

Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz: The history maker

REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR

The Jameel Arts Center in Dubai recently hosted an exhibition of work by Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz. It is the artist's first solo exhibition in the Middle East and Asia, although he previously took part in the Sharjah Biennial during 2007.

"Coming back to the Middle East makes me feel like I am engaging with the texture of the memories of my grandparents that I would hear about," Rakowitz told Arab News. "Being able to show in Dubai is meaningful to me. It's one of several cities where I have

been able to work with people who activate and mobilize some of these materials, stories and memories around Iraq not just as simple nostalgia but as something that is a proposition or a blueprint for a futurist kind of approach."

Rakowitz's thought-provoking work straddles the realms of contemporary art, politics and society. Art, for Rakowitz, serves as a means to foster public debate. He is best known for his conceptual art which challenges perceptions of social and historical topics.

He first came to prominence in the late Nineties thanks to with his ongoing series "par-



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ASITE" inflatable shelters for homeless people that attach to the exterior vents of a building's HVAC (heating, ventilation and air-conditioning) system, which heats and inflates the structure.

Rakowitz is the 2020 winner of the Nasher Prize for Sculpture. In a statement, Jeremy Strick, director of the Nasher Sculpture Center, said Rakowitz "wrestles in unique and revelatory ways with many of the complex questions of history, heritage and identity that are so much at the forefront of contemporary culture and politics."

Here, Rakowitz talks us through some of his most significant work.

'The Breakup'

This was commissioned for The Jerusalem Show in 2010 and considers the intricacies of The Beatles' 1969 breakup as an example of a collaborative cultural phenomenon that, over time, stops functioning and reaches a point where negotiation fails as a tactic and communication is halted. I hosted a 10-part radio program — broadcast across Palestine — dissecting the tapes of The Beatles' contentious final sessions that pinpointed the cause of their 1969 breakup; an allegory for breakdowns of political negotiations in Israel, Palestine and across a Middle East that once dreamed of Pan-Arabism.

The tapes revealed The Beatles planned concerts in the Middle East in 1969. Unable to agree, they instead performed atop their studios. "The Breakup" culminated with a recreation of this final rooftop concert in Jerusalem. Sabreen, a Palestinian band, reunited for the event, and interpreted the songs using Arabic instruments."



The Ballad of Special Ops Cody'

In 2005, an Iraqi insurgent group posted a photo of a captured US soldier named John Adam. They threatened to behead him in 72 hours if prisoners being held in US jails in Iraq were not freed. The US military took the claim seriously but couldn't locate a John Adam within their ranks. John Adam, it turned out, was actually Special Ops Cody, a souvenir action figure. The dolls were available for sale exclusively on US bases in Kuwait and Iraq, and were often sent home to soldiers' children as a surrogate for a deployed parent.

In this work, which takes the form of a stop-motion video, Cody confronts Mesopotamian votive statues in vitrines at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, speaking unspeakable truths voiced by a veteran of the Iraq War. While Cody offers the statues liberation, and urges them to leave their open vitrines and return home, the statues remain — petrified and afraid — unable to return in the current context."



The flesh is yours, the bones are ours'

In the 1870s, fires destroyed many of Istanbul's traditional wood-houses, inaugurating a new era of stone structures. The new buildings mixed the novel Western aesthetic of Art Nouveau with the characteristics of Turkish Ottoman architecture, and rose at a time when Istanbul's Armenian population was about to fall as a result of the Armenian Genocide. A member of this community, the artisan Garabet Cezayirliyan, was responsible for crafting the moldings and friezes installed on the façades of these edifices. Many remain visible today. As part of my project for the 14th Istanbul Biennial, I collaborated with Garabet Cezayirliyan's former apprentices, including Kemal Cimbiz, who owns and operates the atelier that continues to produce these decorative architectural elements. When giving Cimbiz over as an apprentice to his master, his parents told Cezayirliyan, "The flesh is yours, the bones are ours." A customary Turkish saying, the phrase is meant to convey that the teacher is granted influence over the learner.



'White man got no dreaming'

This work responds to indigenous life in Australia and creates new associations with the history of visionary architecture and its failures, and with the collapse of narratives of revolution. Produced with an Aboriginal neighborhood in Sydney called The Block, the project includes a contemporary version of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (1919-20). The Block's tower recycles discarded materials from old Aboriginal-owned houses — to be demolished as part of a controversial, racially motivated gentrification project — while drawings tell the neighborhood's story. The tower also doubles as a broadcast tower for Koori Aboriginal Radio.



'What Dust Will Rise?'

In 2012, I collaborated with Afghan sculptor Abbas Allah Dad — who survived threats from the Taliban for his realistic work — and restorer Bert Praxenthaler on a workshop with local students in a monastery cave close to the niche where one of the Bamiyan Buddhas stood. "What dust will rise?" recreates selections from the State Library of Hesse-Kassel in Germany that were destroyed in a fire in the Fridericianum Museum during bombing by the British Royal Air Force in 1941. The museum is where my project was sited. With the help of stone carvers from Afghanistan and Italy, I remade these lost volumes out of travertine quarried in the hills of Bamiyan, where two monumental sixth-century sandstone Buddhas were dynamited by the Taliban. The undertaking conjures up tombstones and recalls the tradition of stone books serving as surrogate reading material for the illiterate.



'The invisible enemy should not exist'

This ongoing project began in 2006 and was initially just responding to the looting of the National Museum of Iraq, reappearing these artifacts that were looted using materials that are vulnerable and urgent — like the packing of Middle Eastern food stuffs and the Arabic and English newspapers that one finds in cities where there are Arabic populations in the US — so they become these fragments of cultural visibility that are being enlisted to make these things that are now invisible. The project is unfortunately continuing because the looting and destruction keeps happening. It is a project that I would love to see become obsolete.

