



WALLS AND VEILS

It is a particular honour for an artist to be invited to show at the Venice Biennale. Every two years, since 1895, international artists have exhibited there and the most prestigious invitation of all is to represent your country in a national pavilion. In 2013, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, trained and based in Britain since 1992, was selected to represent her country of birth, Macedonia, in a solo show. A second and rare honour was conferred when she was subsequently invited by the Vatican to be one of three artists to represent The Holy See at the next Biennale in 2015. The Vatican commissioners' biblical theme, "In the Beginning ... the Word became Flesh", made Elpida a perfect choice to respond to, and interpret, this complex idea. For many years her work has looked beyond the surface, deeply into the beauty of nature's constructions, celebrating the hidden through the use of materials from tree roots to animals' internal organs.

In the 1850s, the leading Victorian art critic John Ruskin wrote *The Stones of Venice*, three influential volumes, which describe the buildings of Venice in the context of the city's pivotal position between East and West, between Byzantium and Rome. He discusses the importance of craftsmanship and his belief in the decline in art and morality since the start of the Renaissance. He champions the work of early craftsmen who were not concerned with smooth finish but in the joys of life and religion. He writes at length about what he calls the "wall veil", having seen what he believed to be perfection in the effect of light and shade in the geological colours and textures of an Alpine mountainside. Ruskin remarked that "*sometimes more valuable lessons are to be learned in the school of nature*" than in the work of classical architects. He admired simplicity above all and noted that: "*The first conception of any given story of a house in the Byzantine mind is that of a space enclosed by a wall-veil crowned with a simple cornice....*"

By "wall veil" Ruskin meant architectural surface and his ideal was the stone face of that Alp, naturally and powerfully simple. In this regard, if Ruskin were an art critic today, he would have celebrated much of Elpida's work. He always felt that artists create their best work when inspired by the natural world and he wrote of "changefulness, savageness and naturalism" as essential to art and society, anticipating today's concerns for the environment, sustainability and craft.

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva was born in the former Yugoslavia during the communist era. The Republic of Macedonia has two main religions, Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Islam, but she is not a religious person. Her family name contains Hadzi which might seem to suggest that one of her ancestors was

Muslim and made the Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca. In fact, it is a nickname which the family have kept in reference to her great-great-great grandfather, a wine grower, who was imprisoned in Asia Minor. Originally the name was Adzi - Asian - but, during the communist era, the H was added and has been kept. Elpida means 'hope'.

Macedonia is a Balkan country, landlocked, and bordered by Kosovo to the northwest, Serbia to the north, Bulgaria to the east, Greece to the south, and Albania to the west. There is a strong heritage of architecture from Roman and Byzantine onwards and the National Gallery, where Elpida has had a solo exhibition, is a beautiful 15th-century hammam (or Turkish bath complex) in Skopje. Elpida has a deep interest in architecture and its echoes in the structure of the body and trees. Her work is characterised by a powerful mixture of challenging materials and architectural scale, responding each time to the place in which she shows – its structure and form, culture, economics, trades, history and other reference points. This enables each showing to be newly considered and most of her work is best described as installation. More than simply “large-scale sculpture”, the word installation implies thoughtful and responsive placing and a formality, almost theatrical, in so doing.

Her project for the 2015 Venice Biennale was called *Haruspex*. Responding to the ideas of both word and flesh, Elpida took her title from the ancient prediction of the future through reading entrails (a rather more dramatic version of seeing a tall dark stranger or foreign travel in your tea leaves). She stood back from a religious response, and with great respect and integrity, created walls, arches, columns and capitals from waste materials of the meat industry. The references to the part that domesticated animals have played in world religions were explored more fully in an essay by Professor Ben Quash, describing how animals are celebrated, cherished and rejected in religion. They often act as a defining factor to demarcate one religion, ancient or contemporary, from another. Islam and Judaism avoid pig meat; Hinduism holds the cow in high esteem. For Christians, the Lamb of God is another name for Christ but eating roast lamb is part of the celebrations at Easter, in the Western and Eastern Church. Roasted entrails are part of religious holiday feasts in the Balkans, Greece and Turkey. Animal sacrifice placated the classical gods and the God of the Old Testament and even now we speak of a scapegoat, the animal cast out into the wilderness carrying our sins, today meaning one who unfairly takes the blame for everyone else's mistakes. All of the organic material that Elpida uses is a by-product, carefully treated, certified and preserved.

