

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

Silentio Pathologia

By Gill Hedley

“Those strange and mystical transmigrations that I have observed in Silk-worms, turned my Philosophy into Divinity. There is in these works of nature, which seem to puzzle reason, something Divine, and hath more in it then the eye of a common spectator doth discover.”

Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici, XXXIX, 1643

Over the last two years Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has continued her well-established practice of working in unpredictable venues. Throughout 2011 she was the first Artist-in-Restaurant at Pied à Terre, a London restaurant with two Michelin stars. Twenty years ago, in 1993, the owner, David Moore, travelled to Venice to see Richard Hamilton’s exhibition in the British Pavilion at the 45th Venice Biennale. Hamilton, who won a Leone d’Oro that year, was a founding director of Pied à Terre and the residency programme celebrates that long link with artists. 1993 was also the first year that The Republic of Macedonia participated at the Venice Biennale with its own national pavilion.

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva set the tone of the Pied à Terre residency by spending much of her time observing the chefs and working with them in the kitchen, learning their techniques and, most important of all, making the best use of materials that would normally be discarded. For the final exhibition, *The Wish of the Witness*, tiny skeletons of quails were gilded to enhance their beauty and arranged like gothic stone tracery; the skirts that hold scallops to their shells were flattened to the thinnest frill; sheep testicles, covered in wool and lined with silk were made into delicate evening bags and the translucent sacs themselves, like blown glass, contrived into lights.

Whatever the place or the material to hand, there is always sensuality in Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva’s work which is aligned with wit and daring so that it presents itself to the viewer with panache. The realisation of what has been revealed - *“a bracelet of bright hair about the bone”*¹- elicits frissons of delight, shudders of disgust, then admiration at her skill and *tours de force*. Playing with our reactions, she turns innards or the bits left on the side of the plate into loveliness, the base into the noble in an alchemical flourish.

Alongside her work for Venice, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has also been working in the north east of England where she was awarded the 2013 Alexandra Reinhardt Memorial Artist Residency at mima, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. This award is in memory of Alexandra Reinhardt, an artist who died in 2004 having battled with a rare blood disorder and profound deafness all her life. It will result in a permanent commission for the museum garden, incorporating sound (as Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva did with birdsong in Gloucester Cathedral) and making explicit reference to the town’s long tradition of manufacture: during the 19th century the area set the world price for iron

¹ "The Relic" by John Donne, first published 1633

and steel.

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva responds to each new venue and its resonance but always contrives to follow a trajectory, whether in a cathedral or restaurant or landscape, which makes each new work the latest loop in her very distinctive fabric. She constantly refers back, leaps forward, and twists strands into a new complexity. Thus, at Berwick in *Epidermis*, 2001, the artist used cured salmon skins and bones to create sculptures that evoked nets for fishing or for army exercises, powerful references to the local community; at Valenciennes in *Butterflies in the Stomach*, 2007, she made links, literally, between the local traditions of lace making and tripe eating.

She constantly re-invents but also reprises, compiling and digging deep into her own encyclopaedia of materials, references and techniques. Cauls, lace, silk; blood, bones, skin; weaving, cutting, curing; industry, migration and the body: beauty, reality, transformation.

And so, hauling this portmanteau of marvellous stuff, she arrived in Venice, a visitor like so very many others: about 60,000 people live in the historic centre but the city entertains an average of 55,000 tourists per day., Venice with her 118 islands was, from the 13th to the 18th centuries, a merchant city, luxurious above all others. About 1596, William Shakespeare began his play *The Merchant of Venice*; in the same year his eleven year old son Hamnett died, probably of the bubonic plague.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

ACT III, SCENE I. Venice. A street.

Shylock: *I am very glad of it: I'll plague him; I'll torture him: I am glad of it.*

The Republic of Macedonia's pavilion is the Scuola de Laneri which houses the Venetian Institute for Cultural Heritage (IVBC) specialising in conservation, a discipline in which Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has also trained. The building was started in 1630 by the charitable guild for those in the wool trade. 1630 was also the year in which the bubonic plague yet again attacked Venice, this time more viciously than ever: one conservative estimate suggests that 46,000 people died out of a population of 140,000. In 1631, the senate of Venice decreed that a church would be built to mark the salvation of the surviving population and dedicated to Santa Maria delle Salute: Our Lady of Health or Deliverance. This magnificent church was the starting point for Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's project in the Venice Biennale. The architect of the Salute was Baldassare Longhena who also designed the Scuola de Laneri and the two projects must have been in his mind simultaneously during 1631.

The bubonic plague or The Black Death was one of the most devastating pandemics in human history, at its very worst in Europe between 1348 and 1350, killing between 75 and 200 million people. Medical geneticists recently confirmed that the plague originated in Yunnan province in southwest China ² reaching the Crimea by 1346. The bacterium *Yersinia pestis* was probably carried

² Nicholas Wade (October 31, 2010). "Europe's Plagues Came From China, Study Finds". *New York Times*

by fleas living on the black rats that were regular passengers on merchant ships plying the trade route from China to Europe via Asia Minor and the Balkans. This was the Silk Road.

