

## Michael Rakowitz *The Flesh Is Yours, The Bones Are Ours*

Graham Foundation and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago 18 May – 13 August

Tracing and assembling *fin de siècle* architectural decor and cultural artefacts from cataclysmic events of the era, Michael Rakowitz unmask the enduring imprints of collective trauma. For this exhibition, he constructs a reliquary and a craftsman's workshop dedicated to the sordid history of the Armenian genocide, relating historical events and sites in Istanbul to others in Chicago. Across two locations, the Graham Foundation and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Rakowitz compares the skeletal structures of urban societies with the exploitative or abusive circumstances via which they were created.

The aspect concerning Istanbul was initially conceived for the 14th Istanbul Biennial, which took place amid the 100-year anniversary of the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians during the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Armenians who were enslaved, starved, systematically murdered and subject to forced migration were persecuted on account of their religious and ethnic background, and to this day, the Turkish government refuses to issue a public apology or admit that any 'genocide' took place.

Over the last century, Armenian cultural histories, including those of the architectural and artistic contributions presented in Rakowitz's exhibition, have been repressed and silenced. Recent studies in epigenetic and intergenerational trauma, specifically focused on descendants of survivors and escapees of the Armenian genocide (and on Holocaust survivors), are proving that such traumas can

cause actual changes in genetic code, and as a parallel, Rakowitz relates the genetic mutations of emotional and physical stress reactions from such experiences through structural imprints of remnants from the built environment. The 'genetic' code in this case, though, comes in the form of designs for art-nouveau plaster panelling produced by Armenian craftsman Garabet Cezayirliyan, his Turkish apprentice Kemal Cimbiz and the modernist Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, also known for his extensive use of art-nouveau ornamentation.

Working with the Armenian community in Turkey (and descendants of the genocide's survivors), Rakowitz created rubbings of building decorations designed by craftsmen such as Cezayirliyan. Layers of these transferred imprints on gauzy paper (combined with others from Chicago's own architecture) hang loosely from the edge of the ceiling in Rhona Hoffman's gallery, intricate designs cascading down the wall in coloured variations of black, grey, blue, green and red. Four vintage wood-and-glass vitrines, such as *Cosmology For The Flesh Is Yours, The Bones Are Ours* (2015), contain anthropological fragments such as Ottoman bullet moulds; an image of Turkish troops showing off the severed heads of two Armenians; a photograph of a disembodied Native American head ornamenting the neo-Gothic Woolworth Building (once called the 'Cathedral of Commerce') in New York; and dog bones collected from the island of Sivriada, where 80,000 dogs were brought to

starve and die to make way for Istanbul's modernisation – a mass killing that predated the human genocide. These objects are each accompanied by handwritten notes and drawings on the vitrine's glass surfaces, detailing their lineage as catalytic touchpoints connecting commerce, gentrification, institutional racism and murder.

The ground floor of the Graham Foundation contains an installation with more decorative panels arranged in grids on the floor and stacked against the walls as Rakowitz found them in Cimbiz and fellow craftsmen's workshops. Copies of art-nouveau panel designs are combined with patterns Rakowitz created using animal bones. Upstairs, more rubbings, plaster casts, image artefacts and animal remains lie on a worktable. These offer insight into the specific source materials and traditional production process used in Turkey, incorporating glue made from pulverised animal bones to strengthen the plaster moulds. The cycle of death is not only applied onto the decorative panels, but also integrated into the very substance allowing them to exist.

By teasing apart the ghostly remnants of these structural, social and cultural histories, and revisiting their linkages, Rakowitz resets the path for understanding how such traumatic events and legacies endure. Actions have consequences, but if we want to build a better future for ourselves and learn from the disgraces of history, this is something that we, as humans, must not forget. *Arielle Bier*



*The Flesh Is Yours, The Bones Are Ours* (detail), 2016, installation, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: RCH/ΕΚΗ. Courtesy the Graham Foundation and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago