

# CCQ

a creative conversation



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## Beauty Disclosed

The Macedonian artist, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, uses animal body parts in her work, affording them the space and context to disclose their own particular and unexpected beauty. She spoke to philosopher **Clive Cazeaux** during her show, *Making Beauty*, at the Djanogly Gallery Nottingham.

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Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's interest in revealing what is hidden, is strongly manifest in *Making Beauty* at the Djanogly. Within the installation *Haruspex*, which forms part of the show, the object that commands attention, is a sphere-like construction, suspended two metres or so above the ground, composed of inside-out, sewn-together omasa. An omasum is the third of four compartments in a cow's stomach. It is a mucous-lined membrane that is folded into leaves, like a book ('omasum' also means 'bible'), to create a surface of four to five square metres within the stomach. It can absorb water and nutrients while also preventing the transmission of large particles through the digestive system. The title *Haruspex* refers to a priest in ancient Rome who practised divination, especially from the entrails of animals killed in sacrifice. The work was first commissioned for the Vatican Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. Turned inside out, sewn together and suspended in a network of sheep's intestines, which fan out above and below it, it looks simultaneously like a brain and a sphere of lips. Arching above us, it feels as if we are within the domain of an alien creature, with a religious truth or commandment, or many truths, about to issue from its multitudinous lips.

This exploration of Hadzi-Vasileva's recent work is made from a philosophical perspective, and draws in particular upon ideas from the philosophy of perception. Perception is widely understood to be a form of reception: the world as we know it, is the world that we receive through the five senses, via the impressions that reality makes upon our sensory faculties. This is one of many theories of knowledge. It began with Aristotle, and was revived by John Locke, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to become one of the foundations of modern British empiricist philosophy and the philosophy of science. Another theory is that perception is a form of disclosure, of un-concealment, of providing the conditions that allow something to become manifest, tangible and detectable in the first place. In order for something to appear, the conditions that will allow its appearance to form – light for illumination, a surface that can reflect light, and a light-sensitive perceiver – have to be in place. This was first proposed by the 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Martin Heidegger, and has begun to challenge the dominance of empiricism within the philosophy of science.

I was keen that my conversation with Hadzi-Vasileva should touch upon this idea of 'disclosure', both because of her own declared interest in the practice of revealing what is hidden, and also because many of the works in *Making Beauty* are the result of collaborations with scientists, and much of scientific knowledge can be understood as a form of disclosure. Common to both is the idea that disclosure, as a process of revealing something new or unexpected, brings to light something not normally associated with the object of study that changes our perception of it. Something that at first sight might seem to be one thing with one identity, once it is turned around, studied from the left, from the right, from above, from below, examined through one lens, then through another, begins to display many different facets and appearances. This means any object or domain can be mined for qualities that are wholly other than what the object is known to be. The initial object in *Haruspex* and its surprising innards, when combined, become a metaphor: one thing is presented as something else. With this in mind it seemed fair that I should begin by asking Hadzi-Vasileva whether the transition from an 'initial object' to 'finding surprise within it' is something she actively seeks in a project?

**Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva:** As I develop an artwork, the material I've selected and its nature suggest different approaches. Sometimes these are surprising, but it's not something I particularly look for. It's an outcome of using these unusual materials.

**Clive Cazeaux:** It sounds as if the selection of material at the start of a project and, in particular, the selection of material that is unusual, is important for you. What is it about the 'unusual' that appeals? Is it 'unusual' in the sense of 'unexpected in an art context', or in the sense that these are materials whose hidden depths, or aesthetic possibilities, have yet to be explored?

**EHV:** It's very much about the hidden. Early in my career, I was probably more focused upon choosing unusual materials, but now, it's very much the context that drives these decisions. Perhaps I have normalised this approach, but I don't think I am consciously choosing materials for →







the fact they are unusual, rather I am focused on their appropriateness.

**CC:** Your work frequently involves collaboration with experts in other subjects. Is it one of the benefits of collaboration that specialists can reveal surprising qualities in objects?

**EHV:** Yes, specialists from other fields offer really interesting insights into materials, and my conversations with them, my observations of how they work, their techniques and working methodologies, reveal and suggest different and new ways of working with those materials. Sometimes this influences the work itself, so the forms, the shapes, the dynamics of the whole work are informed.

**CC:** Being exposed to so many new methods and possibilities must be stimulating on the one hand, but challenging on the other, for it suggests that new avenues of possibility are opening left, right and centre. I imagine that this could be quite daunting. How do you know which ones to pursue, or is it a case of they choose or grab you?

**EHV:** A vision or, perhaps better put, a first idea is developed quite early, but this is also quite speculative, so being introduced to new methods and possibilities, shifts and develops the vision, so there is a process of change, updating, shifts in emphasis – the R&D period is quite fluid.

