

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART

## Artist Michael Rakowitz Reveals the Iraq War's Many Wounds

From war loot to Saddam Hussein's *Star Wars* obsession, an exhibition at MCA Chicago considers the costs of power and destruction.



Claire Voon | 2 days ago



Installation view of 'Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West' at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

CHICAGO — In 2006, the artist [Michael Rakowitz](#) took on a complicated, seemingly impossible task. He opened a store in Brooklyn to sell dates, with the chief goal of importing the sweet fruit directly from Iraq, and packaged in boxes that advertised their true origin. Some Iraqi companies had successfully circumvented the United Nations-imposed sanctions and smuggled date syrup out of their country, but the labels of their final products on the shelves of foreign stores were typically tweaked. Rakowitz's goods would be the first imports labeled "Product of Iraq" to enter the United States in over 25 years.



Works from "The invisible enemy should not exist" (2007-ongoing)

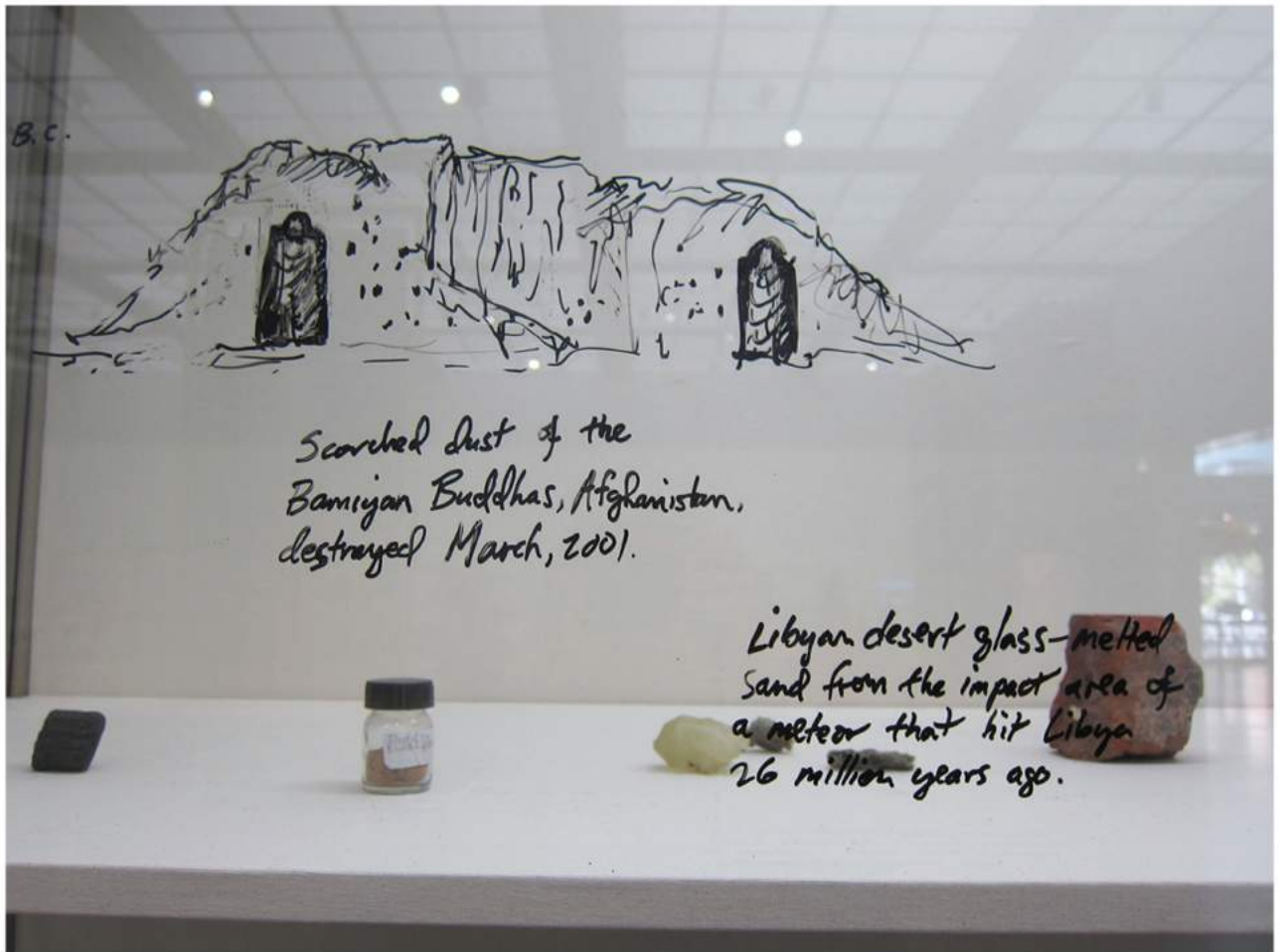
His enterprise, supported by [Creative Time](#), was not one in which a savvy merchant would have engaged. The dates, driven to borders by truck, ended up following a difficult route that encountered many bureaucratic hurdles, and Rakowitz eventually had to settle on airlifting a small shipment from Syria, via DHL. The arduous but ultimately triumphant journey ended up telling a larger narrative: the dates, arriving from a war-damaged industry, represented environmental victims that were literally caught up in the same traffic as refugees; they were, like humans forced to move their lives, trapped in unfeasible transactions.

