi Sad, Serbia. This was the nearest, known, and respected, Design School (500km away from home) called Skola za Dizajn Bogdan Suput. I graduated in 1990 and sadly the war in Yugoslavia forced me to return to Macedonia. I had to wait for a year before applying to university, and then another year as the war kept spreading and moving further south. At this point an opportunity opened up and in February 1992 I travelled to UK with a plan to return back to YU in 6 months and start my studies. However, in September 1992 I enrolled at Central School of Speech and Drama, which was very new art foundation course based in Camden Town and my life began in the UK. From 1993-1996, I went to Glasgow School of Art where I completed my BA Fine Art in Sculpture; and subsequently between 1996-1998 I attended the Royal College of Art where I completed my MA in Sculpture.

I am interested in the topics and areas of life that people ordinarily find it hard to talk about – death, disease and religion to name recent examples. I've often wondered where this desire comes from. I think it's in part my natural curiosity and in part growing up in a communist country (Macedonia) where certain topics were out of bounds. Freedom of expression, asking difficult questions, using difficult materials, revealing the hidden and looking behind and below are variety of the themes that inform all my work. My early works have included excavations, planting trees upside down, making carpets out of watercress or fir cones, using fish skin or small birds' bones; all aiming to explore materiality, taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary, and adding the precious (like gold leaf) to the mundane.



Ambush, 2000, Rhinefield Ornamental Drive, The New Forest, Hampshire, underground intervention, 2000 x 1500 x 200 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

RB: What is the underlying focus of your work? In particular, what are the thinking processes and knowledge practices that guide your artistic research?

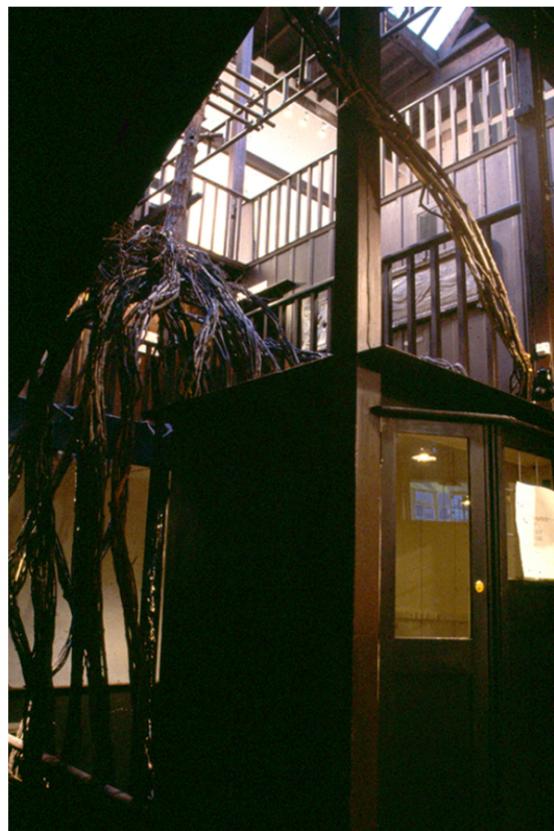
EH-V: My major focus is my interest in space, in particular a hidden space, space that we don't pay attention to or are not aware of. Starting from a very young age I was fascinated with the underworld a space that we cannot inhabit, such as burial grounds and my interested in exposing this world of habitat, curiosity to what really happens at 6 feet under.... Macedonia is traditionally an agricultural country, and its influences on my work is clear in many ways; *Ambush*, a project I created in the New Forest, gave visitors the direct experience of going under the earth, encountering the darkness, moisture and narrowness of tunnels positioned below two mature trees. My aim was to create a different perspective of seeing the underworld as another living space; something inaccessible becoming accessible and liken the tunnels to a womb. In this mysterious subterranean world, riddled with references to 'myth, birth and growth, underworlds and death', visitors find themselves challenged to enter a relationship with

'that which is normally unseen'. I thrive on challenges, 'without them, I find it very hard work.' I learn with every new work I make. The materials I use for my sculpture often have an existing link or history to the specific place and/or environment, which often results in new and unusual methods of working.



Epidermis, 2000, Berwick Gymnasium Gallery, Berwick on Tweed, UK. Preserved salmon skins and bones, fishing line
460 x 460 x 300 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

In 1999, *Who Am I?*, a solo exhibition at ArtSway, I used materials as difficult to handle as butter and fir cones, pushing them to their limits. In a site-specific exhibition called *Epidermis* at the Berwick Gymnasium Gallery, I used 2,500 salmon skins and 1,500 bones, all specially cleaned and preserved for the purpose. These and other large-scale works, I'm deliberately using confrontational scale to regularly surprise or shock the viewer. These works involve repetitive, physical labour over extended periods of time, sometimes months, or years. I give myself to the material, and the material gives back. I give the work the time it needs – and then quietly but insistently asks for the time of the viewer too.



