

April is the Cruellest Month by Michael Rakowitz – war's waste

The Iraqi-American's Margate commission is a monument to the folly of the Iraq conflict — and of monuments themselves

Jackie Wullschläger APRIL 24 2021

“April is the cruellest month.” A century after TS Eliot immortalised a pavilion on Margate beach by writing *The Waste Land* there — “on Margate Sands I can connect nothing with nothing” — another American takes the poem’s opening lines as the title of his new public sculpture for this bleakly beautiful, socially troubled stretch of coast, and teases out many difficult global connections.

Unveiled next month as the inauguration of “[Waterfronts](#)”, a welcome outdoor sculpture show of new commissions along the south-east coast led by Margate’s Turner Contemporary museum, Michael Rakowitz’s “April is the Cruellest Month” is a life-size, strangely textured, uneasy figure cast in chalk from Margate, concrete, calcite, sand and earth from Basra, embedded with military medals. It is modelled on the artist’s friend, Daniel Taylor, a young soldier who served with the Royal Artillery in Basra during the 2003 invasion and is now a member of Veterans for Peace UK.

Like Eliot in 1921, Rakowitz in 2021 responds to the aftermath of war with a demotic, multi-layered, allusive work built, as the poem declares, from “stony rubbish” and “a heap of broken images”, set in a desolate seascape — “*oed’ und leer das Meer*” (desolate and empty, the sea).



Michael Rakowitz's proposal image for 'April is the Cruellest Month'

But Rakowitz's figure turns away from the water and looks inland, towards London, "to parliament and the foreign office, where in some sense these soldiers fell", soldiers sent to Iraq for a war "based on blatant lies — a crime against a collective humanity, a brutality visited on Iraqis but also on the soldiers — asked to be part of child sacrifice, a continuation of something that shouldn't be happening any more. Who is displaced by war? Not just civilians, refugees, but returning soldiers, having been asked to do unimaginable things."

Rakowitz, 47, a fiery and fluent speaker, warm, friendly and intently engaged, with a dark mop of lockdown curls that shake to every animated gesture, tells me this by Zoom from his Chicago home. Of Iraqi-Jewish heritage — his family left Baghdad in 1946 — he has just emerged from the Passover Seder, the symbolic meal commemorating the Exodus and diaspora. "My grandparents were the first installation artists I knew," he jokes, "casting the house with the smell of cumin like Rachel Whiteread cast 'House'." The heart of his work, as physical as it is conceptual, is "the projection of meaning on material — part of the alchemy and magic of making."



Michael Rakowitz's 'The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist' (2018) on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square © Michael Rakowitz

This was brilliantly achieved in "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist", for the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square in 2018: a sculpture of a winged bull constructed from date syrup cans, created in memory of the ancient Nineveh Lamassu statues destroyed by Isis. Visually and conceptually, this is the best fourth plinth installation, its anti-destruction message wrenching, clear, inclusive, although its hinterland story of what Rakowitz calls "the exertion and power of atrocity" is complex.

“April is the Cruellest Month” is similarly universal, accessible — “an antiwar memorial, to serve as a symbol of peace” — and emotionally nuanced: the figure of Taylor turning away from the sea implies resistance and grief, absence and presence, confrontation and consolation, the long effects of conflict.



Michael Rakowitz and his mother, Yvonne David Rakowitz

Rakowitz's art emerges from "entanglements" of personal and political narratives. "April for me is a tragic month, my grandfather died on the 11th, the Iraq Museum was looted from the 10th to the 12th, Basra fell in April." Family associations, also global, are set into a plaque in his new sculpture, reiterating the words of first world war poet-officer Siegfried Sassoon, who was Rakowitz's great-great-uncle: "I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, on which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest." Text and image interweave: Rakowitz depicts Taylor through collaged materials embodying trauma, including medals that Taylor and other veterans in a "very emotional moment" gave up, to be incorporated into the work — recalling Sassoon, who flung his medal ribbons into the River Mersey in disgust.



In-progress details of Michael Rakowitz's sculpture . . .





... 'April is the Cruellest Month', to be shown in Margate © Ben Ryan

But Rakowitz's project is also local, relating to histories and ambiguities in Margate's site. "Poets and rescuers looking out at the sea for inspiration and life", as well as "the fossil-bearing rock of the coast, which reminds me that stone is an archive", and, crucially, "urgency, of understanding what it means to be at the edge of a place, where hospitality and hostility mix", all inform the piece. In particular, "April" is alter ego and provocative companion to "Surfboat Memorial", Margate's 1899 bronze, facing the waves, of a lifeboatman in oilskins, which honours lives lost in a rescue mission. "I saw that figure looking out to sea and felt a betrayal of that sculpture", Rakowitz says. "We are no longer looking out to sea but turning people away."

Cruelty to Calais migrants, and questions raised this year of statue toppling, starting last spring with those of confederate leaders in Alabama and slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, underlie Rakowitz's "April". What do built memorials mean, how do they represent values, should they outlive association with discredited ideologies? Rakowitz calls his figure of Taylor the "81st soldier", referring to a group of 80 statues, commissioned under Saddam Hussein, modelled on officers killed in the Iran-Iraq war. Installed on Basra's seafront with their fingers pointing accusingly across the Shatt Al-Arab towards Iran where they died, they were removed by the local population in 2003.



In-progress detail of ...



... 'April is the Cruellest Month' © Ben Ryan