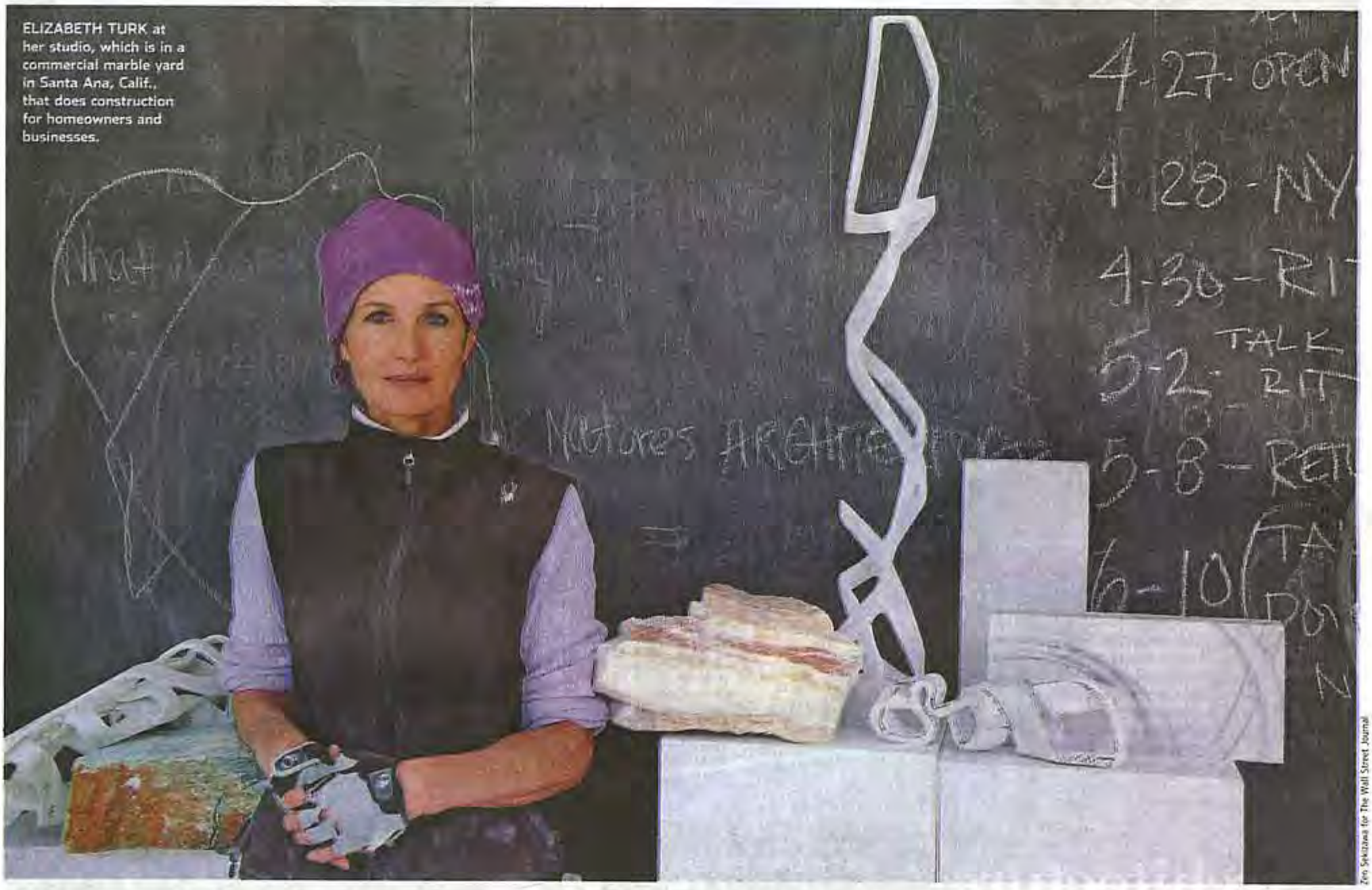

ELIZABETH TURK at her studio, which is in a commercial marble yard in Santa Ana, Calif., that does construction for homeowners and businesses.

