

THE PEACEABLE *KINGDOM*

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ



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Whether through food, baseball memorabilia, looted Iraqi artefacts or *Star Wars*, Michael Rakowitz reappropriates and probes to raise questions about ancient history, popular culture and personal identity. **Sarah Hassan** speaks to the Iraqi-American artist about the bittersweet paradox of displacement and belonging.

here is poetry in exile. The disruptive nature of wartime and revolution has launched a thousand narratives; to long for a homeland that once birthed then rejected you is a bittersweet paradox. What to make of this rejection, how to remember where you came from, and is it truly fair to think of ever going back, once you have claimed ground elsewhere? The internationally celebrated Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz was marked with this paradox from the beginning.

Born to Iraqi-Jewish parents in the United States and raised in Great Neck on Long Island, he grew up in the same house as his mother when her parents settled in America. Emigrating from Iraq via India in 1946, Rakowitz's grandfather relocated his family to Long Island from Manhattan when a Syrian man told him that the leafy suburbs of the North Shore "were a great place to live." Raised amidst anti-Semitism, Michael's mother learned that Arabic was the language of secrets and would eventually raise her son in the same environment, eating the cuisine of Iraqi Jews, while his grandmother told fantastical, rose-coloured stories of old Baghdad.

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The 1979 Iranian Revolution gave Michael a new influx of Iranian Jewish classmates and soon the very countries that were creating communities abroad would also become the targets of American bombs and fighter planes, emblazoned across the nightly news. Rakowitz was 16 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, citing that for his grandparents “the place that they had run to was about to bomb the place they had come from,” and from the first drop, Rakowitz’s ideas of body and identity became politicised. Secular memories of the minaret for his grandmother – “the tower that sang the time” – were now eclipsed by green-tinted CNN images of explosions and smoking cities. One night, during these violent news missives, Rakowitz’s mother turned to her children and declared: “There are

no Iraqi restaurants in New York.” It was clear his family’s heritage was invisible, a culture to be ignored and soon despised.

GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

It is this erasure and subsequent desire for reconciliation that drives Rakowitz – who now resides in Chicago and serves on the Faculty of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University – and gives his conceptual art a vibrant, chilling life-force. Having graduated from SUNY Purchase and later the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he began his foray into public art with *Para/Site* in 1998 – a series of inflatable shelters for the urban homeless which were attached to the exterior ventilation systems

Opening pages: *Zabiba, The King, The Dragon & Jonathan Earl Bowser Installation*. 2010. Pencil on vellum drawings, Saddam Hussein novels, wood shelves, giclee print. Variable dimensions.

Installation view (facing page) and detail (above) of *Dar Al Sulh*. 2013.



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of buildings in Boston, Baltimore and New York. This act soon characterised the artist as one concerned with the ‘unseen’ of society. In a way, the complicated nature of a city’s relationship to its homeless population – that of ignoring yet recognising a responsibility – is mirrored in the current relationship between the West and East; a tension and confusion nonetheless gaining strength in the midst of contemporary crises.

Focused on bringing together both the beautiful and the unsettling aspects of Iraqi culture and history, Rakowitz’s subsequent projects would be both reflective and participatory in nature. In 2006, as part of their ‘Who Cares’ initiative, Creative Time produced *Return*, Rakowitz’s storefront opening of Davisons & Co in Brooklyn – once a successful import/export business run by his grandfather until the 1960s. It was here that Iraq’s famous dates could be sampled and items could be shipped free to Iraq. Acting as both a memorial and mausoleum,

Return brought awareness to the absence of Iraqi items on store shelves and highlighted the problem with a transient population, constantly ‘shipped’ back and forth between nation states. The longing for a simple, perishable date became a symbol of family ties and political catastrophe.

EAT ME, DRINK ME

Food is a constant theme in Rakowitz’s work, a source of bringing people together not only as a community, but as conscious consumers. *Enemy Kitchen*, a series of cooking workshops he started in 2003 with his mother, taught traditional Baghdadi cuisine to middle school and high school students and eventually evolved into a food truck. Ten years after 9/11, Rakowitz enlisted chef Kevin Lasko to collaborate on a series of Iraqi dishes for Park Avenue Autumn served on plates looted from Saddam Hussein’s palace – an eBay find for the artist, nonetheless – arousing equal parts curiosity and disgust from



Facing page: *Bearded Male with Skirt Holding Vase*. 2007. Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue. 48 x 17 x 8 cm.

