

ELIZABETH TURK

# THE COLLARS: Tracings of Thought



VANTAGE *point* III

MINT MUSEUM OF ART

October 2, 2004 - January 2, 2005



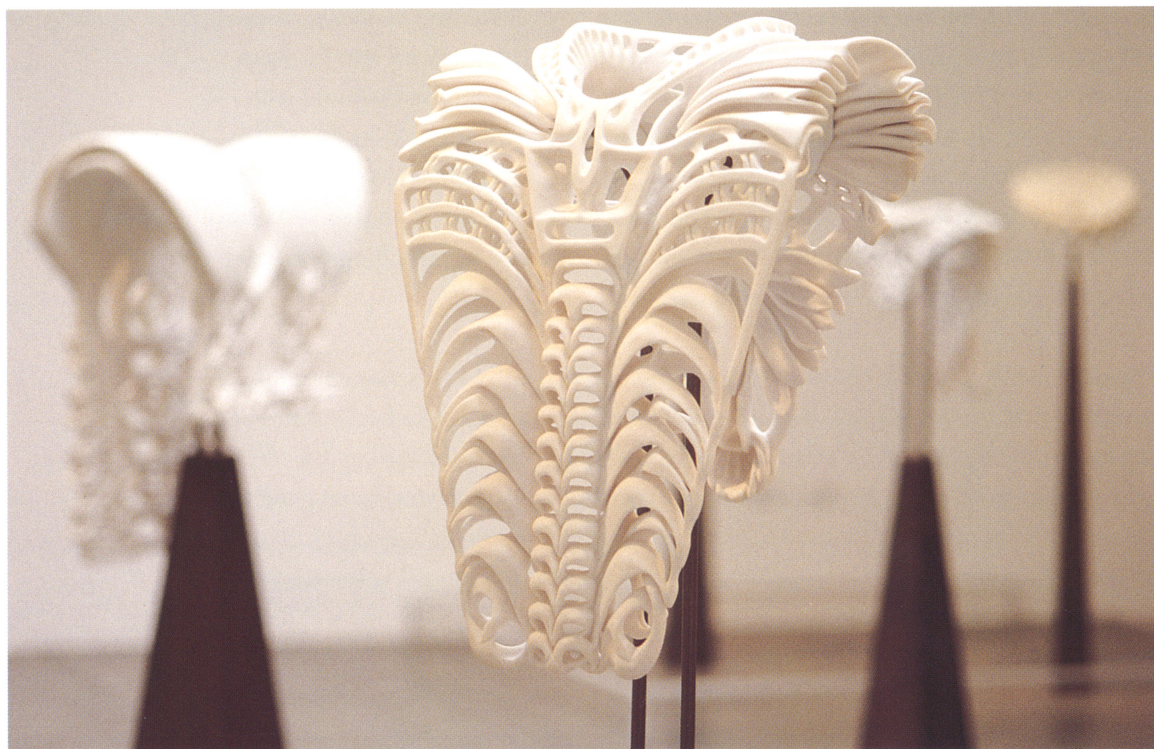


# THE COLLARS: Tracings of Thought

Elizabeth Turk's marble collars are monuments to time, labor and consciousness. Individually, each object is a fanciful structure, painstakingly carved into intricate patterns that form a whole. They contain the history of the artist's dialogue with stone—the hours and years required to complete this body of work. As Turk says, "It is impossible to dominate the material. In fact, in the end the stone has carved my body as much as I have carved it." The artist's body is indeed altered: muscles develop, tendons become more fragile from repetitive activity, and the body must be rested and disciplined for such exacting work.

The demanding physical nature of stone carving has much in common with the laborious practice of lace making, which these marble collars specifically reference. Lace was developed almost simultaneously in Flanders and Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Like gold or jewelry, lace became a much sought-after commodity and a powerful status symbol. Donning lace categorized the wearer as belonging to a certain class, with finery framing the face, edging cuffs or contouring the body with fanciful shawls and flounces.

