

## Michael Rakowitz forges bonds over Baghdad at the MCA

A major survey of the Iraqi-American, Chicago-based artist finally arrives.

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Installation view of a photograph illustrating that the dishware in Rakowitz's *Spoils* was looted from Saddam Hussein's palaces after they were destroyed by coalition forces. Personal household items such as plates and silverware were taken by Iraqi citizens, many of whom used them in their own homes.

NATHAN KEAY/MCA CHICAGO

**T**hroughout his career, conceptual artist and Northwestern professor Michael Rakowitz has used simple provocations to reveal the complexities of human relationships. Rakowitz is the son of Jewish parents, an American father and an Iraqi-American mother, and grew up in Great Neck, New York, on Long Island. His maternal grandparents fled Iraq in 1946, no longer feeling safe there when British colonial forces withdrew after World War II and political upheaval

ensued. Much of Rakowitz's work centers around the absence of anything "Iraqi" in the U.S. that isn't related to war, and his sculptures, performances, drawings, and illustrations in some ways act as a remedy to that—they're substitutes for missing cultural context. "Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West," now showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art, features ten of his most iconic artworks and a new stop-motion animation piece. The show is filled with stories, conversations with strangers and new friends, and research; it's a demonstration of the human desire to manifest memories.

To repair, mend, and recoup cultural histories, Rakowitz grounds his artwork in social interaction, persuading audiences to contemplate the resulting tensions: between hospitality and hostility, conflict and agreement, or complicity and innocence. Low-risk actions like preparing and sharing food or discussing science fiction films, to take two examples from "Backstroke of the West," can create an opening for asking more complicated questions about culture, nationality, religion, class, and power.

*Enemy Kitchen* (2003-ongoing) started as cooking classes in which middle and high school students were taught Iraqi and Jewish-Iraqi recipes. During the third week of the project, a student complained about making Iraqi cuisine, expressing confusion because Iraqis were responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks. Another student countered that the assertion wasn't true, but that the blame lay with Osama bin Laden; a different pupil disagreed, saying the U.S. government was accountable. In this brief exchange, the classroom became a microcosm of discussion surrounding the Iraq war. A later iteration of *Enemy Kitchen* was a mobile kitchen where Iraq war refugees prepared dishes and American military veterans served them.

To further explore the correlation between hospitality and hostility, Rakowitz collaborated with renowned New York City chef Kevin Lasko in 2011 to create a dish inspired by the flavors of Iraq; the entree was served at the upscale Manhattan restaurant Park Avenue Autumn on china looted from Saddam Hussein's palace, purchased on eBay. The reaction to the project (titled *Spoils*) was polarizing. People sent angry e-mails calling for Park Avenue Autumn to take the dish off the menu. Yet the demand for the course was so high that Lasko and Rakowitz considered

trying to buy more of the looted china so they could prepare more platings at the same time. Two weeks before *Spoils* was to end, Park Avenue Autumn received a cease and desist notice from the U.S. State Department, which claimed that the plateware should be repatriated to Iraq.

Cultural objects also figure heavily in Rakowitz's work. In *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2006-ongoing), he and a team of studio assistants reconstructed hundreds of the missing, stolen, or destroyed objects from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. The human figures, daggers, vases, and other objects were sculpted to scale out of Arabic-language newspapers and food packaging; to approximate their size and shape, Rakowitz relied on Interpol-alert descriptions, research, and photographs compiled by archeologists at the Oriental Institute. The use of detritus to make Iraqi objects that may never be repatriated—to date there's no stable infrastructure for the artifacts to be returned, catalogued, and properly cared for—becomes a comment on the failure of the U.S. military to protect Iraq's centuries-old cultural heritage during the war.

As the Taliban and like-minded groups have looted and destroyed cultural institutions and objects, *What Dust Will Rise?* (2012) highlights the challenges of preserving culture while valuing the human life that's responsible for it. The project, a commission for the German exhibition Documenta 13, displays re-creations of books that were lost when the British Royal Air Force bombed the city of Kassel, Germany, in 1941. Rakowitz collaborated with stone carvers in Afghanistan and Italy to make the books out of rocks sourced from the hills of Bamiyan, where giant centuries-old Buddha statues were destroyed by the Taliban. Text in a vitrine explains Mullah Mohammed Omar's decision to dynamite the statues despite their importance to Afghani culture: Swedish archaeologists had rejected using funds for the statues' restoration to feed suffering Afghani women and children.

"Backstroke of the West" exemplifies Rakowitz's desire to memorialize and acknowledge loss. He accomplishes as much, through unexpected items such as food wrappers, family recipes, tchotchkes, and stories. Most importantly, such an achievement opens the door for potential reconciliation.