

The Line Defining Three-Dimensional Space

A Conversation with

Elizabeth Turk

BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

Opposite: *Collar 21* (detail), 2010.
Silvec marble, 23 x 14 x 17 in. Above:
Cage #1, 2008. Corton French lime-
stone, 35 x 29 x 12 in.

Elizabeth Turk does not fit very comfortably within an art world that demands rapid production of work for museum shows, international biennials, and an ever-expanding range of art fairs. Her meticulously carved sculptures take years to create, and their fragile nature makes them difficult to transport. Still, growing numbers of admirers have followed her steady progress, and in 2010, Turk was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. Her newest body of work, four years in the making, will premiere at Hirschl & Adler Modern in New York, March 1–31, 2012, during Armory Week.



Rebecca Dimling Cochran: *You present your work thematically. Earlier series were titled “Wings,” “Collars,” and “Ribbons,” and your newest is “Cages.” How do these series evolve?*

Elizabeth Turk: “Collars” was really about the connection between small shapes, conceptually similar to a flock of birds or a swarm of fish. Then I moved into “Ribbons,” which I look at as sketches. Taking those small shapes (and they all work together), how could they move through space? With the “Cages,” the next step was taking those pathways, or systems, and integrating them with one another. This became the idea of a cage.

At this point, it’s expanded greatly, because there are a lot of other intellectual ponderings that get thrown into the mix. The “Collars” were not entirely closed spaces. I liked the idea of an object that was entirely open in the interior, but with locked parameters. This touches back on the “Wing” series, where I tried to keep the outside dimensions exactly to those of the original stone, and so, it harks back to another story. That’s the thread.

RDC: *So, the “Cages” are consistent in that each piece is entirely enclosed, all the way around, whether in the shape of a circle, a rectangle, or a square.*

ET: Exactly. It’s the line defining a three-dimensional space, a line that can fold back on itself, like a circle or band will define a space. One can wonder, then, if it is a cage, or a boundary. “Cage” is a loaded title, so you can take it in a lot of different directions.

RDC: *Is it always a single, unbroken line that runs through and connects back to itself?*

ET: Many of them are, to play with the idea of the infinite. A couple are bands, or circles, and one is defined by three circles.

RDC: *Each one is carved from marble, a solid and weighty material that, in your hands, turns into something delicate, light, and airy. How did you begin to experiment with the idea of the void that now permeates the work?*

ET: That has a few answers. I like the femininity of having it really light, although I

Collar 21, 2010. Silvec marble, 23 x 14 x 17 in.

did not start off in that direction, it's sort of a by-product. I have the luxury of keeping my studio in a marble yard that has some of the best equipment in the industry. By watching what is technologically possible, you can't help but translate it into your own work—and so, machinery itself is pushing me along. You can replicate everything now; 3-D imaging is changing the topography. You can enlarge work; you can make it look surreal. You can do anything that you can do on a computer, but that's not interesting to me. The undercuts and what's *not* there are much more interesting. Plus, the grinding does not send as many vibrations through the stone, and so I thought, "How far can I take that? What is extreme about that?" Philosophically, I like the idea of emptiness, the Buddhist concept of emptiness. Things like matrices or filigree structures seem much more flexible, much more workable, and these [ideas] paralleled what was available technologically.