Above: Installation view of *Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. 2007–present. 46 artefacts, Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, four drawings one CD *Smoke on the Water*, one design template.

those deciding whether or not to sample a delicacy in light of an unsavoury material provenance. When speaking of his most recent and ambitious project, *Dar Al-Sulh* (translated from the Arabic as 'Domain of Conciliation') a pop-up restaurant in Dubai during May 2013, Rakowitz says he wanted to "expose a myth of Iraqi-Jewish cuisine and prove it really is Iraqi cuisine. Jews weren't always niched and ghettoised, and the population was part of something bigger; so many different families made these dishes and recognised them." Rakowitz collected flatware and serving dishes once belonging to the Jewish community in Iraq specifically for the restaurant, allowing his guests to reflect on the families who had to leave such objects behind while sampling the food cooked by the artist's hands. "The projects that I do are prototypes for how things can be," Michael says. "People want to come back to the experience."

The artist's relationship with objects, found, collected or otherwise, is as complex and personal as his one with food. He has created a body of work based in equal parts on ancient history and popular culture, recognising the significant role chosen materials can play in getting his message across. From his love of baseball cards and memorabilia to his education of Mesopotamian artefacts at the Metropolitan Museum by his mother, Rakowitz has used this fetishisation to his advantage. From reconstructing objects looted from the National Museum of Iraq out of Middle Eastern newspapers and cardboard in *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* to creating volumes of stone from the Bamiyan travertine with the help of Afghani and Italian carvers in *What Dust Will Rise?*, Rakowitz's media are carefully curated and thoughtfully handled with respect to their origins. A *Star Wars* obsession shared by the late Saddam Hussein with his militant son, Uday, practically handed the artist his installation *The Worst Condition Is To Pass Under A Sword Which Is Not One's Own*, when he came across what, on first inspection, appeared to be a Darth Vader costume helmet on eBay, but was instead that of a real Iraqi soldier. "It's not ballistic proof," Rakowitz laughs, "but here is this iconic movie that has taught American



youth culture how to render the lines of good and evil so thickly, and it's the perversion of that story because now the enemy is using it."

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

To better understand and explore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Rakowitz sought inspiration from one of his first loves, The Beatles, and focused on *The Breakup*, a series of radio broadcasts to the region, to re-examine the negotiations and subsequent failure of Pan-Arabism through the lens of the legendary band's rise and fall. When he talks about *The Breakup* and its surprising impact, Rakowitz explains that "people were listening while they were at checkpoints throughout the city, and they were Beatles fans! An unexpected portrait of their lives was shown in a different way. It's an immersive narrative that created a foreground where Palestine could emerge, which is hard to do in the West. I'm genuinely invested and passionate in these aspects of popular culture. It's an archive I've built for myself." It is precisely in moments like these,