In 1347, plague victims were catapulted by the Mongols over the city walls of Caffa, a town located in present day Ukraine, in what may be the first incident of chemical warfare, and it is possible that infected inhabitants may have fled first to Italy, spreading the Black Death to Europe.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

ACT I, SCENE I. Venice. A street.

Salarino: *Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks ...*

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva was born in Macedonia and now lives in Brighton, a seaside town in southern England where the Prince Regent built himself a summer pavilion around 1800. Its chinoiserie interiors were based on the summer palace of Kubla Khan, the Mongol ruler of China. About the time Brighton Pavilion was built, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem Xanadu:

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree :
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.*

The most famous merchant on the Silk Road, Marco Polo (c 1254-1324), joined his first diplomatic mission and visited Kubla Khan at his summer palace in 1271.

Whether Marco Polo was born in Venice or, as some believe, in Dalmatia (politically linked to Venice and once part of Yugoslavia, like The Republic of Macedonia), is not proven. He was certainly one of the first Europeans to travel the Silk Road, bringing silk and other goods from China to Italy and beyond. A range of technologies, religions and philosophies were exchanged, and the bubonic plague fatally delivered along side rolls of silk, silken thread, silk moths still in their cocoons and the mulberry plants on which they feed.

Silk was a prized fabric first developed in ancient China, using the white silk thread originating from silkworm pupae bred for the purpose. The pupae are killed by either dipping them in boiling water before the adult moths emerge or by piercing them with a needle so the whole cocoon can be unravelled as one continuous thread, allowing a much stronger fabric to be woven. The silkworms

feed on the leaves of the white mulberry tree which was introduced to Italy along with the art of silk manufacture although the black mulberry had been grown earlier for its delicious, staining red fruit.

Italy became the most important producer of silk during the Middle Ages and Venice, the epicentre of luxury trade, once had about 10,000 silk looms to produce the silk velvets, damasks and brocades that the nobility demanded for its adornment and the Church for its worship.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

ACT I, SCENE III. Venice. A public place.

Shylock: *He hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath, squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors but men: there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves, mean pirates, and then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks.*

The merchant ships carried black rats from China via the Black Sea to Europe and those rats carried fleas. The infected fleas killed the rats and then sought out another host; humans were always nearby. So was their food waste and their excrement so the rat population flourished and the cycle continued. Many people fled infected areas, unwittingly creating more disease as they migrated.

The flea bite penetrated the skin of the victim and the bacterium entered the blood vessels which map their way under skin.

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has long been fascinated by the many metaphorical aspects of skin, a membrane which protects us like our own personal architecture yet also wraps around us like a landscape with clefts, valleys, promontories and hills ... and at the very fingertip, is patterned uniquely to each of us in an identifying whorl. Skin, through pigmentation, exposure to the elements, time and cultural adornment, scars or surgery, also defines us by race, age, gender, economic status and health.

The plague arrived through human trade and natural bacteria but the notion of plague as social ill, and needing someone to be blamed, is still endemic to our culture. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jew Shylock is viciously described as a social parasite; his argument for the equality of humanity is at the heart of the play:

“Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?”³

Shylock’s case is fought in a court of law where he is granted the right to precisely one pound of flesh but no more blood or skin than that.

Silent witness is a term in law by which the integrity of an image – such as an X ray looking deeply into the human body - gives visual evidence without words.⁴

So, in *Silentio Pathologia*, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva takes up a thread from previous works to place the viewer in the role of witness then uses images and symbols to give eloquence. Sensual silk cocoons have been knotted, by her family and friends in Macedonia, into the polygons of a web. Using this web and the equally soft and beautiful cured skins of albino rats, the artist wraps us in a dichotomy of protection and fear. Both materials are pure and white, evoking memories of careful packing from birth to death, swaddling and shroud. Sheets of steel, their surfaces marked with wear and use, are contrasted with black webs of silk to form walls so the viewer is led, protected as if by a skin - hot, cold, soft, hard, moist, dry - through the fragility and interconnectedness of the work and its ideas.

Silentio Pathologia tells an ancient tale but one which plays on our fears of new viruses and bacteria, including H5N1 and HTN1 or Avian Flu, as well as those yet unknown.

Venice’s airport is named after Marco Polo, citizen of Venice and legendary traveller. Every day it brings new tourists to Venice; other visitors come on liners bigger than any Venetian palazzo and may one day sink them all. Every two years, Marco Polo produces a reflux of people hungry to see new art in the Biennale and send it out again on new trade routes.

“The Earth has a skin and that skin has diseases, one of its diseases is called man.”⁵

³ *The Merchant Of Venice* Act III, scene I

⁴ www.jstor.org/stable/4144332

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche; he first visited Venice in the 1880s.