Re-Evolution, 1996, Glasgow School of Art, Mackintosh Museum, Glasgow, Scotland. Live Scots Pine, timber and metal
2780 x 460 x 460 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

Flora is also a continuing interest in my work, from my Glasgow School of Art final exhibition, *Re-Evolution*, where I placed a full size Scott's Pine tree through the stairwell of the Macintosh building, through, various residencies and commissions, including *Road to Nowhere* in Kielder Forest, where I 'replaced' a flooded road (for a reservoir), with a floating carpet of watercress, to a very recent work, *The Gilded Elm* in Preston Park, turning a very highly loved 450 years old English elm tree, felled due to elm disease, into a memorial for it and it's still living twin.



The Gilded Elm, 2023, Preston Park, Brighton, UK. 450 years old English Elm, gold leaf, 600 x 300 x 300 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.



Road to Nowhere, 2002, Kielder Forest, Northumberland, UK. Watercress, bubble wrap and floats, 3000 x 450 x 7 cm.

Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

I am drawn to waste products especially from the meat industry, questioning our behaviour and human impact on our environment. 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. I have been pushing the boundaries of unusual art 'materials' for some time, using salmon and chicken skins, silkworm cocoons, upside down trees, pig and cows' stomachs, lamb intestines.

I am fascinated with skin, it being both an internal & external organ. The skin is identity and a projection surface, the representation of the soul. What is authentic lies beneath the skin and is hidden inside our body. I have created many site-specific installations where I refer to the building as a metaphor, a body/container, where the body becomes a hollow, vessel-like space and the skins I've used are soft,

sometimes translucent and imagined like a self-contained 'balloon' filled with history.

RB Have there been any particular influences to your ideas and work?

EH-V: Architects create buildings for bodies to inhabit simultaneously. Both skin and building protect and shelter, while providing a means to express identity – whether personal, political, religious, or cultural. The analogy between the building and the human body has a long tradition. The notion of living in the body turns out to be a discourse about hollow space: the imaginary room created by one's own skin. Skin, whether generated by the body or manufactured, is crucial as a barrier, it protects the body, and it is a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces.

In 2007-2008 I undertook a 6-month long residency in Valenciennes, which was followed by a solo exhibition. It is here that I discovered and started to use Caul fat. Also known as lace fat, crêpine, a thin membrane that surrounds and wraps internal organs to protect them.



Butterflies in the Stomach, 2008, L'H du Siège, Valenciennes, France. Caul fat – Pig (crépine de porc), plastic, 110 kg of caulfat (crépine de porc) 250 SqM (250 m2). Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

A complex of dermal layers forms the organism as a whole; the body is, in effect, nothing but layers of skin in which interiority and exteriority are thoroughly convoluted and a line between a hidden interior and the exterior that we know and experience. Everything has a skin. Thick or thin, smooth or rough, porous or impermeable. Skin is the flexible, continuous covering of the body that safeguards our internal organs from the external environment. *Butterflies in the Stomach* created in Valenciennes, it's a tunnel of Caul fat where visitors where able to travel through, coming to an inaccessible exit, requiring them to turn around to repeat the journey and leave. The sound of hungry empty stomach accompanied the work. I was aiming to make the hidden visible, encouraging a sensitive appreciation of a particular place, but acknowledging both skill and craft which is less appreciated in the fast food, mass produced, consumer focused society of the 21st Century.

Our skin reflects our age, our ancestry, and our state of health, our cultural identity, and much of what we want the world to know about us! Skin is visually perceived to provide involuntary insights into hidden things. Skin is multi-layered, multipurpose organ that shifts from thick to thin, tight to loose, wet to dry, across the landscape of the body. Lacking definitive boundaries, skin flows continuously from the exposed surfaces of the body to its internal cavities and organs.

A living body could be imagined as a continuous surface from inside to out, but there are limits to the actual representation of that continuity. Medical technology has continually sought to uncover the unseen, the unknown, that hides behind a body's surface and through time this imaging has moved from the surface of the body to probing its depths.



Haruspex, 2015, Pavilion of the Holy See, 56th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Italy. Installation view, pigs caul fat, lamb intestines, cows stomach (omasum), plastic & metal, 850 x 900 x 550 cm. Photo: Bernard G Mills.

RB: Can you say something about your installation *Haruspex* (2015)? How did it come about?

