

Aesthetica

Interview with Installation Artist, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, Djanogly Gallery



Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva is a site-specific installation artist working across the varied media of sculpture, installation, video and sound, photography and architectural interventions. With a diversity of materials, namely organic matter, *Aesthetica* catch up with the artist about her new show at Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham: *Making Beauty*.

A: How do the contexts of the objects and materials you use affect the works that you create? Do you intentionally work with cultures and histories or try to transform works with new, personal ones?

EHV: I am very interested by the idea of place. The starting point of any of my site-specific installation is the context in which the work will be installed. In the case of my recent large-scale installation *Fragility*, the space I was occupying was a converted Regency church in Brighton (Fabrica gallery). Exploring the phenomenon of near-death experience in the context of the building could not be ignored. I decided to echo the structure of the work's setting, reflecting the architecture of the church. I made *Fragility* out of pigs' caul fat – a delicate, translucent material, which once light is shone through has a diffused effect, similar to that described by those who have had near-death experiences.

A: Entitled, *Making Beauty* the exhibition perhaps comments on the practice of art, reworking the everyday with aesthetic consideration. Do you feel as though your work is beautiful, and do you think this is important?

EHV: The title of the exhibition, as you said, doesn't just refer to the new body of work which I have been making in collaboration with UK medical research centres, but it reflects my overall approach and interest in materiality. I often use unpromising or waste materials to make my installations transforming these rejected materials into objects of beauty. Part of this is to challenge attitudes to certain materials or conditions. My most recent work looks at how patients struggling with digestive diseases are impacted by their conditions. I am drawn to the areas of life that have almost become taboos, because people feel they are too uncomfortable to talk about openly. I felt it important to show how dealing with disease is so much a part of many people's everyday life experience, and to question our natural assumptions about what is defined as beautiful and what is considered ugly. For example, if you didn't know what you were looking at, you might find images of disease inside the body, beautiful.

A: Could you discuss the work *Haruspex* (2015)? What was your intention behind the work and how do the materials work with this inspiration?

EHV: *Haruspex* is the installation which I was commissioned to make by the Vatican for the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). It responds 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. I chose to use animal visceral very deliberately in this work drawing attention to the corporeality of the incarnation – when the word (God) came in human form (Jesus). In this work the caul fat acts as a membrane or protective envelop which may be likened to a sanctuary. 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.

A: With regards to other works on show, for example *Fragility* (2015), how do you find the relationship between such a monumental structure and the perhaps morbid materials it comes from? Do you see the material as such or does it have more connection to life

EHV: One of the aspects that particularly interests me about perishable materials is the idea of a material's lifespan. In *Fragility*, I used the delicate and vulnerable material of pigs' caul fat very intentionally to explore the fragility of life itself. The use of animal visceral 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 potency.

A: With its UK premier at Djanogly Gallery, how do you think this space will differ from its commissioned environment at the Venice Biennale?

EHV: Part of the joys and challenges of working with the medium of site-specific installation, is that no one presentation is the same. I'm excited that I will be able to show *Haruspex* for the first time in the UK at the Djanogly Gallery. For those who saw my work at the Venice Biennale last year, it won't look entirely the same but will be reconfigured to suit the unique requirements of the Djanogly Gallery space. My work always responds to place, so here, though retaining the interests and concerns of the original commission, the work naturally changes in a new environment. For me, more formal issues come to the fore, within a white cube gallery space, such as use of space, the way the work sits within the space, the spaces in between the work and the building become more important. I've tried to re-install the works to bring a new and revised reading of the works to the installation, which focuses upon the materials, encouraging the viewer to walk through and engage with the materials in a very intimate manner.

A: Do you think your works collectively have residing themes that you're interested in, and if so, what are they?

EHV: I am interested in the topics and areas of life that people ordinarily find it hard to talk about – death, disease and God being recent examples. I've often wondered whether this desire comes from, and 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 a selection of the themes that inform all of my work. My early works have included excavations, planting trees upside down, making carpets out of grass 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 (gold leaf for instance) to the mundane.

A: You use a lot of animal waste within your installations – what do you find so intriguing about this concept as a material to be recycled as art? Do you think that artists have a duty to think about wider socio-ecological issues and respond to them?

EHV: I am certainly interested by the idea of waste product and a material's lifetime. In the past, I have worked with precious materials as well as discarded ones, but at present, waste materials have been my main material choice.

Artists have freedom of expression, but I'd not insist that artists have a duty to do anything but make art that is interesting and challenging. I am concerned with sustainability and the environment, and many of my works could be considered as a form of up-cycling, but I'd not necessarily consider my practice 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.

A: What are your future plans in terms of works and further exhibitions?

EHV: The *Making Beauty* project extends beyond this exhibition. I will continue working with the University of Nottingham, East Anglia and UCL in the future to further develop the *Making Beauty* works, but I'll also be developing new opportunities and responding to interesting invitations to exhibit and make new works in new places. I'm particularly keen to show the range of scale and diversity of works in my practice (beyond this fantastic opportunity to show two large scale installations at Djanogly) particularly works of a more domestic scale. During my residency at Pied a Terre, I made a number of smaller domestic works, and following these large scale installation works, I'm interested to follow this up, making my work more available and accessible. Of course, I'm also really keen to respond to challenging locations and to expand the way my installations work in the public domain.

***Making Beauty: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva is at Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham Lakeside Arts from 20 August – 30 October* www.lakesidearts.org.uk**

Credits:

1. Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, *Fragility*, 2015; caul fat, plastic, metal and wire; 2400 cm x 7350 cm x 700 cm, Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, England; Photo: Tom Thistlethwaite, © the artist, courtesy the artist
2. Same as 1.
3. Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, *Haruspex*, 2015; caul fat, lamb intestines, cow's stomach, plastic, metal and wire; 1156 cm x 1166 cm x 560 cm, Arsenale di Venezia, Sale d'Armi nord, Holy See Pavilion, 56th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Photo: Bernard G Mills, © the artist, courtesy the artist

Posted on 16 August 2016