The Italians dubbed lace *punto in aria*, "sketches in the air." While the appearance of lace is fragile and delicate, its structure is actually quite unified. Patterns mimicking nature—flowers, leaves and geometry—form the very structural matrix of this fabric. Perhaps this contradictory nature of lace—its airy fragility contrasted with its structural wholeness—remains key to its appeal. Over the course of the three centuries following lace's development, the demand for this finery from royalty, the church and the aristocracy fueled a vast network of industry. Lace was made by communities



Collar #8, 2004



of women in nunneries, ladies' courts, and humble cottages. Elizabeth Turk's marble monuments pay homage to this overlooked resourcefulness and this significant industry fueled mostly by women's skillful, painstaking work.

The Collars series began almost five years ago with the concept that Turk would create a body of work that was, as she terms it, "delicately monumental." She chose to work in marble, an assertive material traditionally used to create enormous sculptures representing conquest and destruction. Instead, Turk created something diametrically opposite: quiet, yet resonant forms to commemorate the social forces behind the creation of lace. Marble as her chosen material is richly associative. As Turk explains, "marble is a memorial stone through the histories of many cultures, as is needlework. I am fascinated by that interesting paradox." Another impetus for this series was a box of treasured pieces of lace belonging to Turk's mother's family. Upon examining this collection the artist imagined the traits of the women who created such delicate needlework—their patience, persistence and knowledge—and she sought to create a body of work that would honor these attributes.

Working in an open-air studio in Santa Ana, California, Turk begins each sculpture from a block of stone, roughly sketching the outline in broad crosshatched patterns using an electric grinder. She then uses air die grinders to remove more stone, followed by small dental and jeweler's tools to further shape the design. As the work becomes more perforated and delicate, she works entirely by hand, using files to remove more and more stone. This reductive process is also collaborative in that she senses the limitations of the stone, testing areas to determine how thinly she



Collar #6, 2003



Collar #4, 2002

can carve and feeling where there may be potential fissures. As Turk began to further explore the possibilities of the marble, her forms became more architectural and more refined, with intricate networks on the interior as well as the exterior of the forms.

The various internal shapes are structurally dependent upon one another. According to Turk, this structural complexity is meant to engage the viewer: "The eye can wander into tiny crevices where one can't imagine finishing work of filing and carving to have been done. I think this makes the body of work intrinsically sound and approachable. In this approachability I want to remain respectful of an audience, of the space that is rightfully theirs."

Turk develops the collars' intricate designs in large part through intuition and tactile dialogue with the stone. Yet her concepts are informed by acute observation. Turk has long been a student of pattern. She keeps a notebook in which she periodically adds images of structures found within nature, such as spider webs, river tributaries, images of the brain's synapses, and the double-helix structures of DNA. Working outdoors in California, she also gains inspiration from the landscape: "I am by the ocean a lot. I see how the waves perforate the rocks and cliffs. I see the sky and the patterns of light and clouds—it can't help but influence what I sculpt."

In the autumn of 2003 Turk had a residency at the McColl Center for Visual Art in Charlotte. During her time in the city, she took the opportunity to study the body of lace within the Mint Museum of Art's historic costume collection. "Each piece was



tagged like a specimen," she says. "Working there, photographing each piece made me wonder about patterning in formal terms—many of the lace collars were so organic, parallel to patterns within nature." During the hours she spent poring over the collection, Turk discovered lace as a formal abstraction: its patterns impersonate nature, but never represent nature.

In choosing to carve marble collars, Turk conceptually explores the trappings of elegant clothing which constricts activity and freedom. Our natural selves are compromised when we conform to such elaborate standards of beauty. Collectively, these sculptures could also serve as a memento mori reminding us of life's (and beauty's) fleeting nature.

There is something innately human-like in Turk's presentation of these sculptures, which are displayed on thin steel rods approximating a person's height. Each sculpture evokes a particular identity. In creating works that confer such individuality, Turk is also commenting on the essence of being. She seeks to make tangible the tracings of thought as a chemical and electrical process, recording in stone how these synapses might appear. Significantly, she chooses as her subject an ornate article of clothing that mediates between the head (intellect) and the heart (emotion).



