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Collar #10, 2005, Marble, 9 x 12 x 12 in.

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THE COLLARS

Elizabeth Turk

BY LAURA JANKE



with the Army Show and its main counterpart, the Whitney Biennial, one in the recent past, what remains standing in the memory? For this reason, several works about souls, most notably Elizabeth Turk's exhibition at Hirsfeld & Adler Studio, yielded an acute case of Stendhal syndrome and embodied faith in art's ability to be meaningful beyond a judgment checklist of fashionable names. Perhaps not surprisingly, Turk's resonant works were timeless, demanding attention and more than a distant glance. But beyond a remove from the visual, social, and financial spectacle that has come to define recent art fairs and the crowded collector marketplace, the tenderness, beauty, and technical virtuosity of these pieces stopped viewers in their tracks, equally engaging women and men alike. Now, at a distance, they continue to do so in the mind's eye.

Although far from innovative in contemporary terms, Turk's recent Collor are thoroughly avant-garde in their disregard for recent demarcated trends and in their privileging of object and process. Technically, they are amazing. The six sculptures in her New York show (plus five works on paper) represented four years of labor and were held back from the market until they could be shown as a unified group. The emerging installation was perfectly important for several reasons, including topographical Elizabethan ruffs, symbols of rising middle class power often comically parodied in De la Haye portraits, in a hall in the 40th anniversary of Bernini's tomb, Turk installed her works at human height in a configuration that echoed the original motifs and instantly implicated the viewer. With this humanization was in tandem with the viewer's absence and the fact of the viewer's closeness. As a result, the works lay away from art historical reference and abstractions whose undulating waves evoke stately as much as social history. With the clear and thickness of glass (diamond or the well-worn kindert of a very Dutch wedding cake), the collars undulate in differing sine wave compressions. From above they resemble flowers, from the sides, with a bit of zooming, jellyfish and, from any angle, the circular wires composed all the atomic and anatomic metaphors we have come to expect.

Collor #7 in all forms architecturally lace cultured by physics and a seemingly delicate shell-like wrap. While it also maintains a veil of functionality, it combines the folds and soft pleats—the tone of a barista's wig—from Turk's Bernini and style group with the formal engineering of a chess piece. The happiness of the armor and its material is offset by the descriptively carved floral motif. Four other works also explore the armored form, taking various points of departure. Like the lacinated Collor #8, #12 explores just one is in view by taking the butterfly as the inspiration for its overall shape. But it is stylized in a way that renders much more complexity—scale and rib-like structures mimic the deep camp in the gills of a very large fish, and from a distance it takes on the appearance of a tribal mask. Other cultural references abound in Collor #9, which seems to reference the Samurai katana. From the strongly traditional, semi-winged National Commission of

The Collor #1, 2003, Marble, 7 1/2 x 11 x 14 1/2 in. (shown); Collor #5, 2006, Marble, 30 x 29 x 21 in. (shown); Collor #6, 2006, Marble, 24 x 14 1/2 x 12 in.





the shoulders, second layers of juxtaposed imagery of modern life: crowded verticals are modeled after urban congestion and overlaid with a veil of chain link. The context suggests the evolution of social structures and environments, yet the overall form and metaphor—protective armor—is as pervasive today, in the form of the flat jacket, as it was during the 1960s period. It is interesting to note that Turk's series evolved from the ornamental to the protective as the war in Iraq escalated, and in *Collar #12*, the relationship between the form and the human body is at its most graphic. Here, the intestines, which are normally protected by armor, constitute the work's external structure, illustrating the inherent limitations of any protective device. The supple, visceral forms twist into a woven screen that supports and resembles a coat of arms.

More orthopedic than gastroenterological, *#7* stands like a splayed rib cage with regally Victorian vertebral supports. The opening for the neck has been constricted, taking the work one step further away from the idea of a functional collar and one step closer to the stronghold of fashion. *Collar #17*, which is similarly anatomic but even more abstracted, resembles both an Art Nouveau-inspired pelvis and a horseshoe crab or trilobite. Like *#12*, *#17* and the spider-like *#10* transform nature into graphic linearity. The reduction of form opens them up to endless visual associations. This is particularly true of *#10*, whose web-like matrix most directly evokes science on both micro and macro scales. On the floor next to the supporting armature lies another section of the matrix, whose vectors Turk carved a bit thicker so that it would appear from above to be the exact same scale as the mounted element (and perhaps so that it might not be mistaken for an accidental pebble). The relationship between the two sections suggests the fragility of life and of the material.

For Turk, working with stone lends a conceptual pivot to the formality of her sculptures. There is an irony and a postmodern satisfaction in using a traditionally male material and process to create forms that mimic women's handwork: 200-pound blocks of marble are abetted into lace. In doing so, Turk draws on methods of architectural stone carving and the histories they embody while linking her forms to recent science: details inspired by the diamond and St. Mark's twist into double-helices and Fibonacci spirals. Similarly, she begins with sartorial history—"Collars are accessible...a great vehicle for everyone to see themselves among this body of work...and it is a word with infinite paradox"—and spirals out into the corporeal. Turk describes the process as a "con-versation with the stone," not the execution of a preconceived design. Because of the unknown variables within each block, the works are as much about the process of patience, time, and division as the final object. As Turk explains, "The rigor of the work, the induction of the sound, the challenge intellectually and physically, makes it real...a dialogue with stone tests you—it changes you—your hands, your shoulders. It can never dominate it." Beyond the exquisite beauty of the *Collars*, Turk's rigor, vision, and humility act as touchstone and ballast in today's slippery and temperamental art world.

Gaeul Wilentz (left) is the editor of *Artweek*.



Opposite Collar P10, 2005. Marble, 40 x 2 x 2 in.
This page, clockwise from left: Collar P11, 2005,
Marble, 28 x 20 x 11 in. Collar R17, 2005, Marble,
17 x 18 x 9 in. Collar P12, 2005, Marble, 21 x 12
x 17 in.



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WWD

NO NECKTIES: There is no shortage of stiff collars on the Upper East Side, but the last thing artist Elizabeth Turk wants her upcoming Madison Avenue exhibition, "The Collars," to be is stereotypical. Her first solo show at the Hirschi & Adler Modern gallery bows March 9.

Carved from 400-pound blocks of Sivec and Carrara marble, her sculptures skew the historical definition of women's work. Turk's choices of materials and tools are more in line with the typically masculine world of war memorials and masonry. But her intricate lace-like designs, which include patterns inspired by flower petals, eroded fossils and arabesques, are a nod to the centuries-old tradition of making handmade lace — a field largely dominated by women. — R.F.



An Elizabeth Turk marble collar.