

BROOKLYN RAIL

Relishing Spoils: MICHAEL RAKOWITZ with David Sprecher

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Michael Rakowitz, *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*, 2010. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Marshall Field's by exchange. Image courtesy of the artist.

Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West is currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, through March 4th. The show is organized by Omar Kholeif, Manilow Senior Curator and Director of Global Initiatives at the MCA, and is the first major museum retrospective for Rakowitz. Projects from the late nineties to the present coexist in a large, open gallery, allowing them to overlap and refresh each other in ways that would be lost in a more walled-off, linear exhibition. Adjacent to

the main gallery is a screening room showing *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody* (2017), a stop-action animated short commissioned for the exhibition, that stars an action figure involved in a fake hostage situation during the US occupation of Iraq. Additionally, the project *Enemy Kitchen* (2012 – ongoing), a food truck collaboratively run by veterans of the Iraq War and local Iraqis, has been serving Iraqi cuisine from the museum’s plaza. Chicago-based artist and writer David Sprecher spoke to Rakowitz at his home in Chicago.

David Sprecher (Rail): Why do people enter this show through the back of *May the Arrogant Not Prevail* (2010), your reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate?



Michael Rakowitz, *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*, 2010. Found Arabic packaging and newspapers, glue, cardboard, and wood; 35 1/4 × 194 1/4 × 37 1/2 in. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Marshall Field’s by exchange, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

Michael Rakowitz: Well I was more or less picking up on the way it was originally displayed when I did *May the Arrogant Not Prevail* in Berlin in 2010. It was site specific and organized as a polemic against the Pergamon Museum for an exhibition called *On Rage* curated by Valerie Smith at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt.¹ There was this incredible opportunity because Stefan Weber, the curator at the Pergamon Museum, said, “Oh it would be fantastic to have *the invisible enemy should not exist* (2007 – ongoing) under the Ishtar Gate.”

So I was already reconstructing the artifacts² at that point, and when I saw the gate, and when I saw that main avenue through which those statues were carried during the Babylonian new

year, I was like, “That’s the perfect site for them because the title is the name of that processional way, *Aj-ibur-shapu*.”³ I was excited to situate it back at the Pergamon, the site where I first became lucid to how rarely we question how the objects in these imperial museums get there, which is often a loaded question. So the ability of the museum to be critical in that way was something that I thought

was really interesting, just in terms of accountability. I was interested in working with the particular curator who invited me because he was aware that this was a way of setting up another form of institutional critique. He said that as a curator, he couldn't editorialize but that artists can, and it's what we need.

When the director of the museum found out about the plans to show it two months before it was supposed to happen she wrote a very angry email saying that there was no way in hell that this project about looting was going to be shown in the context of the Ishtar Gate. I decided, "Screw it, I'm gonna make a reconstruction of the reconstruction to show the urgent materials that the Iraqis needed to use to replace this thing that was taken from Iraq initially by German archaeologists." And the interesting thing about the Haus der Kulturen der Welt is that it's not that far from the Pergamon. You can see all the museums together when you step back and look at the islands the museums are on, and it was more or less standing there like a ghost, standing next to the original to show how it had to be scaled down and how the material transformation took away so much of the detail and the hand work. There was a reanimation of that hand work through careful reconstruction using the detritus that had been so much of a common thread through *the invisible enemy should not exist*. I was looking at Berlin and its Arab community and seeing Pepsi boxes and Lipton tea and all these Western modernist products made for the Arab market.

I wanted people at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt to enter through the ass of the gate where you see the plaster and plywood and two-by-fours that are used to make this thing that is basically just theater. I wanted to create a placeholder for something that's gone missing, which is the larger trajectory of that project. I'm never recreating the actual thing. It's always just a specter or a ghost of the thing.

Rail: It seems like that impulse, even beyond *the invisible enemy should not exist*, is broadly present in your work and in this show. In addition to the exposed back of the Ishtar Gate, the Pruitt-Igoe inflatable and the plywood ramp around it, the use of saw horses and raw lumber and the presence of potted plants make the exhibition space feel like a film set. You seem interested in exhibiting facades and exposing them as such. Would you agree with that?

Rakowitz: Yeah, I definitely agree with that, and I think that impulse goes back to these important moments when I was being taught at MIT by artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko who was the author of *The Homeless Vehicle Project*, a total inspiration for *Parasite* (1998 – ongoing). He would speak about monuments and architecture so intelligently—the way in which it really is about facade. The buildings themselves are surrogates for the state or surrogates for these things that become proxy states like corporations. When he was projecting on those buildings, he was using the facade as a background for something critical to happen. In his manifesto about projections, one thing I found really beautiful is that the projectors need to be turned off before too long, otherwise the projections risk becoming decoration and becoming part of the facade. And that spoke to me not just about what

happens to the projections themselves when they're up for too long but what happens when art becomes appropriated—what happens when those things are allowed. We've seen it happen when corporations hire graffiti artists so it looks like these things that are done without permission are actually valorizing the corporation.