Remarkably, one of the names for a cow's third stomach chamber or omasum (which forms the crux of *Haruspex* and is also celebrated in her earlier work *Bad Hair Day*) is “bible”, from the way in which the layers fan out like pages of a large book: word and flesh. Elpida has developed fluency in working with discarded materials, using highly skilled craft techniques which are very labour intensive, and has made these materials her personal vocabulary. When invited to show her work, she embarks on a long period of research into the area. This approach sprang from a residency in Berwick-upon-Tweed in a 17th-century army gymnasium where she created *Epidermis* from salmon skins and fishing line, exploring the relationship between two local industries: the armed forces and fishing. *Reoccurring Undulation* is a related work where the dapple of the salmon skins evokes lines in landscape, the beautiful mathematical regularities that nature creates in waves, snowflakes or crystals. Ruskin would have seen these as perfect wall veils.

Another residency was in Valenciennes in Northern France where Elpida made contact with people working in the traditional craft of lace-making for which the city, like Nottingham, is world-famous

and she began to explore their designs in her drawings. A chance walk past a butcher's shop revealed to her similar patterns in both lace and the locally-prized tripe. She celebrated the intricacy and time-consuming craft of the lace tradition together with a very basic foodstuff that is (or was) popular in so very many cultures. *Butterflies in the Stomach* was a lyrical labyrinth of caul fat, translucent and lacy, where delicacy – food stuff and decorative skill – is highlighted. The sustenance of the region was linked with its creativity and its industry.

Subsequent venues for new work, full of reference and challenges, have included Gloucester Cathedral; Nymans and Mottisfont, both National Trust gardens; a university department and Pied à Terre, a Michelin-starred restaurant. Often the installations are re-made for gallery venues and do not lose resonance: this survey in Nottingham provides an opportunity to see how the strands of her work constantly weave and extend. *Haruspex* is shown in Britain for the first time, re-made especially for the Djanogly Gallery, but is given an extra dimension in the way it is now connected to a second major work.

As if it were not enough to be invited to represent the Vatican at the Venice Biennale, Elpida was also preparing to create another work only one month later. Elpida lives in Brighton and was asked by a public gallery in the city, Fabrica, to create an installation for their deconsecrated church as part of a series on the end of life. Elpida chose to reflect on the near-death experience often talked about in terms of light, glimpsed or experienced at a distance. *Fragility* is architecture literally made of fragile material; the artist worked with delicacy and sensitivity to create translucent veils of pig caul fat, transforming the membrane that contains vital organs in a chemical process similar to embalming. The effect was ethereal, gauze-like and precious; changing in every light, it entranced visitors to Brighton some of whom asked if they could marry there.

The material used in each of her works delights the eye; then visitors become involved, provoked into curiosity, wanting to understand the making process. The poetry of the experience transforms the rejected, often very peculiar, material into something “rich and strange” and unforgettable.

For Nottingham, Elpida has brought her two major works of 2015 together allowing her to expand the ideas that were running in parallel. They share many ideas: architecture, unlikely materials, a respect towards religious ideas, metaphorical response. She elevates her material from the everyday or overlooked and takes her audience beyond the fabric to think of transformation and wonder, making beauty out of what is thrown away or unappreciated. The emphasis on the elegance of the web-making effect of lace is particularly appropriate for Nottingham, as it was for Venice and Valenciennes. The patterns of the caul equally resemble tree roots and she has produced several outdoor works where trees are gilded with a lace pattern or upended to reveal the webbing of their roots.

Elpida uses both traditional and highly exploratory techniques and this is where, as a contemporary artist, she would have left Ruskin a long way behind, still searching for nature in the old stones of Venice. She has recently sought out medical scientists working in the area of digestion, the stomach and the bowel, to learn more in collaboration. While working on her Venice and Brighton projects, Elpida was also in London, Norwich and most recently in the NIHR Nottingham Digestive Diseases Biomedical Research Unit to understand more about new materials developed for use in reconstructive surgery and also to offer her thoughts on beauty to help medical staff discuss difficult, intimate topics more usefully with patients. Contemporary social pressures have given rise

to many eating disorders and distorted ideas of body image so, in her latest work, Elpida's seeks to create objects and images that might help to challenge accepted notions of beauty. Her most recent sculptures include a large panel of stitched copper wire whose lines are derived from analysis of action in the human bowel and a "bible" transformed into a listening point in which digestive sounds are heard privately. The involvement and responses of patients have been an important element in Elpida's 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 :-)"

Haruspex and *Fragility* were forming in Elpida's mind while she was spending time in various medical laboratories and travelling between Brighton, Venice and Nottingham to produce a new group of smaller sculptures, seen here for the first time. She has used ideas from many religions, architecture and innovative medical science to give her very simple materials a power that comes from their own visceral origins, her craft skills and the transformative nature of her imagination.

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