

DOUBLE TAKE

MEL CHIN & ELIZABETH TURK

NOVEMBER 18, 2022–MARCH 26, 2023





double take:

a delayed reaction to a surprising or significant situation after an initial failure to notice anything unusual.

—Merriam-Webster Dictionary

"To name an object is to destroy poetic enjoyment, which comes from gradual divination. The ideal is to suggest the object."

—Mel Chin

"I am constructing positive forms out of absence ... suggesting the rhythm and richness of that which we cannot see."

—Elizabeth Turk

Cover: Elizabeth Turk. *Echoes of Extinction* series (detail), 2020.
Mel Chin. *Cabinet of Craving* (detail), 2019.

More Than Meets the Eye:

The Art of Mel Chin & Elizabeth Turk

The original impetus to pair Mel Chin and Elizabeth Turk's sculpture stemmed from their both being MacArthur Fellowship recipients. This highly illustrious award, often called the "genius grant," is firm testament to the creative excellence and broad social reach of the two artists' work. While this mutual distinction is not apparent within the *Double Take* exhibition, it is one of many less than obvious features these artists share.



Elizabeth Turk. *Evaporated River* (detail), 2015.

Indeed, at first glance, the works of Chin and Turk may seem unrelated. Upon further examination, a wealth of connections begins to emerge in their art and approach to various themes. One visible trait they hold in common is their adroit handling of materials—from wood to stone to sound—along with a refined execution of form. Chin and Turk's art is literally *attractive*, drawing us near to better glean the latent content. What slowly surfaces in this exhibition is a deep concern for the well-being of the environment and the sentient lives of others.

The artists' regard for biodiversity and natural systems finds expression in manifold ways. Focusing on extinct or endangered birds, Elizabeth Turk has chosen to render the soundwaves of their calls in columnar structures, giving

tangible presence to what is gone or slowly vanishing. She further color-codes the aluminum columns to signal those birds now extinct (black) and those still living though in peril (bright hues). "The sound columns are positive shapes rising from loss," explains Turk, "suggesting the rhythm and richness of that which we cannot see, but still know." A sense of absence is also conveyed in the artist's *Evaporated River*, which silently confronts us with the dry remains of a once dynamic waterway. Turk's limestone and goldleaf *Suspended Meditation*, hovering above a reflective pool, seems to likewise ask that we ponder our precarious state.



Mel Chin. *Cabinet of Craving* (detail), 2012.

Mel Chin's multidisciplinary works resonate with tones in turn mournful and hopeful. The extinct species represented in his *The Conditions of Memory* series—including Labrador duck and Sea mink—are memorialized in molds with negative castings and their date of disappearance. His recent *Never Forever* sound installation also conjures up extinct species through a speaker that emits the animal's

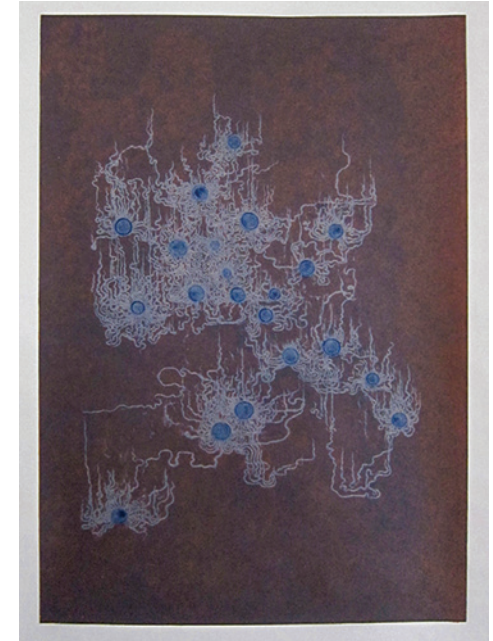
call or cry. Recollection and recovery, literal or figurative, recurs throughout Chin's works. The enormous spider in his *Cabinet of Cravings* poetically stages lesser-known links between the Chinese opium trade and Victorian England's tea culture. Chin's family past intersects with this cultural history, a fact he nonetheless embraces. "I incorporate all the legacies I've been lucky to absorb, but I'm always ready to bust it up, Zen-style," states Chin. "I look at artmaking as an axe to dismantle delusions that have built up."