So that's one of those things that echoed with me early on in the late '90s when I was studying, and it became very important for me to always look at these events that were unfolding in front of me with a lot of skepticism. And being willing to deep dive into—you know, "Why is this happening now? Why is that statue in Ferdo Square in Baghdad coming down now?"—in that moment during the American invasion. It was hardly a spontaneous action. Now it's clear, it's an accepted fact that it was a highly choreographed moment that was supposed to connect what was happening in Iraq to the liberation of Eastern Europe. All of that plays out, and all I'm left with is this hollow feeling.



Installation view, Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West, MCA Chicago September 16, 2017–March 4, 2018
The invisible enemy should not exist, (2007–ongoing) Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

And then of course the way that the West looks at these artifacts—there's an emptying out in some way where there's this concern and outrage for these stolen artifacts or these destroyed artifacts, but then at the center, it never translates into outrage for the lives that have been looted. You know? Where was that moment of pathos? That was one of things that always kind of confused me but interested me because those votive statues are the things that were most prevalent in the Iraq

Museum, and a votive is a surrogate for a person. And that to me was one of the things that was very important to stress—that tension between the object and the people who are dying alongside the objects.

Rail: Yes, and that really comes across potently in *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*. Through the animation and subjectivity of the action figure and through cinematography, you bring the figurines at the Oriental Museum into this liminal state—they flicker between feeling alive and lifeless. It got me thinking about your interest in the joint root *hostis* of the words “hostile” and “hospitality” and whether that inflects your thinking about the relationship between museums and the objects they house.

Rakowitz: Yes! The reason why I’m so interested in this relationship is that there’s no easy answer. Museums were where I first encountered art history, but they also allowed my grandparents and my mother to become the docents for Iraq’s history. And that would not otherwise be available to me. It was available on the walls of our house and with the objects they were able to get out of Iraq when they left. And it was a real—you know a very considered approach. My parents chose to raise me with my mother’s experience of Iraqi culture seamlessly entangled with Jewish culture. I didn’t differentiate between them. I heard Arabic spoken at home as a child and Hebrew when I went to Hebrew school. And these things felt like acts of preservation and transmission. Like when my mother taught me the recipes for projects like *Enemy Kitchen*. It’s like learning Arabic, but I come to it more naturally. Cooking is a lot like sculpting. So I never learned the Iraqi Arabic, but I’ve learned these recipes, which are not only disappearing in relation to Iraqi-Jewish culture but also the larger Iraqi culture of cooking. Anything that’s time consuming is disappearing because of the way things have sped up.



Michael Rakowitz, *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, 2017. Stop motion animated film (projected) Approx 20 min. Courtesy MCA Chicago.

My mother showed me the *Assyrian Lion Hunt*, at the British Museum when I was ten and it was right after my grandmother died, so there was a lot of urgency that my mother must have felt at the time. We went to London, and the first person we saw was my uncle Niazi who was my grandmother's brother. It was a way of reconnecting with a living elder who had spent most of his life in Iraq. And that was a really pivotal time for our family, but a lot of it felt like museology. Like, "This is what's being preserved. This is the photograph we took in Baghdad. Don't put your tea next to it!" And when I started to become more involved in these museological projects, I started to look at that sort of thing I was talking about with the Pergamon. Where it's sort of this Western eye looking East, wanting to preserve these objects, but there's an indifference, to put it lightly, about the people.

One of the more nuanced things I've ever read about the way culture is preserved or destroyed was from a story about Mullah Omar, the former leader of the Taliban. He vetoed the Taliban's desire to destroy the Bamiyan Buddhas three times before it was actually done. And he explained, "This is part of our history, we can't erase all of our history." The Swedes came to the Afghans in late 2000 or early 2001 and had wanted to give the government 30 million dollars to restore one of the Buddhas that had been damaged by the rains. There was a particularly difficult moment in terms of food access, so the Taliban responded to the Swedes and said they could really use the money because there were women and children who were going hungry. The Swedes said, "No the money is for the Bamiyan Buddhas." The story is that Mullah Omar got so infuriated by this, that people would be so callous that they would care for inanimate objects before animate ones, that he decided to destroy the object of their desire. So it's a really interesting execution. And it's purposeful.