Collar #8, 2004

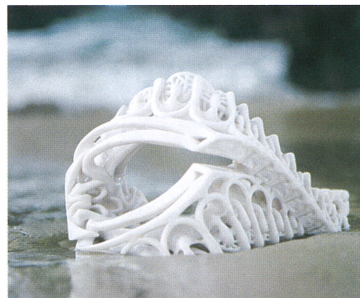
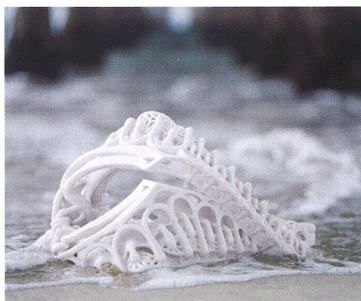


Finally, by presenting these works in a video that documents selected sculptures within the environment, Turk performs a ritual of release in which these sculptures are acted upon by water, wind and sand:

After completion of the works, I take them to different places. One of my favorites is the pier in Huntington Beach. I love the structure of the pier; another favorite is in a swimming pool. In these settings the fragile marble sculptures, which have taken years of my life, are left alone. There is abandonment; a forced "letting go" that produces so much anxiety. Conceptually this part of the work is significant for suddenly the static is fluid. The marble when viewed under water dances. There is a life to it that I have nothing to do with anymore, though I have picked the environment there is no longer any control over what will happen. They are more alive at this point, than if only left on a pedestal, yet it can be the most fearful moment. Maybe, because it is the beginning of the end in a sense, for now the creation is an object inhabiting its own space, decay is right around the corner. I love that after all the obsessive workmanship (all that ego and control), I must let go. Back in those beautiful natural settings, my control is but a speck.

Carla M. Hanzal  
Curator of Contemporary Art





Stills from Huntington Pier video, 2003



I love making these objects. Certainly, I am addicted to the process. The rhythm of movement, the intense focus, the physicality of tools, the properties of materials, these are all pure elements. In this, the daily practice of creating, my mind is freed from the "daily-ness" of life. Perhaps, it is here where the true addiction lies. How can the seemingly endless repetition of strokes of a file sooth the emotional fireworks of a soul? Yet, I am not alone in finding this refuge and enjoying the mystery.

—Elizabeth Turk, 2004





# Checklist

Collar #4, 2002  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
6" x 4½" x 5"  
Courtesy of the artist

Collar #5, 2003  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
8" x 6" x 5"  
Courtesy of the artist

Collar #6, 2003  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
7½" x 12" x 14½"  
Courtesy of the artist

Collar #7, 2003  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
16" x 12" x 9"  
Courtesy of the artist

Collar #8, 2004  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
24" x 16½" x 16"  
Courtesy of the artist

Collar #9, 2004  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
33" x 29" x 16"  
Courtesy of the artist

Collar #13, 2004  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
2" x 15" x 22"  
Courtesy of the artist

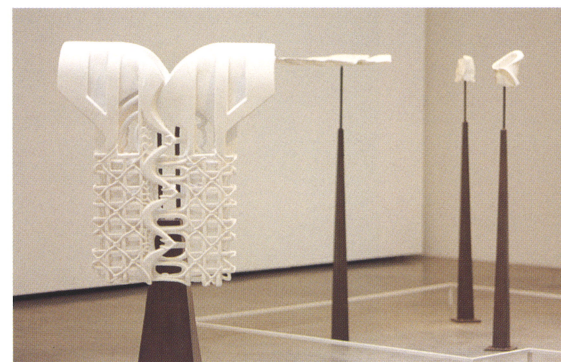
Collar #14, 2004  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
3" x 15" x 22"  
Courtesy of the artist

Collar #15, 2004  
Sivic marble, Macedonia  
3" x 32" x 23"  
Courtesy of the artist

Patterns of Thought, 2003  
six graphite on paper drawings  
38½" x 38½" each  
Courtesy of the artist

Punto in Aria (Sketches in the Air),  
2004  
pen and ink installation  
variable dimensions  
Courtesy of the artist

Huntington Pier, 2003  
13-minute DVD  
Courtesy of the artist



Collar #9, 2004

# Elizabeth Turk



Born 1961 in Pasadena, CA  
Lives in New York, NY, and maintains a studio  
in Santa Ana, CA

## EDUCATION

- 1994 Rinehart School, Maryland Institute,  
Baltimore, MD, M.F.A., Sculpture
- 1983 Scripps College, Claremont, CA, B.A.,  
International Relations

## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- 2003 McColl Center for Visual Art, Artist in  
Residence, Charlotte, NC
- 2002-03 Kyojima Artist in Residence Program,  
Tokyo, Japan
- 2001-02 California State Fullerton, Artist in Residence,  
Santa Ana, CA
- 2000 NYC Art Commission Excellence in Design  
Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant  
John Michael Kohler Arts & Industry  
Program, Artist in Residence, Sheboygan, WI
- 1994 Amalie Rothschild Award



## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 VantagePoint III Elizabeth Turk  
The Collars: Tracings of Thought,  
Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC  
3 Solo Projects, Otis College of Art + Design,  
Los Angeles, CA  
Art Chicago, Hirschl & Adler Modern,  
New York, NY
- 2003 Matter & Matrix, Ruth Chandler Williamson  
Gallery, Scripps College, Claremont, CA  
Going Public, Center for Architecture, AIA,  
New York, NY  
Response, McColl Center for Visual Art,  
Charlotte, NC  
airplanes, Grand Central Art, Santa Ana, CA
- 2002 Postcard collaboration, Japan Bank Building,  
Hiroshima, Japan  
Ironworks from Kohler, Johnson Atelier,  
Hamilton, NJ
- 2001 Fragile Realities, Contemporary Art Forum,  
Santa Barbara, CA
- 2000 Classicism Now, Hirschl & Adler Modern,  
New York, NY
- 1998 Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, DC  
Objectivity: International Objects of  
Subjectivity, Contemporary Art Center  
of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
- 1997 Baumgartner Gallery, Washington, DC  
Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD



work in progress Collar #11, 2004

- 1996 Baumgartner Gallery, Washington, DC  
Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD  
School 33, Baltimore, MD  
Washington Project for the Arts,  
Washington, DC

## SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC  
National Museum of Women in the Arts,  
Washington, DC  
Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC

# Acknowledgments



Santa Ana studio



Elizabeth Turk wishes to acknowledge the following institutions and individuals for their contribution towards the completion of The Collars: Tracings of Thought exhibition:

Chiarini Marble  
Ron Houghton  
Erik Risser  
BJ Farrar  
Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, NY  
Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, DC  
Joie Lassiter Gallery, Charlotte, NC  
McColl Center for Visual Art  
Historic Costume Collection, Mint Museum of Art  
Charles L. Mo  
Sandy Pettyjohn  
Lyn Mack

VantagePoint III Elizabeth Turk  
The Collars: Tracings of Thought is supported, in part, by a grant from the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation.

The Mint Museums are supported, in part, with a Basic Operating Grant from the Arts & Science Council, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Inc.; the North Carolina Arts Council, an agency funded by the State of North Carolina and the National Endowment for the Arts; the City of Charlotte; and their members.

Cover: Collar #7, 2003

ARTS &  
SCIENCE  
COUNCIL  
Advancing Arts, Science & History



This catalog is published on the occasion of the exhibition VantagePoint III Elizabeth Turk, The Collars: Tracings of Thought organized by the Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina.

EXHIBITION DATES : October 2, 2004 through January 2, 2005

Carla Hanzal  
Charles L. Mo  
Emily Walker  
Kurt Warnke  
Martha T. Mayberry  
Rosemary Martin  
Ron Houghton, Grant Robbins  
and Elizabeth Turk

Curator and Essayist  
Chief Curator  
Publication Designer  
Exhibition Designer  
Registrar  
Editor  
  
Photography

Copyright © 2004 Mint Museum of Art. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be used without the express written permission from the Mint Museum of Art.

The Mint Museums are supported, in part, with a Basic Operating Grant from the Arts & Science Council, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Inc.; the North Carolina Arts Council, an agency funded by the State of North Carolina and the National Endowment for the Arts; the City of Charlotte; and their members.

Funding for this publication was provided in part by a grant from the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turk, Elizabeth, 1961-

The collars : tracings of thought : Vantagepoint III, Elizabeth Turk /  
Carla M. Hanzal, curator and essayist.  
p. cm.

Catalog of an exhibition at the Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, N.C.,  
Oct. 2, 2004-Jan. 2, 2005.

ISBN 0-9762300-0-3

1. Turk, Elizabeth, 1961---Exhibitions. 2. Marble sculpture,  
American--Exhibitions. I. Title: Tracings of thought. II. Title:  
Exhibition title: Vantagepoint III, Elizabeth Turk. III. Hanzal, Carla  
M. IV. Mint Museum of Art. V. Title.

NB237.T83A4 2004

730'.92--dc22

2004022361





**The Mint Museums**  
*Experience art*