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Living & Arts



'Extraordinary ... very original' people sought

Foundation gives surprise grants.

Atlanta sculptor Elizabeth Turk among recipients.

By **Howard Pousner**
hpousner@ajc.com

Last Tuesday, Atlanta sculptor Elizabeth Turk was named as one of 23 recipients of this year's MacArthur Foundation "genius grants."

Turk, 48, will receive an award of \$500,000, paid quarterly over five years, from the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. There are no strings attached and no oversight from the foundation, which has made the grants for 30 years. Grantees aren't even required to report how they spend the money.

Turk's plans sound simple enough: "I think I'll continue what I'm doing, but hopefully on a larger and deeper scale," she told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

And just what does she do? In an interview provided by the MacArthur Foundation, Turk said:

"The work that's become the most well known is stone sculpture. And the stone, sort of reclaimed marble, is really about what's not there. What has been removed is a tremendous amount of material so that only a delicate lattice remains. ... How can that structure hold itself? That's the difficult part of it, and the intriguing part. ... And it's a very honest part of it, because if you make a mistake, it breaks.

"I think my sister describes my work best. She said, 'Your work is inspirational because it is mak-



Sculptor Elizabeth Turk will receive a grant of \$500,000. She loves how her sister described her work as "making something possible out of the impossible." Photos by **John Nowak** Getty Images for the MacArthur Foundation

ing something possible out of the impossible.' I love that statement because it's optimistic, it's inspirational even to me, and it does describe my work."

In the wake of Turk's award, we asked MacArthur Fellows director Daniel Socolow, a part-time Atlantan, to tell us how it's decided who gets the surprise grants.

Q: So, the folks who receive the grants have no idea the MacArthur Foundation has been considering them?

A: It's one of the most amazing things that drops out of the sky on people who have no idea we've been looking at them. You get one call from me: I say, "Guess what, we've been looking at you. We think you're terrific, we think the work you do is fantastic and important. You're never gonna hear

from me again, but you're going to get a half-million dollars, and go for it."

Q: What's the process for finding these "geniuses"?

A: We're looking for people who are really extraordinary, unusual, very original in whatever area they work. [The grants have] gone to everyone from farmers to astrophysicists. What we're looking for ... are people who are truly extraordinary. Who are really creative. Who we think have great possibilities and potential to do great things moving forward, not just now.

We're betting on what they're going to do for the future.

I invite hundreds and hundreds of people each year who've never been involved in this to suggest people.

I then write to tens of

thousands of other people about [those suggested], and it's confidential. And I collect all the material written about and by the person, copies of their art if they're artists, music if they're musicians. I take these many, many dossiers to a very small committee of not surprisingly anonymous and confidential folks that are with me for a year, winnowing down from hundreds of hundreds to 20 or 25 [honorees] from across this broad spectrum of expertise.

Q: How many serve on the final selection committee?

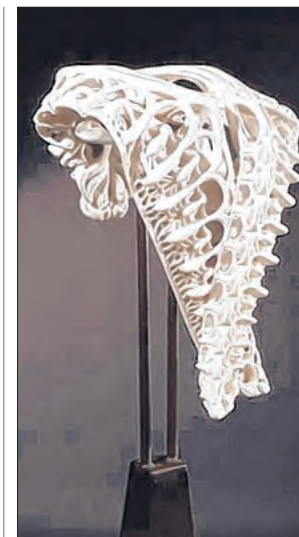
A: About a dozen. Nominators and evaluators change every year. Selectors are on a rotating basis, [serving a] three-year term. All these people are outside the foundation. The reason for all [that] is not to play games. We

really believe when you can't find a nominator, can't find any of the players, you can't influence the program. As a result the people who get this are truly deserving and haven't gotten to us through influence.

Q: It's amazing that you don't require that they justify, or even detail, what they do with the \$500,000.

A: We believe these people know far better than we what to do with the money. That they're really creative people who need no oversight, nobody hanging on their shoulder.

More online: Read Howard Pousner's interview with Elizabeth Turk at ajc.com. More images of Turk's work can be viewed at the website of Hirschl & Adler Modern, the gallery that represents her, at www.hirschlandadler.com.



Turk was awarded a "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation. Her collars carved from slabs of marble are shown.