But I'm obviously not offering justification for it because when books burn so do people. And when the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed they also massacred the Hazara people that live there. So it's absolutely a tragic act, and the circumstances around it are awful, but it throws up this question. Which is the one I'm exploring constantly—trying to understand whether iconoclasm is still a meaningful gesture, one of speaking back to power or merely a meaningful gesture of conquest, which is what was going on when the US was knocking down the symbols of Saddam's regime.

Rail: Yes, and in the film *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, there's this beautiful moment when the narrator, Sergeant Gin McGill-Prather, who fought in Iraq, is talking about volunteering to touch dead bodies that no one was willing to touch, and she's speaking over footage of the vitrine at the Oriental Museum as it is being lifted. Without resolving into any explicit metaphor it raised the question for me: How completely can objects be surrogates for human lives when we don't touch them?

Rakowitz: Wow, that's a beautiful question. I mean I love that question as a read of that moment because that is one of the things, when I was looking at pictures of vitrines at the beginning of the *invisible enemy* project it was like—the pictures of smashed vitrines and empty vitrines—they were so profound and they told the whole story.

The extension of *Enemy Kitchen* that I love is *Dar Al Sulh* (2013). I was invited to do *Enemy Kitchen* in Dubai, but it wouldn't have made sense because there are plenty of Iraqi restaurants, so it wouldn't have created the same tension. So I said, if you want me to do something about hostility and hospitality or hosting and ghosting and the notion of food as a moment of fissure, I'll open up the first Iraqi-Jewish restaurant in the Arab world in more than eighty years. And they went for it. They were really brave curators.

That had happened two years after I had done the project *Spoils* (2011)⁴ with Saddam's plates. So I had actually been buying and collecting objects for years from Israeli antiquities dealers who had things like the silver sabbath plate for an Iraqi Jewish family. The family was likely so poor when they got to Israel that they had to hock things like that. They were the Mizrahim Jews, the Arab Jews who were more or less de-Arabized upon arrival. And it was a class situation. These plates were evidence not only of where they were from but where they were situated in Israeli society, at the bottom of the bottom.

So I started to buy these things back with the intention of developing an archive. And when I did *Dar Al Sulh* I looked at this growing archive of plates and was like, let me "break the vitrine" and let's use these things the way they're supposed to be used. And that becomes a way of declaring a culture undead. It doesn't allow these things to just become nostalgia. We realize that Arab Jewish culture is ending alongside Palestine—those two histories are intertwined, but it's not too late to revive, to breathe life into lungs, to make a blueprint for going forward.



Installation view, Michael Rakowitz, *The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own*, Tate Modern, January–May 2010. © Michael Rakowitz. Photo © Tate Photography.

Rail: When you were speaking before about Krzysztof Wodiczko, you mentioned that one of the things you took to heart was that he felt his projections needed to be turned off as a defense against them being appropriated or absorbed into the architecture. Generally, this show reflects the influence of that idea through your use, in much of your work, of light, less enduring materials. By contrast, the carved books in *What Dust Will Rise?* (2012)⁵ are made of stone. I'm aware that the use of stone from Bamiyan was significant to that project because of the destroyed Bamiyan Buddhas, but the use of stone feels like a distinctly different gesture in the conversation around recreating, reanimating, and re-preserving lost chunks of culture. How do you think about that material contrast?

Rakowitz: When I was in high school I was trained as a stone carver. The person who taught me, the Dean of my high school, showed me three examples. One was Michelangelo's *Prigioni*, the unfinished works, another was the Al Khazneh, the treasury building in Petra Jordan, and the final one was the Bamiyan Buddhas. All were examples of something that was carved surrounded by the raw material, and I loved it! I loved Michelangelo's unfinished works because there were all these empty spaces that you could project things into.

I was really shaken when they [the Bamiyan Buddhas] were destroyed. By the time Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and I were talking about *What Dust Will Rise* for Documenta 13, I had been reconstructing the Iraqi artifacts for years, and I said, "You know I wouldn't want to fall into the trap of rebuilding the Buddhas." Carolyn introduced me to this man Bert Praxenthaler who's the chief custodian of the site and an artist himself and he said that stone carving had disappeared in that part of Afghanistan 300 years ago. I immediately thought, "What would mean to reintroduce stone carving to that region, to disperse the skill set?"

It was really a meaningful moment for me as an artist because it was an opportunity to go back to stone carving, which I've never had a good excuse to do, beyond it being my favorite process ever, but the conceptual ideas never really lined up. So, the idea was to do the workshop and the students we taught were amazing. Some of them have continued to work with Bert and the Afghani stone carver who came on board to help us teach the workshops.