EH-V: I was invited and commissioned by Dr Micol Forti, Head of the Modern and Contemporary department of the Vatican Museums, to make a new work, *Haruspex*, for the Pavilion of the Holy See at the Venice Biennale 2015. Dr Micol Forti visited my site-specific installation *Silentio Pathologia*, at the Scuola dei Laneri, which was commissioned by the National Gallery of Macedonia, where I worked with curator Ana Frangovska for the Venice Biennale 2013.



Silentio Pathologia, 2013, Pavilion of the Republic of Macedonia, 55th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Italy. Internal space, steel, silk, silk worm cocoons, rat skins, life rats, bespoke cages, cotton and wire, 1000 x 900 x 600 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

I was asked to respond to the scriptural text, “In the Beginning... the Word became flesh” and is – like a lot of my recent work – 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 those 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.



Silentio Pathologia, 2013, Pavilion of the Republic of Macedonia, 55th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Italy. Internal space, steel, silk, silk worm cocoons, rat skins, life rats, bespoke cages, cotton and wire, 1000 x 900 x 600 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

I chose to use animal visceral fat 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’.



Silentio Pathologia, 2013, Pavilion of the Republic of Macedonia, 55th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Italy. Internal space, steel, silk, silk worm cocoons, rat skins, life rats, bespoke cages, cotton and wire, 1000 x 900 x 600 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

I also used the animal visceral to refer to ancient divination practices. 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.



The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb central interior oil paint on wood panel from the Ghent Altarpiece by the Netherlandish Renaissance artist Jan van Eyck (c. 1390-1441 CE).

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 venerate the Agnus Dei, who is raised up in the centre of a paradisal 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 relocation 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.



Fragility, 2015, Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, 2015, UK. Installation view, pigs caul fat, plastic & metal, 2200 x 1000 x 800 cm. Photo: Bernard G Mills.

RB: In your work, *Fragility*, you utilise appropriation of unusual materials, in this case pigs caul fat. Can you say more about this, the significance of its use and the process of creating this work?

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: *Fragility* took two years to plan and 10 months to make, with

the help of two or three assistants. In *Fragility*, I used the delicate and vulnerable material of pigs' caul fat very intentionally to consider the fragility of life itself. Exploring the *expérience de mort imminente* or near-death experience, I focused upon the light seen and discussed by those effected, employing the architecture of Fabrica Gallery to route light through animal membrane – juxtaposing experience and materiality. 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 its potency.

In collaboration with architect Pero 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 and it's one that doesn't allow any mistakes.

There's also an unusual smell as you come into the gallery. Some people might not notice it, but I would like people to experience the work with all their senses. The pieces when hung rustle as the air is disturbed and such is their delicacy, they seem to follow passers-by as they drift through the gallery.

This sense of movement, of reanimation, is extended by the behaviour of the materials once the preservation and installation is completed. Depending on the humidity and temperature of their resting places, the installations perceptibly warp and shift as if retaining a life of their own. It's not like a typical sculpture, has a more unpredictable nature, this afterlife is, at least to some extent, out of my hands.



Butter Wall, 2000, ArtSway, The New Forest, Hampshire, 1t of Butter, timber, metal 300 x 300 x 50 cm. Photo: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva.

RB: How does place and a sense of scale affect your work?

EH-V: Being at Glasgow School of Art was a very important time for me. I was in the sculpture department, but next door was the environmental art department, now joined together as one; David Harding introduced the Public Art Project in Environmental Art, and Paul Cosgrove brought this into sculpture, and it became part of our second-year curriculum. We had to go out and look for a site, making a work for a non-gallery setting outside the art school; we had to find our own site, negotiate permission to use it, propose a work and set it up. Work would remain in-situ for one or two weeks while staff/student crits took place on each of the sites. The work was thoroughly documented before it was removed. This introduced me to working site specifically and my interests in responding and exploring the landscape grew from there.



Inquisition of Beauty, 2016, Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham University, UK. Pig stomachs, LED lights, fibre -glass tube, 180 x 70 x 180 cm. Photo: Nick Dunmur.

RB: You have worked with a number of medical departments. How has your research with these departments influenced your work?

EH-V: I have had research work funded by the Wellcome Trust in the past, where I shadowed doctors and medical scientists at University College London, University of East Anglia and Nottingham University Hospital. It was all to do with the stomach and the bowel, to understand the critical impact of nutrition on patients, the difference between healthy and unhealthy guts, the role of bacteria, those with various bowel disease and intestine failure, either as an illness or self-inflicted.

