

Art in America

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Michael Rakowitz at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

by Lauren DeLand



Michael Rakowitz *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, 2017, stop-motion video, approx. 20 minutes; at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Chicago artist Michael Rakowitz's work often foregrounds his heritage as the son of an Iraqi-Jewish mother and an American father. Familial rituals—cooking, hosting, and archiving the ephemera of personal histories—closely inform his processes and subject matter, as do the cycles of contact and conflict between Arab and Occidental cultures. In a wall text introducing "Backstroke of the West," his first museum survey, Rakowitz emphasizes the intertwined relationship between "hospitality and hostility," effectively inviting American viewers to immerse themselves in the recent history of military interventions in Iraq as guests in his proverbial house.

Rakowitz's houseguests, however, find themselves in something of a hoarder situation upon entering the gallery. The exhibition includes multiple installations in which textually and materially dense displays articulate little-known, often bizarre, and exhaustively researched chronicles of cultural interchange between the Middle East and the West. Narratively rich and witty, these installations would have been much better served by a partitioned space that provided a bit of physical and conceptual distance between them. Instead, they crowd one another in a too-small space.

Visitors are immediately confronted with the bare wooden scaffolding that makes up the back of *May the Arrogant Not Prevail* (2010), Rakowitz's re-creation of the Ishtar Gate of ancient Babylon. While the positioning is presumably meant to convey the artifice of the re-creation, it prevents viewers from easily getting a full look at work's front. (To do so, they have to stand on the wooden platform of another installation, and this vantage point forces them to turn their backs to that work's centerpiece.) On the front of *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*, Rakowitz created a charming rendering of the blue-and-gold Ishtar Gate's iconic imagery of bulls and lions using Pepsi and Lipton tea labels and other commercial packaging. A series of captioned pencil drawings spans a wall to one side of the sculpture, narrating the egregious abuses that constitute the recent history of the fragile site of Babylon's ruins: Saddam Hussein built a Disneyesque reconstruction of the Temple of Nebuchadnezzar there, and the US maintains a military base and helipad in the area to this day. Ultimately, Rakowitz's project reminds us that the "real" gate (the one made from material excavated from the site by a German archaeologist in the early twentieth century and on view at Berlin's Pergamonmuseum) is itself a reconstruction—and that copies in general are key components of museological displays.

Near Rakowitz's gate stand long tables crowded with his sculptural replicas of artifacts looted from sites in Iraq and Syria. The presentation of these loving re-creations and their accompanying didactics recalls the voluminous amounts of objects and information found in another local institution, the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute Museum. That museum is where Rakowitz filmed *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody* (2017), a video commissioned by the MCA and on view in the show. The eponymous hero is a GI Joe figurine of the same type that was utilized in a "hostage" hoax in 2005, when a group of self-proclaimed Iraqi insurgents published pictures online of the bound "soldier" and threatened to behead him. Rakowitz's Cody begs ancient Sumerian votive figures to allow him to rescue them and take them back to their homeland. Like the votives themselves, which were likely placed in temples to stand in prayerful effigy for specific individuals, Cody was intended as a surrogate: according to the video, US troops in Iraq and Kuwait could purchase the toy on their bases and send it home to their children. As pitifully inadequate to the task of repatriation as he is to substituting for a real parent, Cody enacts in stop-motion animation a narrative that, recalling the play of children, is literalist and naive. Like Rakowitz's handmade re-creations of looted artifacts, which serve as melancholic stand-ins for priceless objects lost in a still-unspooling tragedy of cultural pillage, the doll speaks to the provisional necessity of the "fake" in enacting cultural repair.