In terms of this reconstruction of the books, it was never a project done without Kassel in the picture as well. I remember going to the library on the site visit in Kassel and seeing this book of prayers that had burned. It was made out of parchment, so the way it had burned was different than if it had been paper. It just kind of crinkled and opened up into what looks like a neck brace. They call it the *Halskrause* which means "neck brace," and it was the most beautiful, sad sculpture I had ever seen. I looked at it and I said, "Oh my god it looks like it's been turned to stone."

Rail: It was petrified...

Rakowitz: Yes, it looked scared. It became petrified. And the librarian, Conrad Wiedemann, was showing me one picture after another of these destroyed volumes that just looked like crazy, deformed, abstract stone sculptures. I thought about the way that one cultural disaster can maybe suture another. So the idea of harvesting the travertine from the Bamiyan hills where the Buddhas were made to make those lost volumes was hatched.

What I was really interested in was this double burn. The British dropped bombs on the Fridericianum, destroying what was in their library but two years before that their inventory was completely compromised by German book burnings. So it was interesting to have this layer of an iconoclasm that was state-sponsored and another one that was incidental.

Rail: The Ishtar Gate is another example of that type of double destruction.

Rakowitz: Exactly! So those double burns are things that to me—you know that's where the really interesting contradictions can exist; that's where the real can exist. What I never want to do with these reconstruction projects is to throw out some low-hanging fruit, sloganeering about—you know, we know looting cultural heritage is bad, but why was it looted? Why was it looted? It was the existence of an antiquities market that allowed for Iraq's past to be liquidated and in some cases to save the future. For some people that was their ticket out of the country. For others, they were offering it to better their own situation, to collectors on the black market. So let's not be idiots about this.

When I was in Germany working on this project, the thing that was amazing was being presented a photograph of the Fridericianum on fire and school kids working with SS officers, creating a bucket brigade to save the books. That same SS officer could have been throwing books into a fire two years before. And I had this really uncomfortable moment where I felt moved by that SS officer. And those are the things—

Rail: That you relish.

Rakowitz: Totally, and it's also the thing with *Spoils*. The whole thing spun out of this idea of having Iraqi date syrup on the menu because high end restaurants tell you where the arugula is from or where the beef is raised. That's to make the diner feel good and I knew that if I said "Iraqi date syrup" that it would make the diner feel complicated. So being able to feed the stomach and turn it at the same time, for me, is the real work to be done.

Rail: You mentioned to me once that you enjoy reading the speculative anthropology of Zecharia Sitchin...

Rakowitz: [*Laughter*] Oh sure! Yeah! You're one of the only people I know who knows that guy.

Rail: So I wanted to ask—as you know, he attributes the origin of ancient Sumerian culture to a race of extraterrestrials from a planet beyond Neptune called Nibiru. You haven't proposed anything quite that radical...

Rakowitz: [Laughter] Not yet.

Rail: But many of your projects, like *The Breakup* (2010)⁶, present speculative historical narratives that seem driven by an appetite for connecting dots and unearthing synchronicities. That impulse seems aligned with Sitchin. Can you talk a little bit about how storytelling and history come together in your work?

Rakowitz: I'm always trying to allow things to be foregrounded that aren't part of embedded journalism. So if you're talking about the Iraq war, it's interesting for me to read stories that I come across on Ebay. Looking at a helmet—the seller who's a soldier in the 101st Airborne Division said, “it looks like Darth Vader,” and the local Iraqis were like, “yeah”—they were huge fans. So that falls into the anecdotal, and there are people who critique the anecdotal, but I think it's there that you find a lot of the stuff that is the real material. That Ebay page is the Iraqi understanding that they've been turned into the pariah dark side—“And we're gonna use your symbols, that we actually consume, because fuck you, we're part of the global culture as well, and we'll wear the uniform 'cause that's what you think of us.”



Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen*, 2012–ongoing. Photo: Greg Broseus. Courtesy of the artist, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago; Jane Lombard Gallery, New York; Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin.

The plates going back to Iraq at the end of the war! Of all the things for the prime minister to carry on his plane when they were declaring the end of the Iraq war, Saddam's plates? And they retained the Takbīr, the Allāhu Akbar on the flag, which Saddam added to the flag, and removed the Ba'athist stars. Those kinds of things aren't even really subtexts; we're just geared to not see that stuff, but it becomes a critique of the way everything unfolded. So I'm interested in the counter-narrative. I'm interested in the oppositional narrative because we live in a world where the dominant narrative annihilates all the others.