Reclamation is the explicit aim of Chin's ongoing *Revival Field*, a pioneering "green remediation" project that enlists plants to extract toxic metal from the soil. Often extending his creative practice into the social sphere, Chin initiated the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project*, a collective action to educate on and combat childhood lead-poisoning—here, removing neurotoxins from blood rather than metals from soil. Turk has similarly produced large collaborative events including her *Shoreline Project*, which was filmed by drones to capture unforeseen patterns of the participating crowds.

The most compelling aspect shared by Mel Chin and Elizabeth Turk is their abiding concern for what remains out of sight, and therefore out of mind. To revive such hidden subjects, the artists ground their work in rigorous research and place faith in human understanding. Ideas are perhaps the greatest unseen forces in operation. When alluringly embodied in art, we are given a chance to see the world anew.



Left: Elizabeth Turk. *Heaven & Earth 9*, 2015. Ink and graphite on paper, 12 x 9 inches.



Right: Mel Chin. *Imperfect Pearls in the Ether of Infinite Labor*, 1998. Woodcut and lithograph, 15 3/8 x 22 1/2 inches.

Mel Chin



Mel Chin at work in his studio.

Born in Houston, Texas, Mel Chin has become known for the broad range of approaches in his art, including works requiring multidisciplinary, collaborative teamwork and those enlisting science as an aesthetic component to developing complex ideas. Chin is one of the artists featured in the first year of the ongoing PBS series *Art of the 21st Century*. He is the recipient of many awards, grants, and honorary degrees, including the MacArthur Fellowship and election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2021.

Mel Chin, *Cabinet of Craving*, 2012. White oak, antique English boneware (circa 1843), footed silver tray, steel, pigmented dye, shellac, 9 x 14 x 14 feet.



Right: Mel Chin. *Labrador Duck 1875*, from *The Conditions of Memory* series, 1989. Cast stone (two installation views), dimensions variable.

Below: Mel Chin. *Revival Field (Diorama)*, 2019. Hyperaccumulator parts, *Revival Field* stake, archival documents, approx. 30 x 50 x 8 inches.



