

The Ghost of Iraq's Lost Heritage Comes to Trafalgar Square as Michael Rakowitz Unveils His Fourth Plinth Sculpture

We spoke to the Iraqi-American artist about his version of the ancient Assyrian sculpture destroyed by Islamist extremists and what he thinks of the rehabilitation of George W. Bush.

Naomi Rea, March 27, 2018



Iraqi American artist Michael Rakowitz poses next to the maquette for "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist." Photo by Carl Court/Getty Images.

The lions in Trafalgar Square in London will get a strange and powerful companion that is part lion, part bull, and part eagle, when the Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz unveils his Fourth Plinth commission on Wednesday, March 28.

Rakowitz has recreated a full-scale version of the sculpture of a Lamassu, a protective deity which guarded the Nergal Gate at the entrance of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh for more than a millennium. The winged creature stood fast from 700BC until 2015, when it was destroyed by Daesh after the Islamist extremists gained control of the site near Mosul in northern Iraq.

Rakowitz's Lamassu will stand on the plinth for two years until March 2020, the 12th work in a series of temporary commissions that began in 1998 and have included work by Rachel Whiteread, Elmgreen & Dragset, Yinka Shonibare and Mark Wallinger.

His contemporary take on the human-headed deity with wings is part of a project the artist started in 2006, called "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist." The series sees him reconstruct Iraqi artifacts that have been listed as missing, stolen, destroyed, or having unknown status since the US-led coalition toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003. "It's a commitment," Rakowitz told artnet News, "and it's one that will outlive me and my studio, unfortunately, because there are over 8,000 artifacts that are still missing from the Iraq Museum alone."



Fabrication. Photo: ©Gautier DeBlonde.

Full Metal Jacket

Rakowitz has clad his sculpture with empty cans of date syrup, referencing Iraq's now-decimated date industry, once the country's second strongest economic driver after oil. War in Iraq has wiped out the country's date palms, which numbered close to 30 million in the 1970s. By the end of the Iraq War in 2003, less than 3 million remained standing. A cookbook of date syrup recipes, aimed at bringing Iraqi ingredients back to the UK, will be published to accompany the Fourth Plinth project, which is funded by the Mayor of London and Arts Council England.

Rakowitz's Lamassu is accurate in scale and detail, right down to the long hidden cuneiform that was never photographed before the original was destroyed. When Rakowitz heard that Ali Yasin Jubouri, a researcher at the University of Mosul, had a more authoritative depiction of the inscription than what the artist was working from, he adjusted his sculpture accordingly for the now exposed part. "Its visibility is the kind of thing that lets you know that something very wrong and very violent has been visited on this thing," Rakowitz said.

The sculpture is meant to be a symbol of resilience despite Iraq's plight after over decades of conflict, but it is also a reminder of the loss of culture and of human life. "It's meant to do two things; to be a ghost that's supposed to haunt, but also a spectral presence that's supposed to offer some kind of light," he said.

The work is a testament of art's power to combat compassion fatigue. Rakowitz draws a parallel between his sculpture and the millions of refugees currently fleeing from Iraq and Syria. It was only when the Iraq Museum was being looted that he started to see any "pathos" coming from abroad, he recalled. "Whether you were for or against the war, there was an agreement that this was a catastrophe. And it wasn't just a localized one, this was a human catastrophe," he said. At first he was angry that this universal outrage did not translate into outrage about the lost lives in Iraq. "But then I understood that for many people these were the surrogates for those Iraqis, for those lives that had been lost."

Dubya the "War Criminal"

Talk about the war in Iraq inevitably leads to the then US President, George W. Bush, whose image has improved since Trump has come to power in the US. The artist is unimpressed. "I think it's reprehensible. This is a war criminal, in the truest sense," Rakowitz said, adding that something could be learned from the way the UK discredited former Prime Minister Tony Blair for his support of the war. "I won't look at [Bush's] paintings, I won't acknowledge the memes that are all so cuddly about his relationship with Michelle Obama and all this other shit that is part of a fucked up celebrity culture. There shouldn't be this rehabilitation of his image, there should be a rehabilitation of Iraq."

When it comes to the current president, Rakowitz sees Trump as "a symptom of the deterioration of empathy and any kind of vision for how things can be, and being driven by a kind of hyper-capitalism and neo-liberalism that has totally wrecked the planet and all life on it."



Michael Rakowitz, "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist." Photo: ©James O Jenkins.

The artist revised his opinions about Iraqi cultural heritage held in the British Museum after hearing from the late Iraqi archaeologist Donny George, a former director of the Iraq National Museum, who was instrumental in recovering about half of the antiquities looted in 2003. George had to flee Iraq in 2006. After the looting, critics began to see the artifacts held in the British Museum and other institutions in Europe and the US as refugees like them, unable to return to an unsafe homeland. "This is not to excuse or to be an apologist for any of those questionable circumstances under which things were attained," Rakowitz said, "but it shows the way that meaning shifts and the way that we as people end up in different places as well."

Rakowitz's Lamassu combines a vision of hope for the future, whilst never forgetting the tragic events of the past decade and a half. On the Fourth Plinth his sculpture will look towards the southeast, towards Nineveh, hoping to one day return, something that might resonate with London's Iraqi population. "I see it as something that will become a citizen of London, it will become an actor in a public space for the next two years, and hopefully complete its journey going back to Iraq afterwards."