When I think about someone like Sitchin or anyone else coming up with conspiratorial thinking—there's a reason that exists. Archeologists will be the first to tell you that their theories are always changing about what certain things mean. There're always updates, and it leaves open the possibility that we're wrong about everything. And I love it because for me it's like art. My relationship to Judaism for instance—which is very secular and very social—but I find myself loving the ritual of it because it's like art to me. The Seder plate seems like scripts from a Fluxus performance, and I think about this the same way. If Sitchin or anybody else can come up with compelling theories where things line up I want to approach that as a human being not as somebody who just wants to see it struck from the record as nonsense. Belief structures are very much about devotion. Conceptual art opened that up for me, enabled me to believe in the invisible. Not to say that I'm a follower of Sitchin, but I get a lot of entertainment from reading it in a way that's not about, "I can't believe he thought that." It's like, "I love the way these connections are being made."

Rail: We've been talking for a while, but I'd love to hear about *Enemy Kitchen*. I'm curious if you have a sense of how the veterans you work with relate to the project as art and whether that feels different than the way the Iraqis from Milo's Pita connect with it.

Rakowitz: Well, that would be a valuable question to ask them because I don't want to speak for them. But it's been amazing watching the evolution of the project. For about nine years before it became a food truck, it existed as a series of workshops and also catering. What birthed the idea of the truck was catering a Memorial Day dinner, a barbeque for the Iraq Veterans Against the War and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. I realized that like, "Oh my god the hands that are making this kabab, the fists that are shaping the lamb, are hands that were also making a fist in Iraq." And it came into much sharper focus for me the sculptural things that I like about that project.

With the veterans, the community that I've gotten people from is normally the Iraq Veterans Against the War. So there's already this desire to push towards a notion of accountability and to actually repair. Also to do it in a way that isn't just as easy as an apology. They're very careful about apology because apology is often more about the person saying it than the person receiving it. So for them it's about not seeing themselves as a victim and knowing that whatever they're feeling sorry about is nothing compared to the loss of life, to the traumas of the Iraqi people.

And I don't want to make it sound like I've only worked with Iraq veterans against the war. There're also people that come to it without that conditioning. Routinely what I see is a certain amount of apprehension from the veterans. Iraqis across the board haven't been hesitant about the food truck as much as they've been hesitant about being visible to the government. Amongst recent refugees, because of the Trump travel bans and everything, there's been a certain amount of fear that they're going to be denied citizenship because they took part in a project like this. But generally they've been very welcoming to the veterans. And the veterans are finding themselves talking not about how the war changed them but how Iraq changed them. Saying, "I always wanted to try that but we weren't allowed to," and it allows for them to finally be guests.

There was this thing that happened that Aaron Hughes talks about beautifully when he does the *Tea Project*, alone and in collaboration with Amber Ginsburg. He makes it clear that he had to decline having tea, which was not only a cultural insult but is also tone deaf to the fact that the Iraqis were trying to make the Americans guests rather than invaders. That was one of those moments that I thought was incredibly powerful to channel when it came to getting people on the truck to work together, making food together and serving together—then circulating these two perceived enemies around the city into neighborhoods where there's, you know, lots of military academies. Most Americans haven't met a veteran. Most Americans haven't met an Iraqi. So it did a lot, on that level, to allow for them to both be doing the same thing together and creating conditions where questions could be asked. All of those antagonisms could be unwrapped and safely consumed.

Notes

1. The Pergamon Museum in Berlin is home to a reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate, originally built in c. 575 BCE in ancient Babylon. The reconstruction was completed in the 1930s using material excavated from the original.
2. The artifacts he's referring to are those that were looted from the National Museum of Iraq in 2003 at the start of the Iraq war. Rakowitz has remade many of these objects out of papier-mâché and the wrappers of Iraqi food products for his ongoing project *the invisible enemy should not exist*.
3. *Aj-ibu-shapu* has been translated as both "The invisible enemy should not exist" and "May the arrogant not prevail."
4. A project at the restaurant Park Avenue Autumn in New York City in collaboration with Chef Kevin Lasko. Venison atop Iraqi date syrup and tahini was served on plates looted from Saddam Hussein's palace.
5. *What Dust Will Rise?* made for Documenta 13 recreates a series of books burnt in a fire at the Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany. The re-creations are made of travertine harvested from Bamyan, Afghanistan, where two massive sixth century carved Buddhas were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.
6. *The Breakup* is a ten part radio series commissioned for Radio Amwaj in Palestine that draws allegorical parallels between the breakup of the Beatles and the collapse of political negotiations between Israel, Palestine, and across the Middle East.

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