

Plinth

'Dig a hole in Iraq, and either oil or history comes out.'

23.03.2018



The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, photo credit James O Jenkins

Michael Rakowitz's new work, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* will be unveiled on the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square, 28 March. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* is a project that Rakowitz embarked upon in 2006, attempting to recreate over 7,000 objects looted from the Iraq Museum in 2003 or destroyed at archaeological sites across the country in the aftermath of the Iraq war. For this new commission, Rakowitz has recreated the Lamassu: a winged bull and protective deity that stood at the entrance to Nergal Gate of Nineveh [now Mosul] from c. 700 B.C, until it was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. To celebrate the commission, Plinth will hold [a pop-up cultural hub and event space in Trafalgar Square](#), open to the public from 9:30am-5pm on March 28th.

The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist is accompanied by the launch of a new range of products developed by Plinth and the artist, available from March 28th at plinth.uk.com, and at the pop-up space. The range has taken its inspiration from Rakowitz's interest in themes of food and hospitality as a means by which to bridge

cultural and political divides. It includes wooden spoons, aprons and tote bags, all featuring the Arabic proverb: A House With A Date Palm Will Never Starve.

The range will also feature a new limited edition from the artist, released alongside the statue's unveiling and the launch of its satellite products. Each piece will consist of a date syrup tin, sourced from Karbala in Iraq and accompanied by a signed artist's book of recipes from chefs including Claudia Roden, Honey & Co. and Michael's mother, Yvonne Rakowitz. The recipes all incorporate date syrup, whether peripherally or centrally; The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist is itself made of date syrup cans, alluding to the economy for a foodstuff destabilised by the war that saw the original Lamassu destroyed.

Plinth spoke to Michael about how this project came to be, the implications of art and culture for international relations – and the power of siting an Iraqi Lamassu in the centre of London.

Emily Watkins

How did you begin the project, The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, which has led you to this Fourth Plinth commission?

Michael Rakowitz

The seeds for the project were planted in 2003, when I was watching as the war unfolded between the US and Iraq. When the Iraq Museum was looted that same year, it seemed like the first unifying moment of pathos had opened up. It didn't matter if you were for the war or against the war – it was clear that this was a catastrophe. This wasn't simply a local, Iraqi loss, it was a loss for all of humanity; the first examples of writing, of urban planning... Just totally irreplaceable. I was interested in why, psychologically, the outrage about lost artefacts hadn't turned into outrage about lost lives. It's a kind of displacement of mourning, but there is also a very serious kind of implication of the West's voracious appetite for antiquity and cultural objects, but not for the people that are shepherding them or to whom they belong. I thought about what it would mean for these objects that were now lost to suddenly come back as apparitions, as ghosts. With a team of assistants over the past 10 or 11 years, I've been re-constructing the artefacts, life-size, with information from databases at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute and Interpol. We more or less make anything which has its status listed as missing, stolen, destroyed or 'unknown'. Working on The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist has shown me the breadth of how much human cultural patrimony has been wiped off the face of the earth in the wake of this war. 8,000 objects are still missing, about half of what was initially looted (about 15,000) and we've made around 700 of those so far. It's a project which is going to outlive me and my studio, which is kind of the point. I mean, think over how many years the original objects were made – we're talking millennia! I have a lot of projects ongoing and I'm of the mind that, well, that's because the problems they're grappling with still exist. The decision to continue this project with something like the Lamassu picks up on the fact that the Iraq war may have ended for the United States but it never ended for the Iraqi people. It got worse.



A House With A Date Palm Will Never Starve, edition of 2,376, Michael Rakowitz, 2018.

EW

You touched briefly on this horrible thing that the West is very good at, i.e., appropriating and stealing objects and popping them into museums, looking at them totally outside the context of the people who made them or acknowledging what they were made to do. It's a tension between art and artefact – and then, what you're doing adds another layer. As a contemporary artist, you inhabit one of those spheres, but working with artefacts which were in a museum and literally drawing them into a gallery does blur the lines.

MR

Well, one of the reasons I decided to do the project in the first place was that I'm not an artist who started out showing in galleries – my practice was always more about the spaces where we meet, public spaces outside the remit of galleries or museums. When I show in a gallery now, my exhibiting is, in some way, supposed to create a relationship between me and a contemporary art market. It was the existence of an antiquities market that allowed the Iraq Museum to be looted in the first place... Some people took objects to sell, and that was their ticket out of the country: a liquidation of the past in order to preserve the present and the future. It's a very interesting set of things, and it doesn't allow anybody to settle on a kind of ethical or moral high-ground as far as why this occurred. We can say it occurred because of an unethical war, but it also occurred because of the way in which the West sees this place [Iraq] – as a place of resource extraction. Dig a hole in Iraq and either oil comes out or history comes out. I wanted to learn more about that, and the project allowed me to understand the way

that we look at each other, and what 'care' means. Is it care for people, care for a culture, or just care for an object? I started to think about how that could be echoed and reverberated in projects with these effigies. These disappeared objects are suddenly rematerialized and staring back at a complicit [Western] audience.

EW

If you're thinking about setting, and the palimpsest of culture and history, then Trafalgar Square is a really interesting place to put something from this series. You're working with found objects and lost objects at the same time, and the Fourth Plinth could almost be termed a 'found space'...

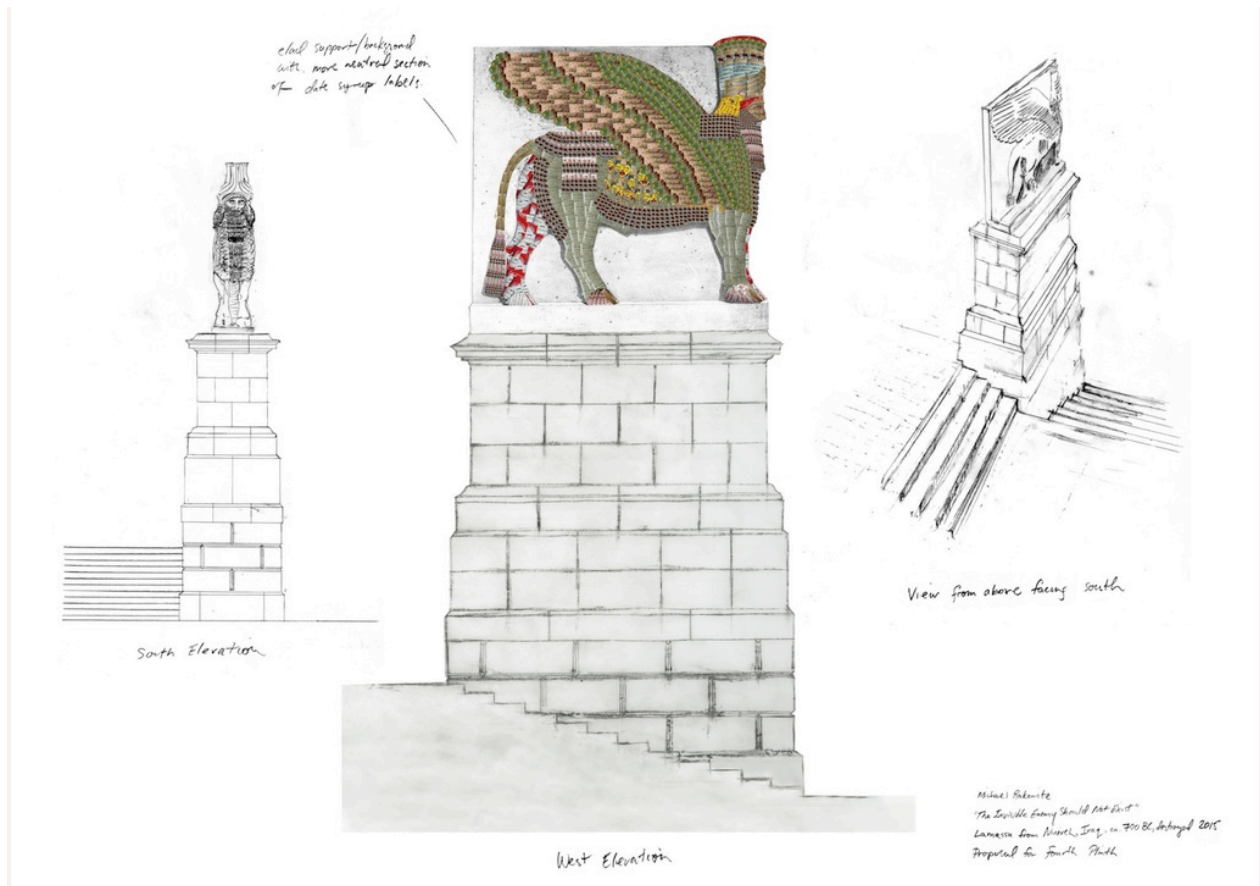
MR

Well, the interesting thing about this is that the piece was not designed for the Fourth Plinth, but it seems that the Fourth Plinth was designed for it. In 2015 I got invited to submit a proposal; I was very excited, and honoured, because I was familiar with other pieces that had been done on the plinth, the importance of that space and of Trafalgar Square.

Things like Nelson's Column [in Trafalgar Square] represent a glorified history. But dig a little deeper and you come to understand that the material culture is more sinister; canons, for instance, were melted down to make the lions [which sit around the base of Nelson's Column] ... When I was invited to do the Fourth Plinth, I said, well, I'm already thinking about and using the compost of history in the making of my work. I'm already doing that. Then, the blueprints they sent me said that the Fourth Plinth was almost exactly 14 feet in length, and I was simultaneously in the studio working on blueprints to make this Lamassu which had been blown up that same year. It was exactly the right size. If all that wasn't enough, the Fourth Plinth itself was made in the early 1840s for a statue of King William, which the city couldn't pay for in the end – so you have this disappeared sculpture, much like the original Lamassu which Austen Henry Layard uncovered only 8 years later. I was like, this is too perfect...!

Aside from all the crazy coincidences, the idea was that the Lamassu could do several things at once in that space. It could talk about the cultural destruction of Iraq, the human catastrophe, but also look at the less anthropocentric and more environmental disaster which was the destruction of the date palm industry because of the sanctions [the sculpture is made of Iraqi date syrup tins]. At its height, in the 70s, Iraq had 30 million date palms. After the Iran-Iraq war they had about 16 million and at the end of the US-led invasion in 2003 only 3 million remained. Being able to have all of those things intersecting through a material choice, which was also pragmatic, was perfect. It was satisfying to have so much of the project and what it was representing wrapped up in one piece.

The last thing to say about its siting is that the Lamassu's back is to a museum; it's facing away from the National Gallery, and I like to imagine it leaving the museums to go home. It is looking South East, towards Nineveh, hoping to return. Some very exciting possibilities are now being discussed with people who want to tour the piece to a couple of places after the two-year run here. I hope it will go back to Nineveh one day, and that the government of Iraq will want it back. That's the idea.



Plans for The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, copyright Michael Rakowitz

EW

I'm thinking about the impossibility of ever making something again. Throughout the project you seem to be making really sincere gestures to recreate something, whilst at the same time acknowledging and asking the objects themselves to embody the impossibility of that proposal.

MR

Yes. I insist on these objects coming back as a kind of mutant, as a ghost. And what does a ghost do? It can haunt you, and it can also calm you. It can make you remember.

EW

Speaking of memory, let's talk about food. It's a huge conversation to embark on, but it does seem to crop up again and again in your projects. What was food like for you, growing up?

MR

Well, the kitchen was the hearth of the house in Great Neck when I was a child. It was the place where my grandmother would be when she was well enough. I remember

sitting at the counter and drawing. My mother and grandmother would be in constant conversation, some in English but mostly in Arabic, and they'd cook together. It felt normal, it felt like home but it felt really special too. The spices, the baharat, that Iraqi spice mix – those are the tastes that are part of my DNA. It's the smell of the all-spice that really brings me into that space, like Proustian time travel. It was such an engaging environment, and it felt safe. Even disagreements felt safe – like, you're in the kitchen, a space of hospitality. That experience was dispersed into the carpets on the floor in the living room and the dining room which my grandparents had managed to get out of Iraq. So the kitchen was this furnace from which all this cultural experience sprung, and I associated it with just living life. I wasn't particularly aware of it defining me as Iraqi – I thought of the food my mother cooked as festival food, for Passover or Rosh Hashanah and things like that, because we were Jewish. But it was Iraqi food! - you realise Iraqi Jewish food is just Iraqi food. And then you start to understand the extent to which separation was made evident as a way of justifying nationalist ideologies. The way the state of Israel set itself up, or Arab nationalism – these things create so many problems when they're trying to synthesise everybody into one people, you lose your nuance. In reality, most of it is a melange. I've often used those experiences in the kitchen, not in nostalgia but in pointing to a blueprint for the future; for how things could be.



Mom Making Date Syrup, by Michael Rakowitz, 2018

MR

There's a story I tell all the time. In 1991, the US was going to war with Iraq [the Gulf War]. I remember watching TV on the first night of the conflict and all of a sudden the stories I'd heard from my grandparents were being illustrated in real time, green tinted with CNN night vision footage. I was watching bombs falling on Iraqi buildings I would never see. My mother realised how vulgar that was and turned to my brothers and I and said, 'Do you know there are no Iraqi restaurants in New York?' It came out of nowhere, as mysterious as the Lamassu. It was like a riddle that just went into me, and

I didn't ask her what she meant by it. Years later, I realised: Iraqi culture was not visible in the US beyond oil and war. It was a real dehumanisation of a people, and of a place. It was an extension of racism, and everything else. That marinated inside me for 12 years, and then – as the drums were beating towards war, and it seemed that Iraq would be in the cross hairs again – I decided that I would step in front of the television to block that image this time and work with my mother to ask her to teach me, so I could teach other people, her recipes.

You can find recipes from Michael's mother, Yvonne Rakowitz (alongside dishes from Claudia Roden, Honey & Co. and more) in the booklet accompanying Michael's new limited edition for Plinth.



Rakowitz with date syrup from Karbala, photo credit Caroline Irby