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Public art

Michael Rakowitz's anti-war memorial

The Iraqi-American artist connects the Kent coast to Basra in an inspired condemnation of war

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ABOVE THE beach at Margate, a chalky-white statue of a soldier catches the spring sunshine. A wreath of white poppies has been propped against his feet. Viewed up close, this man is not in good shape: his military fatigues are shot with holes and a

“April is the cruellest month”, a sculpture by Michael Rakowitz, is the first of seven works to be unveiled as part of “Waterfronts”, an outdoor exhibition that will be displayed along the south coast of England until November. The Iraqi-American artist’s work is flanked on one side by a figure of a man looking out to sea—a memorial to lifeguards who drowned attempting a rescue mission in 1897—and, on the other, by a shelter where T.S. Eliot wrote part of “The Waste Land” in 1921 while recovering from a nervous breakdown. That poem’s opening words form the sculpture’s title.

“On Margate Sands/I can connect/Nothing with nothing”, Eliot wrote. On a visit in 2019, Mr Rakowitz had the opposite impulse: “I felt I was connecting everything with everything,” he says. The lifeguard figure prompted thoughts of a memorial erected by Saddam Hussein in 1989: 80 bronze statues of Iraqi officers, who pointed across the Shatt al-Arab river to Iran, where they lost their lives. “I started to recognise the coast as a rough edge where hospitality and hostility meet. The corniche of Margate became a portal to the corniche in Basra, Iraq, my family’s homeland.”

Intriguing connections have long been a theme of Mr Rakowitz’s work. In 2012, at Documenta 13, an international quinquennial held in Kassel, Germany, he linked the Bamiyan Buddhas to Michelangelo, his family’s arrival in America and his desire as a student to “learn how to build ruins”— uncovering, as the curators noted, “unexpected networks of connections between fact and fantasy”.

Saddam's larger-than-life officer memorial was taken by local people as a warning to the Shia community, who duly removed the figures during the British occupation. In the artist's imaginings, some fell in the water and one embarks on a long undersea journey from Basra to Margate and is magically transformed. Now a life-sized British soldier, he points, not to the enemy across the sea, but inland towards Westminster where the decision to invade Iraq was made.

Mr Taylor, now a member of Veterans for Peace UK, donated his medals to be embedded like fossils in his likeness. Dedicated to Siegfried Sassoon, a poet (who turns out to be Mr Rakowitz's ancestor), the monument has "changed its position for a soldier who changed his", the artist says.

Mr Rakowitz is the latest recipient of the Nasher prize, an award presented to an artist judged to have changed the public's understanding of sculpture. As a teenager with a love of stone-carving, Mr Rakowitz was inspired by teachers to make open-ended pieces. "I became interested in work that wasn't just sculpture as 3D material, but something that continuously gets carved."

Much of his recent work relates to an ambitious project he says will outlive him. "The invisible enemy should not exist" (the name of a thoroughfare in ancient Babylon) began after the looting of 15,000 objects from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad in 2003, some 8,000 of which are still at large. The list has grown again since the artist extended his focus to Syria and later destruction in Iraq. "My studio and I are 'reappearing' the objects that remain at large," Mr Rakowitz explains. The objects range in scale from tiny to monumental: for a current exhibition at the Wellin Museum in Wisconsin the artist recreated part of the Northwest palace in Nimrud, destroyed by Islamic State (IS) in 2015.

There is a wonderful mix of darkness and light in Mr Rakowitz's work. Commissioned to fill the empty Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square in 2018, he

chefs including Yotam Ottolenghi and Giorgio Locatelli. The Nimrud palace restoration used the packaging of Middle Eastern food products exported to America.

He says this blend of dark and light evokes the mixture of *halu* (sweet) and *hamid* (sour) in Iraqi cooking—and he sees in it the influence of his grandparents who, caught between Arab nationalism and Zionism, left Iraq "with a lot of sadness". "In our suburban house on Long Island, they activated a culture that allowed us to be connected to a place I have still not been back to. The conditions of their departure from Iraq were atrocious, but their memories of the place were joyous." With a nod to Andy Warhol's soup cans, the date-syrup tins flaunt their bold graphics, though their contents remind viewers of the destruction of a once-thriving date-palm industry.

As a teenager in 1991, Mr Rakowitz had watched the bombing of Iraq during the first Gulf war on the news; he realised that the place his family had fled to was destroying the place they fled from. It made him want to do something more than preserve family stories. "I felt an urgency as a human being for my existence as an Arab Jew not to be an oxymoron. It is an identity that existed for millennia until colonialism in the 20th century made it possible for Palestine to disappear and with it the Arab Jew. My hope is that I can keep those attachments and belonging stories alive through the work that I make."

With his anti-war memorial in Margate, Mr Rakowitz adds his voice to the West's continuing debate about who and what should be remembered. "It is incredible timing to be putting in place a temporary memorial with people really asking why we keep certain monuments," says Tamsin Dillon, the curator of "Waterfronts". "People will be asking, is this a hero and if so, why?" As audiences respond, Mr Rakowitz will be hoping his work continues to "get carved".

"April is the cruellest month" is a "Waterfronts" commission with Turner Contemporary. The exhibition continues until November 12th (englandscreativecoast.com)