**CC:** What intrigues me in your work is what you do with the forms that you develop, because the action of turning them into a work is never simply presenting them in a white cube environment. In your installations, you are taking the materials and details that you have developed, and then – literally and metaphorically – taking them somewhere else by having them engage with a new location; for example, the suspension of many sheets of caul fat from the ceiling to create a tunnel, or nave-like space, through which visitors walk. I say 'nave-like' because the piece, *Fragility*, was originally commissioned in 2015 for Fabrica Gallery, a deconsecrated church, in Brighton. Part of the joy of the work is the interplay between the light (from the ceiling-mounted spotlights) and the sheets of fat. The sheets are semi-transparent. Folded and crinkled, sometimes they let light through; sometimes the light is diffused across the sheets, making them glow. This means the ribbons of caul fat shift from being light on dark to dark against light. All

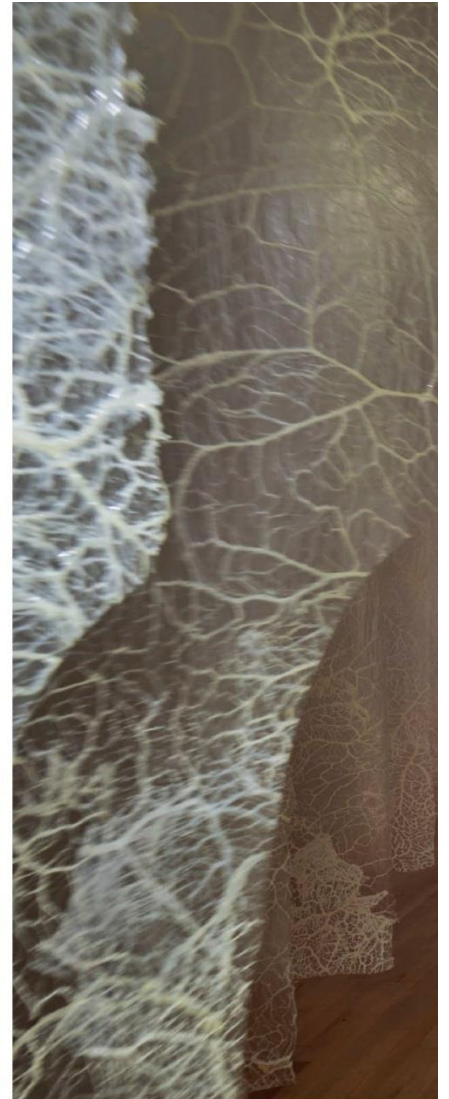
of this is happening as I walk slowly through the tunnel. Thus, caul fat, lighting and a gallery interior have interacted to create an environment and a series of observations which neither could be said to own or predict independently.

How do you approach the relationship between the objects you are working with and the space in which they are due to be installed; for example, sheets of caul fat in a former church, cow stomachs in the Vatican Pavilion?

**EHV:** Those spaces or places were a given part of each commission, so I knew I wanted to fill the spaces in particular ways, knowing how the material would react or behave in each of those spaces. Having used the caul fat and cow stomachs in a number of works, I understand their materiality and the way I can influence – through bleaching, shaping and/or stretching – how they will work when installed. So I'm working to a vision and an ambition, particularly in those two installations. I've been helped enormously by the architect, Pero Bojkov, who's worked with me on a number of projects, to understand and locate the works I have in mind in architectural spaces. For each of those installations, my ambition was to create spaces within spaces: for the Vatican, drawing upon Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb*; and for Fabrica, as informed by the Georgian church itself and the way light behaves in that building.

**CC:** It sounds as if, once the commission is confirmed, you know very early on how to combine material and place. You say you are 'working to a vision'. What is the nature of the vision? Is it a sense that material and place are going to fit, or that their combination will, in fact, produce the opposite effect – that is, an incongruity or clash – which could still be called poetic? Are there any surprises or unexpected effects, beyond the vision, along the way?

**EHV:** Commissions are developed very differently: sometimes there is a fixed process of making a proposal, then sticking to the plan; sometimes it's more adaptable. This is informed by time, resources and, of course, budget; but, predominantly, the methodology the commissioners choose to use or propose. I think I've made successful work when I've stayed close to an original proposal, but also, where time has allowed, the original proposal has changed dramatically. There are always surprises and unexpected challenges, and I learn a great deal more about a new material as I work with it. —>



