



Fig. 5
Empty pedestal at Thorvaldsens Museum
before the installation of Jeannette Ehlers’
project, 2019.



Fig. 7
‘Double portrait’ of
Elisabeth von der Recke and Carrara.

Ancestors: Forever Connected in Time and Space

Jeannette Ehlers and Nikolaj Recke

Thorvaldsens Museum has invited us, as visual artists, to create new site-specific works of art for the exhibition *Face to Face: Thorvaldsen & Portraiture*, which springs from a years-long research and communication project run by the museum and the University of Copenhagen. The exhibition revolves around Bertel Thorvaldsen’s portrait busts with a focus on key themes, including ancestors and belonging.

The invitation proposed that we create a joint work of art based on the concept of ‘ancestors’. Since we are a couple, and even have children together, perhaps we would find it natural to arrive at a form and an approach for creating a common piece inspired by this theme. After talking it through, however, we realized that we could not do this, due to our widely different positions in the world – Nikolaj as a white man and Jeannette as a black woman – and our incompatible relationships with the notion of ‘ancestors’.

To Jeannette, a descendant of enslaved Afro-Caribbeans, the ancestral connection is a crucial and central factor, both in her personal life and in her artistic practice. This despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that she has no clear image of her ancestors, a privilege that was destroyed in Europe’s brutal colonization of the New World. Jeannette feels a strong sense of solidarity with her ancestors’ suffering, and in her art she examines and debates how these conditions relate to contemporary power structures and colonialism. She feels a strong bond to the African diaspora and its scatterings all over the world that are a result of the West’s colonial project.

Nikolaj, on the other hand, has an actual maternal ancestor represented at the museum

in the form of Thorvaldsen’s bust of Elisa(-beth) von der Recke. The bust, which was created on commission, represents an aristocratic woman who was a respected advocate of women’s rights, a writer and a cultural figure from Germany’s creative class.

In addition to this tangible family connection, Nikolaj also recently gained access to a comprehensive and still unpublished family history created by another, living family member, Leif von der Recke Bigler, who for decades has studied and charted the von der Recke family. Despite these family relations, manifested in marble, family trees, coats of arms and books, the notion of ‘ancestors’ carries no emotional resonance to Nikolaj. He rather feels a calling to explore the history of the marble – the marble that the bust of Elisabeth was carved in – in extension of the land-use-oriented studies he often incorporates into his practice.

These two distinctive vantage points say a great deal about privileges and our relationship with history, and this perspective shaped our approach to the task. We thus decided to create separate works, each associated with the themes that we explore in our respective practices, as well as a common event during the exhibition period, where we debate these themes and circumstances, as they are of huge importance for our understanding of our past, our presence and our future.

'Every mountain is a teacher'

(Proverb from the Paiute people)

Visual artist Nikolaj Recke

At Thorvaldsens Museum, there is a bust of Elisa(beth) von der Recke, my distant relative from the 19th century. What does it mean to have part of your family history in a museum?

Am I looking at a sculpture by Thorvaldsen, or am I looking at a family member brought to life through genealogy? What is certain is that I am looking at marble, a processed slice of nature. I search as much for what has been removed around her as I search for a family likeness. It is almost as interesting to me to explore the marble Elisabeth is represented in as it is to examine her achievements as a woman of the world or Thorvaldsen's significance as a sculptor.

Like many other artists, Thorvaldsen sourced his marble from the top quarries in the Apuan Alps, where the stone was white and soft. Today, the entire area around Carrara is cut through, carved up and hollowed out. Excavators have lopped off the mountain peaks to get at the 'white gold'. Human-made destruction was wreaked over the ages in the quest for 'statuario marble', which has been quarried since 283 CE. The material is unique, and it is not an inexhaustible resource. One day it will be used up, the mountains gone. What will be left are the traces in the landscape: deep scars, forever and irrevocably carved into nature. The industrially created gaps in the mountains are reminiscent of the American artist Michael Heizer's monumental land art piece *Double Negative* in Moapa Valley, and the cubically chequered, halved summits evoke sculptures from the 1980s, where organic meets systematic in a mercilessly logical grid.

My initial idea was to bring all the works from Thorvaldsens Museum back to Carrara and place them in the quarries they came



Fig. 6_Nikolaj_Elisa
'Double portrait' of artist Nikolaj Recke and his ancestor Elisabeth von der Recke.

Fig.8a / Fig.8b / Fig.8c / Fig.8d
Return: Family Reunion // Reintroducing (Chp-Carrara)
by Nikolaj Recke
Photographs
Dimensions variable
2019

from. In a lucky coincidence, I was given a lump of Carrara marble from the garden by Thorvaldsen's honorary residence at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Charlottenborg, and like orangutan babies from zoos all over the world that are released into nature in Borneo when they are ready, I took this lump with me in an effort to gradually rebuild the shattered Apuan Alps.

People in and near Carrara have had enough. Enough of the 'perennial snow', as they say of the white peaks that dominate their view. The planet probably is not going to go under because we hollow out a few mountains and lop off some mountain peaks, but it is a chilling image of our ruthless exploitation and our lack of understanding of balance.

Is a bust of Elisabeth also a portrait of humankind and culture as a destructive force that depletes nature? What do these hollowed-out mountains and unnatural forms tell us about ourselves – about our future? Somewhere, there has to be a geological conscience or responsibility if we begin to question whether art and bathrooms in Dubai and New York are so important that they justify wiping a mountain range and a scenic area off the face of the earth.

Can we remain stony-faced in relation to massive destruction in our quest for the perfect material, and do we see Thorvaldsen's portraits in a different light if we consider the geopolitical consequences?

After my visit to Carrara, when I look at Elisabeth I feel that our bond is closer, strengthened by respect: respect for the material she was carved from and for the locals who are missing their view.



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Fig. 9
Family Reunion // Looking for Relatives
by Nikolaj Recke
Photograph
Dimensions ??
2019