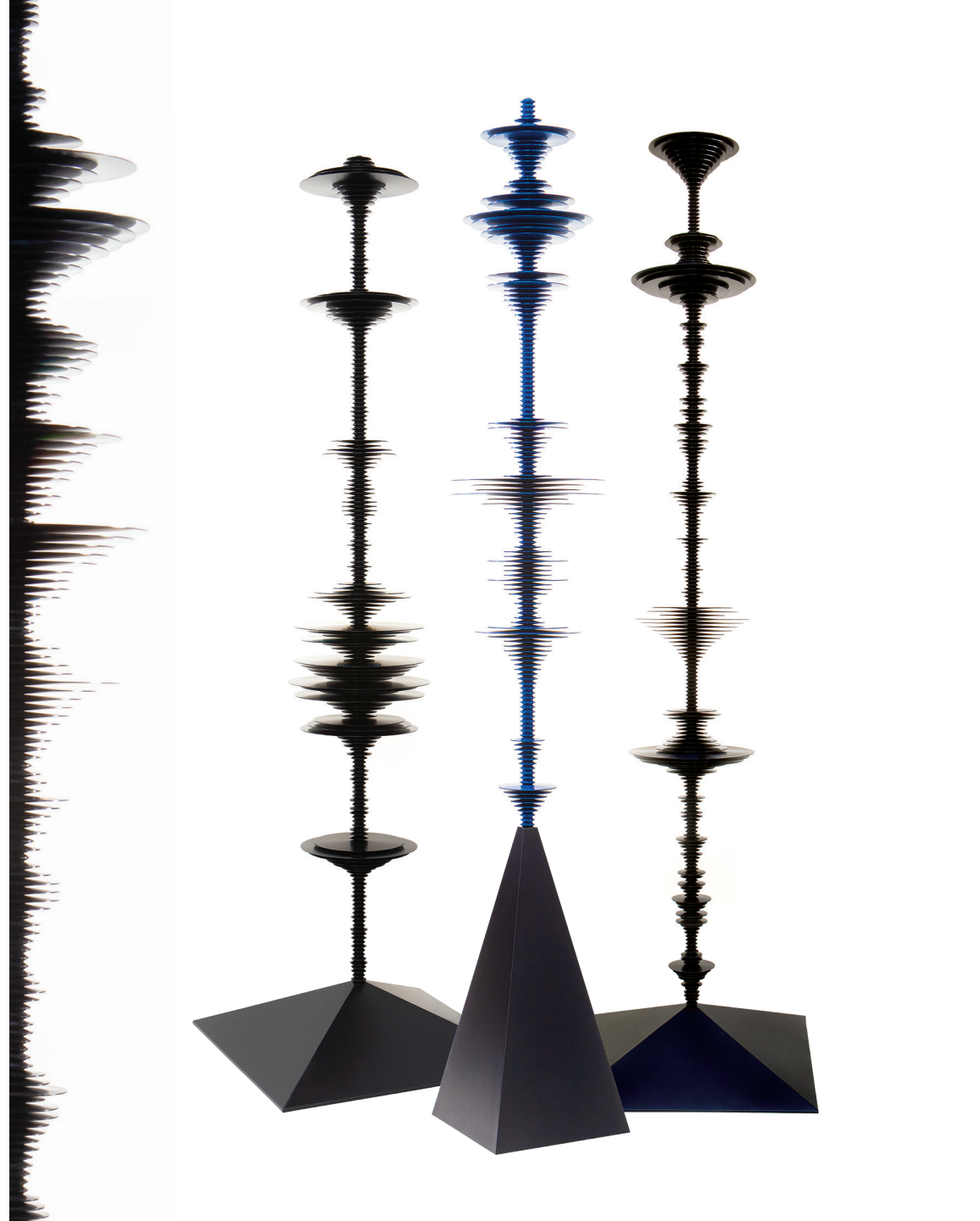
Elizabeth Turk



Elizabeth Turk at work in her studio.

A native Californian, Elizabeth Turk is an artist known best for marble sculpture and, through ET Projects, immersive art events. Currently, she splits time between a studio in Santa Ana, California, and New York City. She is a MacArthur Fellow, an Annalee & Barnett Newman Foundation recipient, and a Smithsonian Artist Fellow, among other awards. Turk received her Master of Fine Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art, Rinehart School of Sculpture, in 1994, and her Bachelor of Arts from Scripps College, Claremont, California, in 1983.

Elizabeth Turk, *Echoes of Extinction* series, 2020.
Anodized aluminum, approx. height 70–80 inches.





Above: Elizabeth Turk. *Evaporated River*, 2015.
Limestone and black marble, 40 x 204 x 180 inches

Right: Elizabeth Turk. *Suspended Meditation*, 2015.
Texas limestone and 24k gold leaf, 38 x 36 x 36 inches.



For Further Consideration

Mel Chin

Revival Field Diorama

Mel Chin's *Revival Field* is an ongoing project located at Pig's Eye Landfill, in St. Paul, Minnesota—a fenced area in which special hyperaccumulator plants are extracting heavy metals from contaminated soil. The diorama displayed here includes plot markers, plant and soil samples, and other artifacts from the site.

Are there plants in your region that might also serve to detoxify the soil? Can you think of other examples where artists have used science to produce a beneficial impact?

Cabinet of Cravings

Chin describes this sculpture as “a hybrid monster born out of addictions and manipulations of empires, in this case, the Victorian English craving for tea and porcelain, the Chinese desire for silver and the insidious and illegal trade of narcotics that lead to the Opium War.”

What elements do you see in this sculpture that relate to Chinese culture and history, and to those of Victorian England? Why has the artist chosen a spider to embody the subject of addiction?

Labrador Duck, 1875

This work appears like a tombstone for a long-lost bird. The already rare Labrador duck became extinct in the late 1800s due to interaction with European settlers in North America. Here the duck is represented by a negative cast of the body, which is a nonfunctional mold suggesting our inability to replicate this specimen.

Do you know of any animals near where you live that are currently endangered? What are some things that might be done to help reduce the number of species that become endangered or extinct each year?

For Further Consideration

Elizabeth Turk

Sound Columns

Elizabeth Turk's sculpted columns translate sound into tangible form, exploring loss and erasure by making visible the soundwaves of songs from extinct, endangered, and once imperiled birds.

What treasured sound would you like to capture and embody as a sculpture? What shape or material might it take?

Suspended Meditation

Limestone is a soft stone formed from sediment on the sea floor, often embedded with fossilized plants and animals. In this work, Turk suspends a large carved stone with gilded interior above a round reflective surface. Gold historically symbolizes spirituality or afterlife, and stone as a medium is wedded to the Earth.

How do the materials in Suspended Meditation add to its meaning? What does this sculpture encourage you to meditate on?