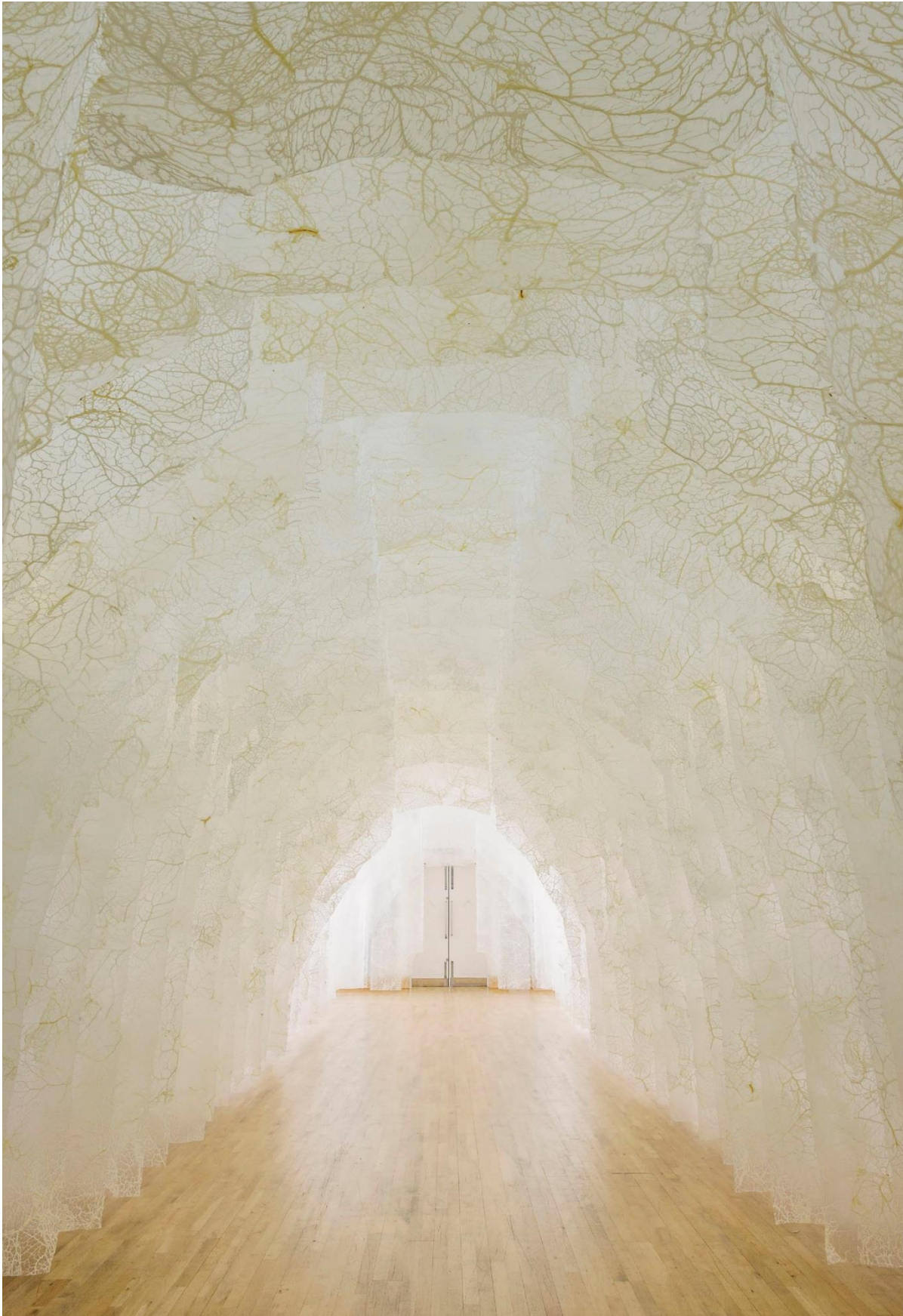


first spread:  
*Haruspex* (detail), **Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva**, 2015,  
animal viscera. Courtesy of the artist and Djanogly  
Gallery. Photo: Nick Dunmur

previous spread:  
*Fragility* (detail), **Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva**, 2015,  
animal viscera. Courtesy of the artist and Djanogly  
Gallery. Photo: Nick Dunmur

above:  
*Fragility* (installation view), **Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva**,  
2015, animal viscera. Courtesy of the artist and  
Djanogly Gallery. Photo: Nick Dunmur

following spread:  
*Fragility* (installation view), **Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva**,  
2015, animal viscera. Courtesy of the artist and  
Djanogly Gallery. Photo: Nick Dunmur





**CC:** The most recent work in *Making Beauty* is a series of sculptures from 2016. They are the result of Wellcome Trust-funded collaborations with scientists working in university departments specialising in digestive disease: University College Hospital (London), University of East Anglia and the University of Nottingham. The majority of the 2016 works are objects rather than installations, inspired by scientific visualisation: the use of imaging technologies and graphic displays to render visible what is normally invisible to perception, or correlations that occur over time. *Prototypes for Making a Machine*, for example, is a series of 3D-printed, white, nylon spheres, 8cm in diameter, that are versions of enlarged 3D-models of digestion-aiding molecules, designed by Dr Richard Day and his colleagues at the University College London.