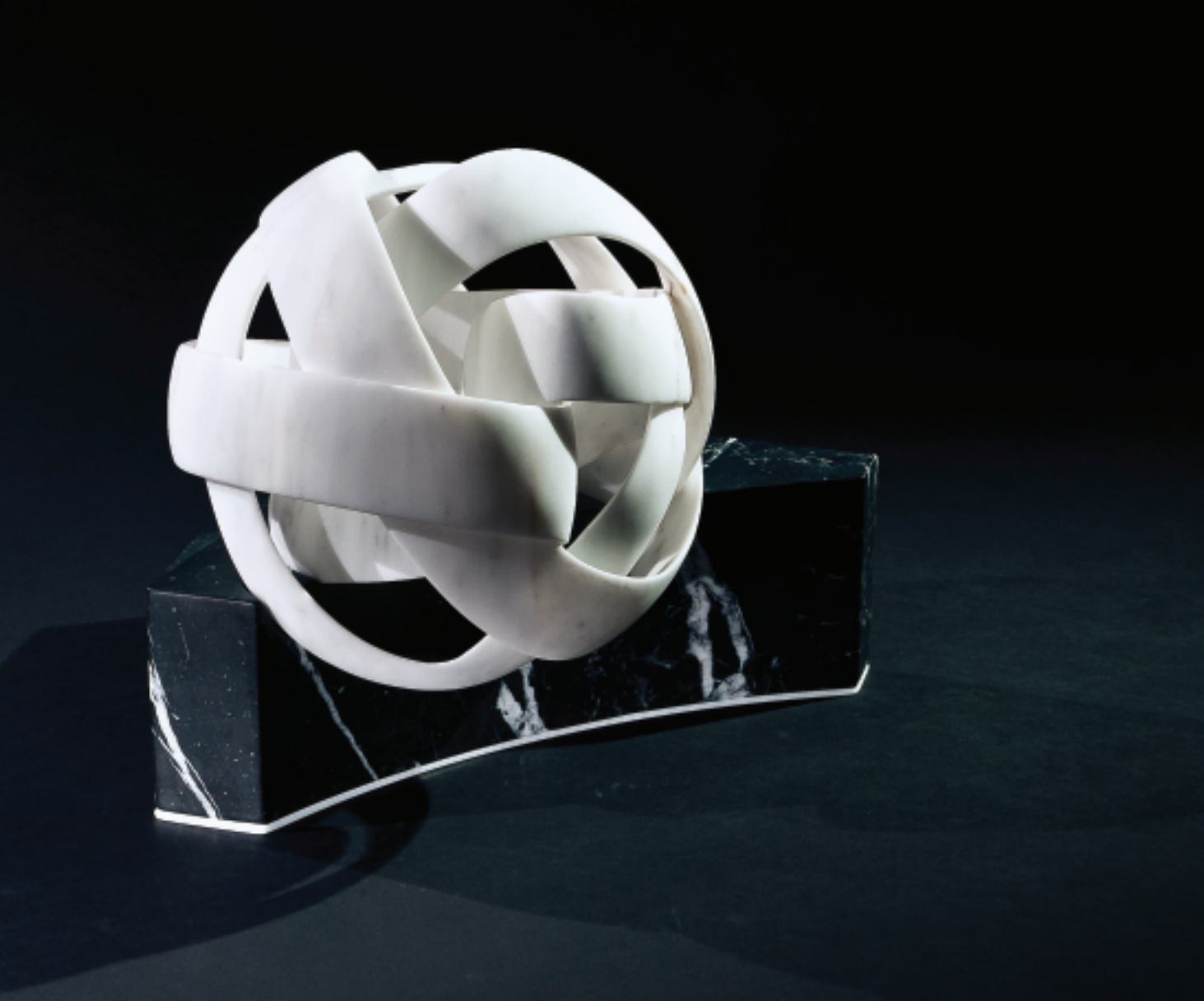
RDC: *Where does your marble come from?*

ET: I never go to a quarry and choose stone. Most of my stone comes to me. I work in the marble yard at Chiarini Marble and Stone. Currently, they have a large project in Texas, a beautiful doorway. The blocks were cut thick and beautifully, but they didn't use all of them so I purchased some. I like that the stone was not cut for my project, but for a doorframe. It is a way of putting my story and my adaptation on the material. Nature already made this incredible stone, then it gets chosen for another purpose. I also have a block that was once a part of a building in Washington, DC, and it still has its big iron core [once the essential connection to the building frame]. It's cool to think that's how buildings were made. Now, we use veneers. That block is a foot and a half thick. I like that there is another storyline being told, not just my own.