Titled "Return," the project embodies a range of the ideas Rakowitz has contemplated throughout his career: the violent disruption or erasure of cultural identity caused by war, the complexities and obscurities of provenance, and the power of objects to stand as unassuming surrogates for large-scale human tragedies.

These are clear patterns one sees in [Backstroke of the West](#), Rakowitz's first museum survey currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Its title alone alludes to Rakowitz's interest in veiled or misunderstood meanings, standing as a [machine's mistranslation](#) of the film title, *Revenge of the Sith*.



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Michael Rakowitz, detail of "What Dust Will Rise?" (2017)

Yes, of the *Star Wars* trilogy. Such strange, surprising nuances are embedded throughout the exhibition and can easily be overlooked. Like “Return” — shown here in the form of a video chronicling the saga — Rakowitz’s work is incredibly involved, heavily researched, and centers on unexpected connections, and each of his installations is accompanied by a copious amount of explanatory wall text. Highlighting two decades of Rakowitz’s thought-provoking work, *Backstroke of the West* is a dense and challenging display, but it does important work of exposing the marginalized realities of war. Much of the exhibition refers to histories related to the US-led invasion of Iraq (Rakowitz is Iraqi-American) although dismal records of violence in other countries appear in the installation *What Dust Will Rise?*, which frames mundane material from disaster zones as valuable specimens.

Organized by curator Omar Kholeif, the exhibition includes Rakowitz’s ongoing series, *The invisible enemy should not exist*, for which the artist and his assistants are fabricating artifacts looted from the Iraqi National Museum in 2003. Each sculpture is made of found detritus such as newspaper and food packaging — material that speaks to an urgency to replace objects that are lost, invisible, even, having been stripped of provenance and placed on the black market. Yet, they assert that history cannot be completely remade. They stand as tragic effigies of treasures forever gone, similar to Rakowitz’s reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate that stands at the exhibition’s entrance, made of plywood and plaster. More accurately, his wooden gate is an imitation of the crude replica that stands in Babylon, commissioned by Saddam Hussein to replace the original — which, again, cannot truly be recreated.



Michael Rakowitz, detail of “May the Arrogant Not Prevail” (2010)

Pillaged artifacts can turn up not only on distinguished platforms like Sotheby's but also on [eBay](#), which is where Rakowitz found one of the strangest objects in the exhibition: an Iraqi paramilitary helmet modeled on Darth Vader's ominous headgear. Sold by an American soldier who had found it in Mosul, the helmet was one designed by Uday Hussein, who, it turns out, was a fan of *Star Wars*, as was his father. It's displayed alongside a Darth Vader helmet, near a sculpture that further conflates fantasy and fact in Hussein's military regime. Rakowitz created a version of the [Swords of Qādisiyyah](#) in Baghdad, known as the [Victory Arch](#), which is formed by two giant hands raising swords. On the eve of the first Gulf War, Saddam ordered soldiers to march beneath it to the *Star Wars* theme song. In Rakowitz's version, the hands instead wield lightsabers.

These objects not only suggest how weaponry communicates a particular class of power but also speak to the cross-pollination of cultural influences that can birth absurd narratives edging on myth. Rakowitz, who has a knack for seeking out unusual associations, is attracted to this kind of storytelling that appears to weave reality with fantasies. One notable series [wildly reimagines the breakup of the Beatles](#) as an echo of failed geopolitical negotiations.

Another work, "[The Ballad of Special Ops Cody](#)," (2017) is a dream-like, stop-motion video, featuring a sentient GI Joe action figure who speaks to Iraqi artifacts at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute. The doll — models of which were sold on US bases in Iraq and Kuwait for parents to send their children at home — has its own bizarre history as a deceiving surrogate: in 2005, it featured in a convincing [hostage photograph](#) believed to be shared by insurgents; the media circulated the photograph widely before its creator admitted that it was a hoax. In Rakowitz's video, Cody, voiced by veteran and artist Gin McGill-Prather, describes the traumas of war to lifeless votive figures and tells them he can free them from their glass prisons. While his speech is pitiful for its powerlessness, the anguish of the statues's shared experience of entrapment is moving.

Rakowitz expresses a similar earnestness in his practice to keep certain truths from disappearing from our collective memory. Gathered now for the first time in one room and arranged so their boundaries are murky, his works activate a space for us to question, contest, and discuss cultural histories. He asserts that the problems he presents, though seemingly distant, are not local and contained, but human ones.



Installation view of 'Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West' at MCA Chicago

*Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West continues at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (220 East Chicago Avenue, Chicago, IL) through March 4.*