My fascination with exploring this subject and exposing highly regarded medical research activity to larger public awareness – considering nutrition, healthy diet, our gut and how highly specialised, invisible to the eye, manufactured parts can fix problems – continues. The medical procedures that are

used to diagnose and treat digestive illnesses, have been my inspiration for producing a large number of new artworks, such as *Prototypes for Making a Machine to Reveal Beauty, Inquisition of Self*, which use biomedical materials & techniques that are still being developed. These include biological and synthetic biodegradable glass scaffolds, which replace tissue removed for clinical purposes. This has developed and extended my approach of using caul fat and other animal organs in my artwork to considering human body parts we sometimes would rather forget. By working closely with medical researchers, observing, and discussing the impact of their research on patients and students, I have used and borrowed models of innovative therapeutic devices such as microscopic sphere-based scaffold and drug encapsulation/ delivery technology to inform works. These prototype spheres are intended to improve healing while the prototype scaffolds are for example, used to restore continence to organs such as the sphincter muscle.

I interviewed patients to understand their history of symptoms, medical history and the impact and effect of long-term living and control of severe IBS.



Manometry I, 2016, Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham University, UK. Copper wire, linen, 100 x 5 x 200 cm. Photo: Nick Dunmur.



Rendition of Self, 2016, Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham University, UK. Cow stomach, turned wood, audio, 50 x 55 x 55 cm.
Photo: Nick Dunmur.

I've created works such as *Manometry I* and *Manometry II*, a large panel of stitched copper and steel wire whose lines are derived from analysis of action in the human bowel and a "bible", *Rendition of Self*, transformed into a listening point in which digestive sounds are heard privately. The involvement and responses of patients have been an important & critical element in my research; a Nottingham Digestive

Diseases BRU Patient Advisory Group member wrote:

“.....after I got home yesterday and sat down with a cuppa I started to think about things that Elpida had said (and this brought a smile to my face and hopefully to yours) I drank the tea and lay down with my mobile phone on my belly and recorded sounds THEN drank a can of coke and did the same...different noises! Am I mad, I actually laughed out loud :-)”



Blood flowing through my heart, 2020, Acrylic paint, pigs' heart, blood, pencil on Sidney Nolan paper, 25 x 30 cm. Photo:

Bernard G Mills.

RB: Can you say something about your print series *Blood flowing through my heart* (2020) and how it came about?

EH-V: In *Blood flowing through my heart* series, I focused on mark making and exposing an internal beauty of an organ vital for our survival. Each print is unique and individual, made using a pigs heart by direct compression transfer onto paper using paint, natural liquids, bloods, gold and pencil graphite to reveal its internal textures and invisible beauty.

During lock down I decided to return to my studio and only use materials that I had available in my freezers. Each day I would take something out and let it defrost without looking in the bag and seeing what it is. I have many animal body parts kept in my freezers, many that I have forgotten about. I use materials which we consider sometimes repulsive, in these prints that I have created I've tried to not only consider 'ugly' or 'uninteresting', but to consider something very valuable. What is important in life and how much more we understand as we gain experience.

Each print takes a week or two to make and it is in the drying process that the full print is revealed, the natural fluids mixed with the environment generate their own creation.



Beauty Exposed I, 2016, Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham University, UK. Sheep stomach, intestine and turned wood, 52 x 37 x 35 cm. Photo: Nick Dunmur.

RB: Pushing the boundaries of the medium is a natural part of the art making process because, in some ways, the artist is exploring the medium itself. What boundaries do you wish to push with the medium that you use?

EH-V: *By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality.' Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency. In much of his work, Michel Foucault insists on describing domination in terms of 'relations of power' as part of an effort to challenge the assumption that 'power is a system of domination which controls everything and which leaves no room for freedom.' Emphatically stating that in all relations of power 'there is necessarily the possibility of resistance', he invites the critical thinker to search those margins, gaps, and locations on and through the body where agency can be found.*

– Bell Hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze*, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992)

Throughout my practice, bringing the inside of living bodies under the viewer's gaze (*Beauty Exposed*), I am diverting our attention and questioning the hierarchy of appearances and beauty. Making use of animal material, the work reflects on death and aestheticization of life, suggesting a transformation of the living towards landscape. From abstract patterns inherently present within nature and the organic realm, light filters and draws upon matter and space. The sculptural gesturing brings fragility and permanence together towards a certain unity of the physical body, the spiritual inhabitant and its environment. The installations I create re-connects beings and matter through a reflection on power and balancing forces, pushing us to experience the work beyond its physical properties and boundaries, to look courageously at our essential weakness and ephemerality.

Drawing from and pushing the boundaries, once again, aiming to make the hidden visible, encouraging a sensitive appreciation of a particular place, but acknowledging both skill and craft which is less appreciated in the fast food, mass produced, consumer focused society of the 23rd Century.

RB: What future projects are you currently working on?

EH-V: I'm currently completing a major new incredibly ambitious site-specific work, which has taken more years than I care to mention to get to this point and is still at least a year from completion. I'd like to keep this secret for a little while longer, but I'm happy to give Interalia an interview and a full accounting of this major new work when it's completed.

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