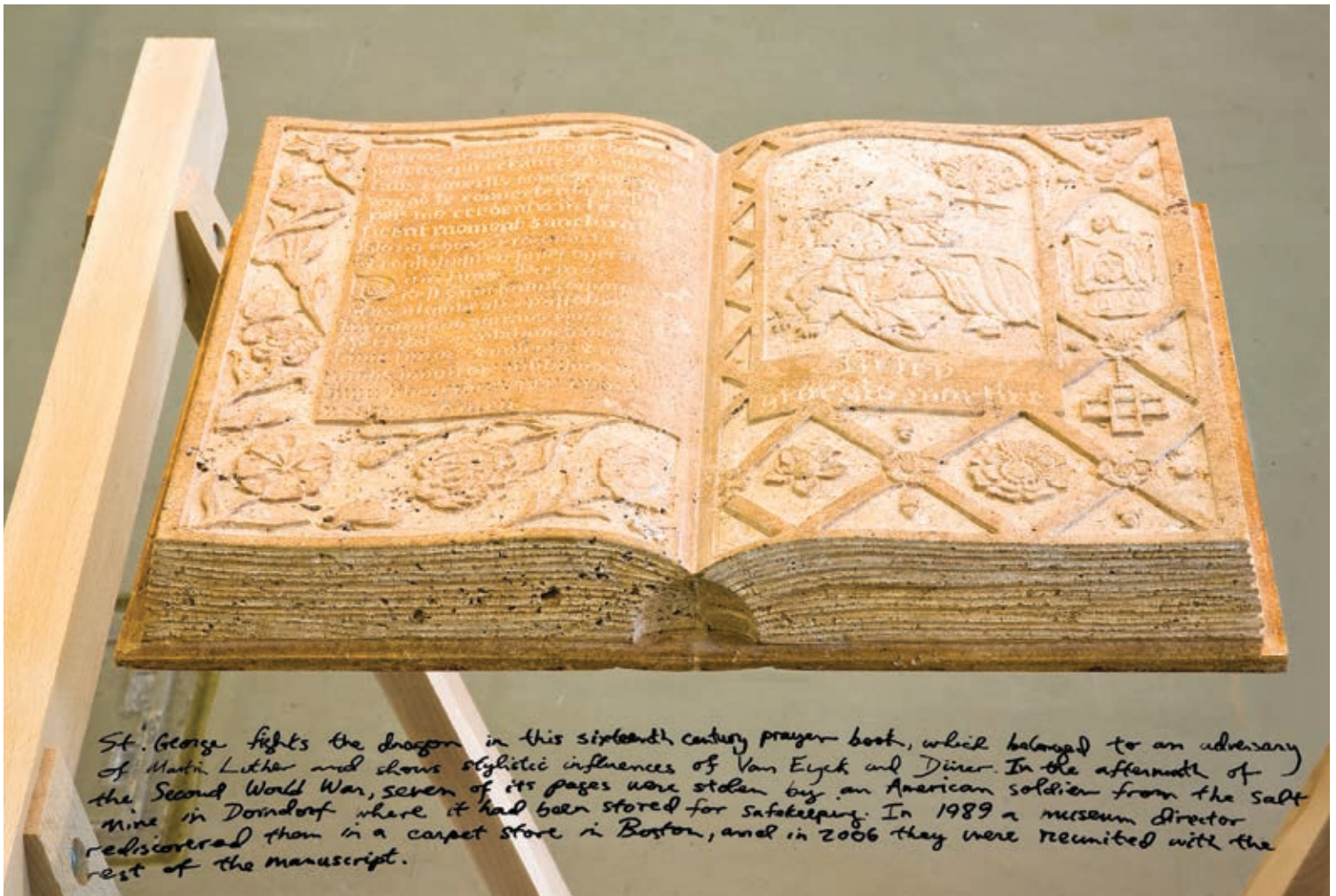
treading the line between the material and the ephemeral, that Rakowitz's art bears fruit. Acting as an eyewitness to history, fully conscious of his Western positioning, he becomes an advocate for art to bridge cultures and create connections, no matter what the medium or where the starting point.

This work ethic shows no sign of stopping. Engaged in providing a platform for the 'disenfranchised' and continually moved by his beloved pop culture, Rakowitz has a few more projects coming up. The first, which will be shown at the Istanbul Biennial, involves the artist working with a Turkish craftsman – who apprenticed under an Armenian – while examining the architectural embellishments that emerged in Istanbul after The Great Fire and sacking of Smyrna in 1922 as "exploring the trauma of disappearance" of a most powerful city. The second project focuses on the iconic singer Leonard Cohen (known for his Zionist beliefs) and the 1973 Yom Kippur War as an allegory of the crisis of Jewish ethics post-Holocaust in the midst of Cohen's 2009

Above: Detail of Michael Rakowitz in *Dar El Sulh*. 2013.

Facing page: *What Dust Will Rise?* 2012. Hand carved Bamiyan travertine. 35.6 x 48.3 x 7.6 cm.

All images courtesy Jane Lombard Gallery, New York



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cancellation of a concert in Ramallah as a result of his concert in Israel. Finally, thanks to a grant from The Pew Foundation for Culture & Heritage, Rakowitz will produce a 10-episode radio show with Bahjat Abdulwahed, the ‘Walter Cronkite of Iraq’ and who is a refugee in Philadelphia, entitled *A Desert Home Companion*. The broadcasts will include narratives and recollections from veterans of the Iraq War, fictional weather reports and music by Iraqi artists who now perform in America.

PARADISE LOST

When Rakowitz clarifies that he himself has never been to Iraq – a misconception he laments in many an article – he goes on to say, “I think there is something interesting about making work about a place where you can’t go – where do I belong? Despite the distance of the place, you still have the culture; the

Diaspora has its own hold and currency... I work with so many people who can’t go back.” Here, he is meditative for a moment, recalling Dr Donny George, the late director of Iraq’s National Museum, when showing *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. “He was giving tours of the ‘artefacts’ as if he was in Baghdad; this was the closest he was going to get. He died in 2011 going from New York to Toronto, in-between countries, and I thought, so much of Iraq is in-between countries. If I ever go, I’m going with someone; it isn’t going to be some misguided search for roots.” Misguided or not, Rakowitz’s search for what creates communities and how to rectify the way a region is viewed and what the future holds has produced deeply compelling and necessary works of art that span time zones and cultural gaps. Perhaps it is the in-between where art can, in a most complicated state of grace, finally bring us back home. 🇮🇶