The relationship that the sculptures have to their source domain feels different from the installations. This is not a criticism. Rather, it is an observation suggesting that disclosure and transformation operate in different ways in your work. The sculptures remain close to the environments or subjects from which they were drawn; for example, the enlargement of a molecule in *Prototypes*, and the rendering of a graph in copper in *Manometry*. Technically, enlargement and rendering in copper are transformations, but the concepts of molecule and graph are still prominent. In contrast, the installations involve a process of transformation, where material from a source domain, e.g. omasum, sheep intestines and caul fat, has been adapted to occupy a space so that material and space interact in a way which neither element in isolation could predict or intimate. The omasums, sheep intestine and caul fat still retain their identities as such, but they are now addressing a space, and have been arranged in ways where we are asked to consider them as something else. Is there a difference for you between sculpture and installation?

**EHV:** I think the difference is one of perception. So, for the installation, the process of viewing requires negotiating the space – you are part of the work; while for the sculptures, they are revealed in one view, a single act of consumption and the viewer is external. For me, it's not about a difference in transformation for sculpture or installation, but of scale, location and the relationship to viewer. For the installation, the materiality of the work is still critical.

**CC:** Do you think sculpture and installation can be distinguished in this way? A sculpture, or a painting for that matter, can make just as many demands on a body as an installation, compelling us to move this way, then that, to draw near, then to back away. In this sense, a viewer can be part of a sculpture or a painting. Also, it seems that, for both your installations and your sculptures, materiality is critical, whether it's suspended caul fat, or the nylon, lace-like structure of a molecule model. Might it be that the sculpture–installation distinction is not that strict or significant for you after all? Or is there something about an installation's relationship with its location that is key?

**EHV:** As I said, I think it's one of perception. For me, I'm concerned with the hidden, so the role of installation acts as a journey, perhaps a longer physical journey than that when looking at a sculpture, accomplished with a few steps, or a tilt of the head. Materiality is always a concern for any sculptural form. I'm interested in place and context, so I hope my installations convey that. Relocating installations is hard, so I'm particularly pleased that the installation in Nottingham worked so well, despite not being intended for that space.

**CC:** 'Beauty' is in the title of your exhibition, but it is also prominent as a theme, given the various beautiful or striking natural forms that appear in your work. The original, eighteenth-century meaning of 'fine art' is art that imitates or represents the beautiful in nature, but this is nature as it is perceived by the human eye, unaided, i.e. without instrumentation. I think something else is happening in contemporary scientific visualisation. The appearances achieved, technologically or graphically through visualisation, are not simply the properties of the objects under examination – for example, a molecule or bowel motility – but are partly generated by the conditions that allow the objects to be manifest in this way – for example, a molecule with a lace-like structure or bowel motility as a series of lines with occasional ripples. What is disclosed in this way is often beautiful, or visually striking, as demonstrated by exhibitions and competitions in the field of scientific imaging.

However, this is beauty that arises not because it looks like nature as we know it or want it to be, but because it is surprising that nature can take these forms. This is one form of beauty; beauty as metaphor: one thing presented in a surprising way. I think one of the values of your method of looking to see what is available within a subject or

an environment, is that it leads to specialists – butchers, bowel scientists – who reveal nature in surprising ways. To what extent are the objects you choose to work with guided by a concept of beauty?

**EHV:** I'm interested in aesthetics that are not bound by our usual view of beauty, but I'm looking to reveal and find beauty in unusual places, or unusual or unexpected materials. I've balanced this, in some works, by juxtaposing with materials we do associate with beauty, such as gold leaf, crafted and turned wood. I appropriate designs, for example those from the Whistler rooms at Mottisfont, the priory and country estate in Hampshire, that I gilded onto five fallen trees for *Resuscitare*, a site-specific installation which I created in the grounds of the priory in 2013.

**CC:** Balance is a significant metaphor. Are you saying you don't want these works to go too far as regards displaying unusual beauty, and that you introduce signs of conventional beauty to keep them at bay? Might it be the case that, by placing opposites side by side, relationships other than balance are being created, for instance, tension, incongruity?

**EHV:** I am not trying to minimise the impact of any unusual beauty I find; if anything I want to emphasise it, and yes, of course, other relationships are being suggested – tensions between forms as much as material, sculptural concerns, light, shadow, the spaces between, and certainly what's underneath and the way things touch—**CCQ**

*Making Beauty: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva was at Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham Lakeside Arts 20 August – 30 October 2016.*

[lakesidearts.org.uk](http://lakesidearts.org.uk)

*Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has a solo show at Danielle Arnaud Gallery from 14 January – 12 February 2017. In spring 2017, her work will be included in A Scientific Encounter at Musée d'Anatomie de Montpellier.*

[daniellearnaud.com](http://daniellearnaud.com)