If you really get into carving, sometimes you'll see a rash of bubbles, really tiny holes. On a Neoclassical sculpture, you'd think, "How terrible." But because my work is more organic, I think, "That rash

Cage: *Still Life, Box 1, 2011. Marble, 13.5 x 9.25 x 6 in.*





of bubbles is the most interesting part of this sculpture. I have to note it in some way because it is air that was trapped millions and millions of years ago.” Why not start to have a longer dialogue with time?

RDC: *Have you ever worked with a different stone, like granite?*

ET: I mostly use marble because it’s strong enough to hold a form and soft enough not to kill my arm and shoulder. I have cut into granite, but I thought, “I’m patient but not that patient.” I admire anyone who uses that material.

RDC: *You really test the limits of marble, regularly removing much more than you leave behind. How do you know when to stop?*

ET: It is incredibly scary. I have had nightmares thinking that I could make a cut, but it would only last for about three days before the force of gravity would be too much and it would crack. It is a slow conversation, and some have broken. I think it has to do with the memory of the stone, because the breaks happened early on. The sculptures have supports, and when I took them away, the sculptures broke. If I can’t intuitively feel how the piece is being held, then it is going to break. I’ve pushed too hard. There was one really beautiful piece, but it had a long neck element; I should have cut the support right away and, then,

Cage: Still Life, Sphere 2, 2011. Marble, 9 in. diameter.

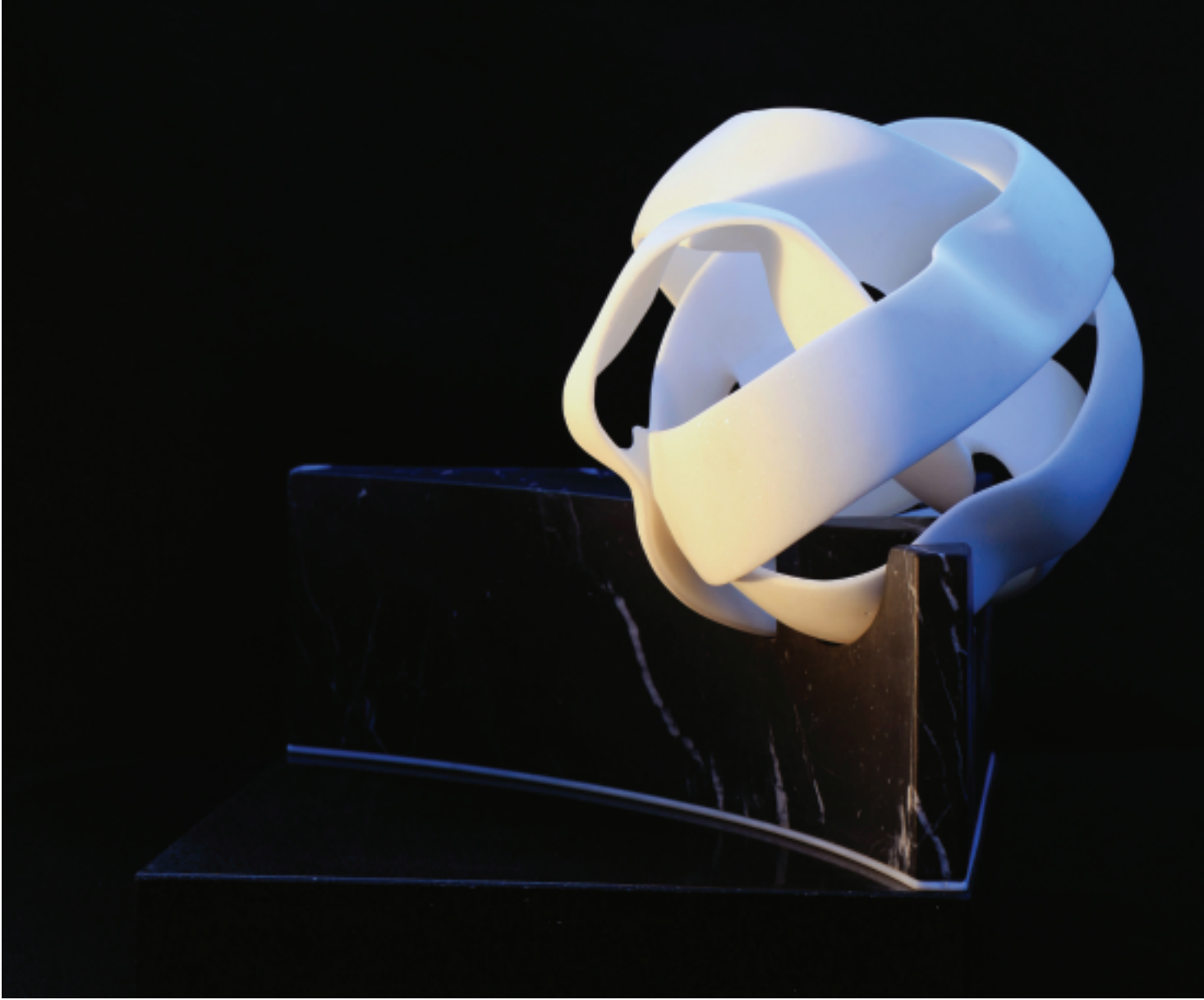
started carving. It’s a battle with gravity. You start to look at all structures within that context.