Evaporated River

Due to damming and drought spurred by climate change, many rivers around the world are drying up, including in the Western United States where Turk lives. Decreasing water is causing drastic shifts in the natural environment and devastation to aquatic ecosystems.

Which elements of Evaporated River indicate damage to an ecosystem? What is missing from this riverbed and what remaining elements suggest its former condition?

Related Programming

For more information on understanding and protecting birds and their natural habitats visit:
birds.cornell.edu
macaoulaylibrary.org

Endangered and Extinct Birds of Michigan: How We Can Help

Saturday, December 10, 11 am–12 pm

Chris Mensing, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In *Double Take*, Mel Chin and Elizabeth Turk offer an aesthetic interpretation of endangered and extinct animals, with a particular focus on birds. Join U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Chris Mensing to learn which bird species are struggling in Michigan today and ways to lend a hand.

Ecological Art in the Contemporary World

Saturday, January 14, 11 am–12 pm

Lily Woodruff, PhD, Associate Professor of Art History & Visual Culture, Michigan State University

Some artists enlist their art to raise awareness about environmental issues—and some use art as a form of action. Join Dr. Lily Woodruff in exploring recent trends in ecological art, from the Earthworks of the 1960s and '70s to current works by Mel Chin and Elizabeth Turk.

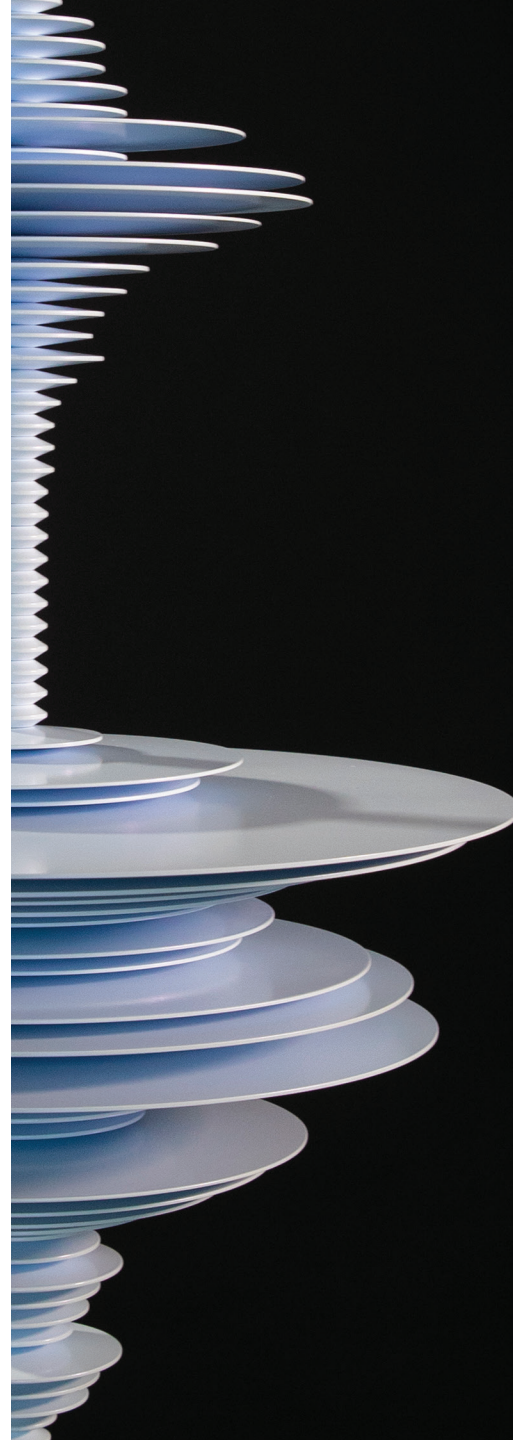
Interpreting Media: Hidden Meanings in Nontraditional Materials

Saturday, March 11, 11 am–12 pm

Amber Oudsema, Curator of Arts Education at Meijer Gardens and Adjunct Professor of Art History at Grand Valley State University

While an artwork's title can offer interpretive clues for viewers, the medium itself can also provide symbolic context. Explore some nontraditional materials used throughout art history before focusing on the varied media found in the work of Mel Chin and Elizabeth Turk.

Inside cover: Elizabeth Turk. *Echoes of Extinction* series (detail), 2020.



Double Take: Mel Chin & Elizabeth Turk
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