



Art from the gut: the scientifically inspired work of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

Aesthetic meets gastric in the surprising and beautiful sculptures of artist Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, finds Kit Buchan

Kit Buchan

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The highly respected Macedonian artist Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva will show a selection of her recent work at the Djanogly gallery in Nottingham later this month, demonstrating her unusual and ambitious installations in a grand, three-part exhibition. Hadzi-Vasileva specialises in mixed-media “interventions” in public buildings and spaces and the new exhibition, *Making Beauty*, incorporates two earlier large-scale works along with a third gallery containing her newer sculptures. Perhaps the most intriguing and unsettling aspect of the exhibition is that the majority of the work is made from artistically manipulated animal viscera, painstakingly preserved and exploited to fascinating, decorative effect.



Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's *Haruspex*, made from pig, sheep and cow entrails. Photograph: Bernard G Mills/Courtesy the artist

“It’s easy to preserve skin,” she says, “but when it comes to an organ it’s a very different matter: they decompose no matter what you do.” Hadzi-Vasileva is fascinated by the arcane mysteries of internal organs, the digestive system in particular, and organic matter has featured in her installations throughout her career. “I’m attracted to how difficult it is, keeping the organ ‘alive’. I’ve had to find my own method to preserve the viscera.” This method is perhaps best demonstrated in the piece entitled *Haruspex*, which was commissioned to hang in the Vatican’s pavilion at last year’s Venice Biennale. The lace-like drapery surrounding the space, translucent with delicate filigree, is in fact the distended membrane of pig gut. Elegant threads of sheep’s intestine connect these walls to a central, textured sphere, made from the carefully preserved stomach of a cow (its third stomach, to be precise, an organ once known as “the bible” for its page-like folds).

Haruspex will form the second of Making Beauty’s three rooms. The first, a long gallery with a low ceiling, will contain *Fragility*, a work originally installed at the Fabrica gallery in Brighton last year. Again: pig’s innards, in this case delicate banners of embalmed caul fat. These are hung from the ceiling in neatly staggered drapes, catching light across their veiny surfaces and mimicking, according to the artist, the light described by survivors of near-death experiences. “There’s an unusual smell as you come into the gallery,” she says. “Some people might not notice it, but I would like people to experience the work with all their senses.” The drapes rustle as the air is disturbed and such is their delicacy that, according to Hadzi-Vasileva, 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 complete. 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,” says Hadzi-Vasileva, discussing the unpredictable nature of her works, whose afterlife is, at least to some extent, out of her hands. *Haruspex*, aptly, is the Latin name for a Roman priest whose task was to divine meaning from the innards of sacrificial beasts.

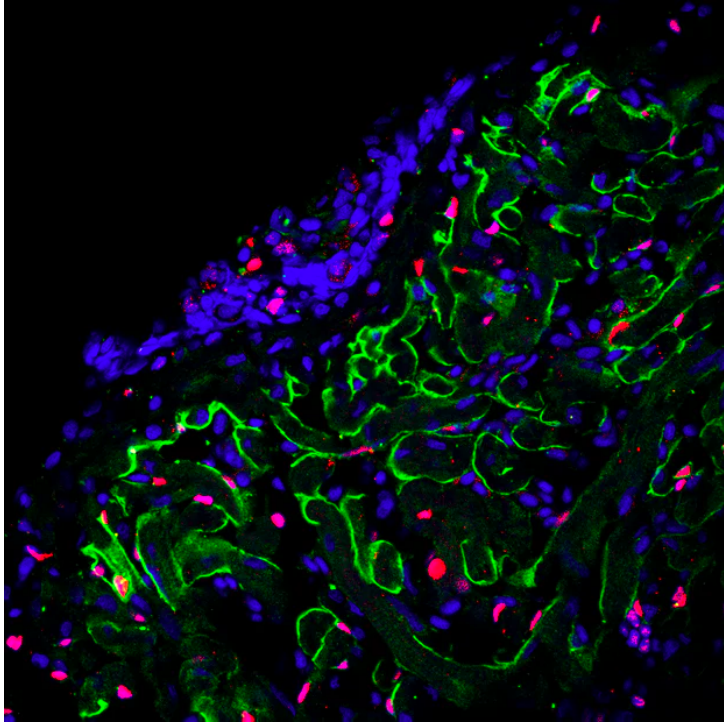


Image of Zebra heart slices with red, blue and green staining.

Photograph: Courtesy Vanessa Lowe, UCL

Despite this association, however, Hadzi-Vasileva is a distinctly scientific artist whose most recent activity, funded by the Wellcome Trust, has been to shadow doctors and medical scientists at three universities. “It’s all to do with the stomach and the bowel,” she says of her resultant sculptures, which will fill the third and final room of *Making Beauty*. Specifically, Hadzi-Vasileva has sought visual stimuli in the medical procedures used to diagnose and treat digestive illnesses, taking inspiration from these procedures to produce small, “very beautiful” artworks.

Dr Giles Major, clinical assistant professor at the Nottingham Digestive Diseases Biomedical Research Unit, worked with the artist during her several research trips to Nottingham. “Having an artist involved is about helping to think about the problems we’re working on in a different way,” he says. “We hit it off; we thought she could help us and she thought we could help her.” Hadzi-Vasileva’s sculptures are the result of two years of interviewing patients, witnessing endoscopies and studying MRI scans of the digestive tract. “I haven’t seen the product yet,” says Major, “but I want it to challenge the way I think.”

At the very least, he will be intrigued. The exhibition will include inflated stomachs with timber attachments, drawings taken from images of bowel mobility rendered in copper wire, even a sculpture that viewers can put their heads into, with a digital soundtrack installed inside.

“People might completely miss what it is,” says Hadzi-Vasileva, “but hopefully they will take something from it.” Major is similarly hopeful: “We’re trying to understand the human

experience, which I've now decided is the point of art, I think.”

Many of these smaller pieces are again made with the salvaged organs of livestock, materials that would otherwise be discarded. The eccentric, even repellant aspects of these materials are not lost on Hadzi-Vasileva, however, who seeks to unearth beauty, “whatever beauty is”, in the most tortuous corners of our minds and bodies. “I find beauty in some most bizarre places,” she admits. “Even a tumour - the colours, the textures - has its own beauty.”

Making Beauty: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva is at Djanogly gallery, Nottingham Lakeside Arts, from 20 August-30 October 2016

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