RDC: *Do you have the orientation in mind and carve with the block always resting the same way? For example, if you are making a vertical piece, do you carve it while the stone is vertical so the gravitational pull is constant?*

ET: In the end, yes. Not originally. In the “Cages,” there is no real sense of up and down, and it is much easier to look at the structure where there’s no definite, consistent pull. The magic is making them feel as if they have that loss of solidity, and so, it’s about the balance between how much you cut the structure and how much you don’t. The terror for me has always been in the transporting and installation.

RDC: *You design all of the bases for your sculptures, and they are as highly conceptualized as the sculptures themselves. What relationship between the two are you trying to develop?*

ET: It’s all one. I don’t look at the base as a different object. The ideas should be fluid. The way that it relates should bring out the parallels and the paradoxes.



Cage: Still Life, Sphere 3, 2011. Marble, 8 in. diameter.

RDC: *Paradoxes in material, in shape, in solidity?*

ET: All of those. It should also bring into focus the different conceptual aspects of the work. All of the objects are objects of concentration. I like scaling the art back down to a manageable size, where you as a viewer are not overwhelmed. It's an invitation for a dialogue with the object, and the base brings it closer to you, at least in these new pieces, because I want that interaction.

RDC: *Do you design the bases as you carve?*

ET: Absolutely, because they should work together. For instance, in the "Collars," I wanted each collar to appear as if it were another human being in the room. The work was positioned at a height that allowed you to imagine yourself wearing it or talking to it. With the "Cages," we're doing mirrored stainless bases, so I can invite you to step up and look in and see your reflection within the cage.

RDC: *In your studio, I noticed a second series of slightly smaller works in which you combine natural "found" stone with carved marble. Is this a new direction for you?*

ET: The stones are like worn pebbles, but they have quartz veins

running through them. I picked them up because I loved the idea that they have ribbons in them. It's just a different context: rather than air, there is stone wrapped around the ribbon. It's a beautiful extension of how I was thinking. The stones paralleled the idea of matter, or the emptiness of matter, and so I started playing with them, just having them around the studio. As I began to get into this series, they presented ideas around "intention," "will versus intention," and "weight," and I liked playing with those ideas. I call these gesture sketches "Variations."

RDC: *Drawing also seems to be very important to your practice. Do you consider it as preparatory work for your sculpture, a separate practice, or perhaps a bit of both?*

ET: Both. I love drawing. It is freedom for me. It prepares me for the sculpture. It is the conceptual preparation. I start by bringing different ideas together through drawings and collages. For instance, in collages, I'll look at a matrix as seen in diagrammed sentences, corporate structures, political systems, and biological patterns. These structures are all very interesting because I am seeking commonalities and new connections across seemingly disparate ideas. I'll try to bring a new perspective to concepts—tying them together, exploring the possibilities of their visual intersections,



Above: *Line #3*, 2011. Marble, 10.5 x 10 x 11.625 in. Right: *Ribbon #17 (Standing)* (detail), 2008. Marble, 50 x 8 x 7 in.

mapping their common matrices, and then I go to the studio and adapt my structures. Marble is the traditional home of ideals, right? This is one side of drawing that is very important.

