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Fourth Plinth Artist Michael Rakowitz on Iraqi art, the British Museum and sculpting with syrup cans

Ben Luke

Michael Rakowitz is in London making the final preparations for the work that will occupy the Fourth Plinth from the end of March.

The sculpture, called The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, is a life-size reconstruction of a lamassu, the ancient Assyrian winged bull with a human head that was created around 700BC to stand at the entrance to the Nergal Gate in Nineveh, near Mosul in modern-day Iraq.

After surviving for nearly 3,000 years, however, the lamassu was, as Rakowitz puts it, "torn away from the wall and then reduced to pebbles" by Islamic State fighters in 2015. But his is no ordinary reconstruction: the sculpture will wear a colourful "armour", as Rakowitz describes it, created from 9,000 steel cans of date syrup made in modern-day Iraq. It promises to be visually spectacular. "In the end, the most important thing is that it be a powerful object," Rakowitz says.

Rakowitz, 44, has built an international art-world reputation over the past 15 years, fusing his autobiography as an American with an Iraqi-Jewish background with social and political observation and activism, as well as the odd absurdist link to pop culture.

He's probably best known here for his 2010 Tate Modern show, in which he drew head-spinning links between Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime and the Star Wars movies that obsessed him as a child. He's shown in a wealth of major museums and biennales, and currently has a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the city where he lives with his wife, an art critic, and their two children.

The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist will be unveiled on March 28 (Uyen Luu)

Aged 10, a family visit to London from the US was, he says, "a primal scene in my life and in my art-making". They visited the British Museum, where Rakowitz saw Assyrian lamassu, like the winged bull only with a lion's body, for the first time. "Suddenly I found myself immersed in this space that was unlike any I had seen before," Rakowitz recalls, "which was going past those lamassu and going into the throne room reconstruction from Nineveh and seeing the lion hunt of Ashurbanipal."

His mother told him that the lion hunt, captured on a series of fragmented alabaster panels, was “the first comic book” and that it was made “in the place where your grandmother, your grandfather and I are from”. As a child “reared on stories like Star Wars, who was really into comics”, he remembers that to see that “pop culture has been alive and well for millennia... and to know that this was its origin story, was really inspiring”.

From his earliest artistic ventures Rakowitz has mined his cultural history but he admits that the Iraq War of 2003 “upped the stakes” of his work. With his mother he created Enemy Kitchen in 2003, an attempt “to create platforms where Iraq could be experienced sensually, through cooking and through the difficult conversation people weren’t really having in those days”.

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Staging culinary workshops with children allowed him “to actually read the pulse of a country that was allowing its youth, and everybody else, to normalise what is a war culture”.

It is an ongoing work: most recently it has been part of his Chicago retrospective, amid an atmosphere of deep animosity towards Middle Eastern refugees and immigrants stoked by President Trump. “Every country seems to be suffering from the same disease of fear and of — once again — targeting the most vulnerable communities, who are fleeing for their lives. Immigrants, migrants, emigrés... these are the people who are being constantly placed in the crosshairs.”

The lamassu on the plinth is not a one-off but part of another long-term project, also called The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist. For this, Rakowitz is reconstructing the entire database of 7,000 works looted from the National Museum of Iraq in the aftermath of the US and UK's 2003 invasion. All of the reconstructions are made from Middle Eastern foodstuff packaging and local Arabic newspapers.

The project grew from Rakowitz's observation that the sack of the museum was the first event of the war about which there was a consensus. "It didn't matter if you were for the war or against the war, this was a catastrophe," he explains. "But that outrage about lost artefacts didn't turn into an outrage about lost lives."

He noted that many looted artefacts were votive statues. "One of the interpretations of those artefacts is that those were statues that the ancient Babylonians, the Mesopotamians, would bring with them to the temple of the god, and the idea was that you would leave the sanctuary at a certain point but you left that statue in your stead, as a surrogate for you, to continue praying. And when I saw the artefacts being looted, I said, 'Well, now we have another surrogate: a lost artefact for the lost bodies'. All those things loop back into the human and environmental catastrophe."

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Rakowitz was already thinking about reconstructing the lamassu after seeing the footage of it being destroyed by IS. He had discovered its measurements by referring to the sketches of Austen Henry Lanyard, the British archaeologist who discovered the lamassu and brought two others to the British Museum — the ones Rakowitz had seen as a child. He was invited by the Fourth Plinth organisers to submit a proposal and remarkably, the plinth was the same length as the lamassu — 14ft. "I was like, 'This is it!' What else would I do?"

Rakowitz has no interest in merely recreating the sculpture, like the strange 3D-printed recreation of the arch from the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra, also destroyed by IS, which appeared in Trafalgar Square in 2016. "You can 3D print an artefact but you can't 3D print the DNA of the people who get killed along with the artefacts," Rakowitz says. "Because in the end what happens with any of these instances of libricide, burning of books, destruction of artefacts is that books burn and people burn." Because of this, he argues "it needs to be reconstructed as a kind of mutant now. It can't come back to you the way it is in your dreams — it has to haunt you a little bit."

So why date syrup cans? Rakowitz first began working with them in a New York project in 2006, Return, in which he reprised his grandfather's import/export business but attempted to deal only in Iraqi goods. He had found the date syrup in a grocery store in Brooklyn but it was labelled "product of Lebanon". In fact, the syrup was made in Baghdad, put into large plastic vats, driven to Syria and canned there before moving over the border into Lebanon, where it was labelled and sold globally. That way, sanctions were circumvented and, post-2003, security tariffs avoided. But for Rakowitz the journey was another metaphor, of course: the dates travelled "the same exact path as Iraqi refugees".

Iraqi dates “were considered the best in the world; what the cigar is to Cuba”, he says. But their demise reflects the tragedy of Iraq’s recent history. Date palm trees disappeared, “from 30 million in the Seventies, when Iraq was the chief exporter of dates in the world, to 16 million at the end of the Iran-Iraq war [1980-88], to three million at the end of the 2003 invasion,” he says.

So the plinth sculpture reflects a huge sweep through Iraqi history. “It’s telling the story of a destroyed Iraqi artefact, and what it’s made from is telling the story of a destroyed land, destroyed nature, destroyed ecology,” he says. “And the destruction of a symbol that was so elemental to the Iraqi people. Dates are the harbinger of good things to come: you put a date into the mouth of a baby in some places in Iraq so its first taste of life is sweet. And when you have the erosion of that sweetness, it’s not a good omen.”

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This is the genius of Rakowitz’s sculpture: it is history, art history, social history and current affairs. Rich knowledge and impassioned polemic all bundled into a single, glorious yet poignant symbol looking over Trafalgar Square.

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