

500 WORDS

Michael Rakowitz

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Bones from Vakifli, the only remaining Armenian village in Turkey. Photo: Michael Rakowitz.

*Often engaging with found objects and sculpture in his research-based practice, artist Michael Rakowitz creates installations and participatory events to instantiate counternarratives to received histories in site-specific contexts. Here he discusses *The Flesh Is Yours, The Bones Are Ours, 2015*, his commissioned work for the Fourteenth Istanbul Biennial, which is curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Rakowitz's project laterally approaches the subject of the 1915 Armenian genocide through the traditions of craft and architecture. The exhibition opens at the Galata Greek School on September 5 and is on view through November 1, 2015.*

THE TITLE OF THIS WORK comes from the parents of a young child who was given over to a master craftsman to become an apprentice. Kemal Cimbiz, a Turkish man now in his seventies, was the youth, and the craftsman was the Armenian plaster caster Garabet Cezayirliyan, who is responsible for many of the molds, friezes, and architectural flourishes one finds throughout Istanbul. It was very rare for a Turk to be given over to an Armenian master. The Armenians were the artistic and artisanal class. As in many places, they were looked down upon. Manual labor—which included being an architect or a builder—was seen as something for the minorities. The poetic thing about these friezes, however, is that they show traces of Armenian hands and fingers, which bear silent witness to what happened during the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and after. They are still there. So the work is not just about an Armenian master—it's about the transmission of that craft from that master to this person from the other side of the divide that gets created when we talk about Armenian history in Turkey. My project also dwells in the intersection between Kemal Cimbiz's craft and an old Greek school in the Galata neighborhood of Istanbul. Greeks were also part of the population exchanges, deportations, and discriminations—as other minorities were—in the Ottoman Empire after the creation of the Turkish state.

For this work I am going to develop new designs for plaster friezes and other architectural elements. The idea behind them is that the traumas of the histories before and after 1915 could give rise to a new kind of geometry or design that relates to or negates Art Nouveau. I will create some new molds or new casts from the old molds.

One of the reasons the old molds have survived is because they include gum arabic and animal bone. I am actually locating livestock that are descended from the Armenian farms that were confiscated after the 1915 genocide. I am inviting guests to have a big meal in the Greek school where I will serve the meat of those animals, and then we are going to grind up those bones and use them to make the new casts and new molds.

I'm always looking for political objects and artifacts that can have almost a shamanistic power. When a news story hits and there is an object related to it, instead of going to Google, I immediately try to find the news through the object.

Often I use eBay as a search engine. In fact, I'm using it right now. Am I outbid? Let me see . . .

Three seconds . . .

Two seconds . . .

One second . . .

"You won this auction!" All right! Eighty-two bucks for a dog skull from Istanbul.

I have a relationship to objects that is very much about preservation and the notion of mint condition, and that comes from collecting baseball objects and getting autographs. All of these things are hermetically sealed and kept out of direct sunlight. That inevitably builds up a certain kind of perverse desire, which is to play with the ball that has been signed by Joe DiMaggio, and to be a bit iconoclastic. There is something that interests me about breaking the vitrine. I think we need to be willing to be impolite and embrace difficulty when we are talking about traumatic subjects like war, genocide, and histories that many would rather forget.

Using these objects helps me not just to provide evidence but also to create moments where I am creating a kind of congregation of bodies, voices, and witnesses. To me, that is so much better than going to see them in a museum where they are relegated to the past and to death.

— *As told to Zachary Cahill*

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