Then, on an emotional level, after the exhaustion of the physical labor of carving, the very quiet kind of studiosness in focused drawing is a relief, a meditation. It is a subconscious form of drawing. It brings the complex ideas or questions of the day into the matrix that I was studying before I left for the studio. This way, I can feel the sculpture when I'm doing it and not overthink. Finally, there are the very large, charcoal drawings, which are about five feet high and three feet wide. I make these if I'm not carving stone. Or, if I'm really dirty and not so exhausted, I'll move from white dust to black. It requires the same sort of physical energy, but different patterns emerge.

RDC: *You have mentioned that you are interested in systems and matrices, particularly in how one thing flows into the other. How does this translate into your work?*

ET: I'm not entirely sure where it came from. It's been evolving my entire life. The evolution of this line of questioning is seen in my drawings and collages. Perhaps the core question is why, as organic, curved, soft creatures, we think and find a resonance in linear structures. Why do we live in square rooms rather than round (well, in many places anyway)? Why is the structure of a monarchy so effective? What do linear systems of order offer our minds and our souls that complex curves and paradoxes do not? Our comfort with systems (of order, of communication) informs our palette of responses: emotional and rational. This is why a study of systems, structures, and thus matrices is infinitely intriguing to me.

It was so long ago when I began asking myself these questions. I suppose the answers have simply moved through their own variations. They generate a very layered perspective. For some reason, these thoughts are easier for me to understand if I think of them in physical shapes—for instance, language



in terms of diagrammed forms. And I find the line of questioning beautiful, because it pushes me to look for the relationship between all things, the matrix of how it all fits together. In the end, even the solidity of the rock is not what it seems.

RDC: *In 2010, you received the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. How has that award changed your work?*

ET: I'm incredibly grateful to have been invited into this group of unbelievably optimistic and inspiring people. I find that I want to incorporate so much of what they are thinking about into my work that I'm challenged in the most inspirational way. The beauty of it, for me, is that it came at a time of such flux in the world, a very serious time. To have an injection of that kind of optimism is nothing short of miraculous; it's hopeful. It's amazing to be with people who look at obstructions as challenges, incredibly invigorating rather than depressing. I'm trying to carry that attitude through to my own work.



Above: *Ribbon #16 (Standing)*, 2008. Marble, 7 x 33 x 5 in. Left: *Ribbons #11, #13, and #10*, 2007–08. Marble, installation view.

RDC: *What is the greatest misconception about your work?*

ET: I wouldn't say "misconception," but people have a barrier about my work in terms of craft. For me, the idea of craft has been much more about ritual, almost like Marina Abramović, and the idea of discipline on a consistent level of repetitive action. We see it in religion, we see it in so much of human behavior, and yet when it comes down to crafting an object, somehow the concept has been lowered. Part of my challenge, I think, is to reinvent some of the beauty of that aspect and put it at a different level because it marries the intellectual and a much more emotional response.

RDC: *People think the work is too beautiful.*

ET: It stops them. I've drawn attention to the object, and that is purposefully done. But then I have the challenge: "Now that you're looking at the object, expand your thought structurally," and that's hard when there is so much focus on the object. But again, part of that focus is because of the time it takes, and that's the ritual I want to communicate.

RDC: *When you say that the mirrored pedestals allow viewers to see themselves within the "Cages" or that the height of the "Collars" allows people to converse with the work, your work begins to function conceptually. Viewers move beyond just looking at the object and begin to have a physical relationship with it.*

ET: Exactly. I want to create conceptual pieces with intimately carved, beautiful objects so that the individual pieces can stand independently, but they become something larger as a whole. That is something consistent in all of the work.

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a writer and curator based in Atlanta.