Zev Sekizawa for The Wall Street Journal

Finding Strips of Ribbon in Chunks of Stone

CREATING:
ELIZABETH TURK,
SCULPTOR

BY RACHEL WOLFF

ELIZABETH TURK'S matrix-like marble sculptures look like physical impossibilities. Their thin, intertwining strips of carved ribbon are so smooth and fragile that it's hard to imagine they could have been crafted by hand. But that is precisely how Ms. Turk works. The Southern California sculptor spends weeks and months drilling away at chunks of recycled stone until her twisted, milky creations emerge.

A recipient of a MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 2010, Ms. Turk carves from 500- to 1,500-pound scraps—leftovers provided by a commercial marble yard in Santa Ana, Calif., that does construction for homeowners and businesses.

Her indoor-outdoor studio is located on the marble yard's property in a relatively industrial neighborhood. Ms. Turk's tin-roofed workspace is surrounded by forklifts, table-saws and flatbed trucks stocked with yet-to-be-carved stone. It's loud there—thanks in part to Ms. Turk's own power tools—but she gets some protection from the shooting earmuffs she wears when she carves.

Ms. Turk works out her ideas through drawing, collage and, more recently, digital tools. But the initial sketches are made right on the stones themselves, first in graphite then in more legible wax pencil. They act as blueprints, showing her where she needs to carve so that the designs are all that remains.

Her latest body of work is called "Cages," a self-imposed challenge that seeks to capture each castoff stone's shape by carving away at its core until its dimensions are expressed by a single, sinuous line. It's a kind of "constructing by deconstructing," she said, taking a break from installing her recent exhibition at New York's Hirschl & Adler Modern gallery, where several pieces are still on view. "The idea is to use a single line to define mass," as if the stone itself had vanished and these skinny bindings are all that remain.

When she's carving, Ms. Turk's focus is always on the stone itself—its weight, its flaws, its contours, the way it responds to her pokes, chisels and grinds. "It's really important to have a dialogue with the medium," she said. "We're so used to being able to force our will onto a material. It's interesting to come up against one that really pushes back, that has its own voice."

Ms. Turk draws her 2- to 3-inch-thick line so that it winds across all sides of the stone. Then, with the help of two assistants, she starts hacking away at the white space surrounding her sketch, using air-powered die grinders and drills. The idea is to first core out the stone, then carefully whittle down and polish the remaining lines, making them as thin as they can be while still structurally sound.

It's a slow process, and the decisions get harder as the line gets thinner. Ms.

> 'A lot of the process is asking myself, "Can I do this? Is this possible? Will this work?" '

Turk must work carefully as she carves to make sure the weight remains equally distributed among all pressure points by allowing subtle little bridges or connections between the lines' vectors to remain. When she's done, the overall mass is reduced to one-twentieth its original weight, if not less.

"A lot of the process is asking myself, 'Can I do this? Is this possible? Will this work?'" she said. The sculptures do still crack on occasion, in which case Ms. Turk has a friend make minor repairs with epoxy resins.

Ms. Turk studied art at the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and has worked in media ranging from video to bronze. When it comes to marble, she is largely self-taught. She took up the discipline in 1996, when she was invited to exhibit her work in a gallery alongside that of one of her idols, Louise Bourgeois. Ms. Bourgeois was showing a series of her bronze spiders. Ms. Turk, who also had been working primarily in bronze, knew she'd have to do something different to complement Ms. Bourgeois's work and to stand out.

"Stone is also such a macho world. I liked the idea of doing really beautiful work in it—something strong, but feminine," she said. The resulting piece was a detached angel's wing resting on the ground.

Transporting her sculptures is always a challenge, and Ms. Turk works with a custom crater to make sure everything always arrives in one piece. ("They're basically works of art too!" she said of the meticulously-crafted containers). But it's the journey to her Los Angeles workspace that always has her on edge. "I buckle them in to the back seat of my Miata and leave at 6 a.m., when there's no traffic," she said.

"It's always terrifying!" she added with a laugh. "But it's part of the journey, part of the drama of it."

MAKING MARBLE MOVE

BREAK THE RULES Instead of whittling around the stone's edges, Elizabeth Turk worked from the inside out, a process she used to create this unfinished work, left. 'I do everything wrong!' she said. 'But why not figure out how to push the material in a way that you couldn't before?' Inset, pencil outlines drawn by Ms. Turk indicating where she intends to carve; holes are a starting point.