

Michael Rakowitz aims to connect cultures with art and a food truck

By Steve Johnson
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Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune.

Artist Michael Rakowitz is preparing an exhibition "Backstroke of the West" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where he is seen with the piece "May the Arrogant Not Prevail," on Wednesday, Sept. 6, 2017.

How does "Backstroke of the West," the Michael Rakowitz solo exhibition at the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#), break the rules for an art show? Let us use bullets to enumerate the ways, a choice that seems appropriate for an exhibition that is in part about the connections between conflict and every-day life.

- Its aesthetic, for Rakowitz's high-concept riffs on Arab-American relations, recalls the workbench more than the art gallery. Unfinished wood is everywhere. Much of the text is Rakowitz's own handwriting. Visitors enter through the exposed backside — the raw wooden framework — of a replica of the blue-tiled Ishtar

Gate of ancient Babylon; you only see the front when you've entered the exhibition

- Some of the “wall text,” the explanatory labels museums glue up to explain what we are seeing, is printed on the floor.
- “Backstroke’s” newly commissioned work, a short film, features a GI Joe-like doll going to the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago and telling the Iraqi artifacts there they deserve to be free. This provocateur is not just any doll; it’s Special Ops Cody, a figure sold exclusively at U.S. bases in Iraq and Kuwait, Rakowitz said, that became famous when insurgents posed it as a hostage in a temporarily convincing video.
- And then there is the matter of the food truck parked on the plaza outside the museum, decorated with a golden eagle emblem inspired by one found on Saddam Hussein’s dinnerware. Almost weekly since the exhibit opened in mid-September, the “Enemy Kitchen” truck has served Iraqi cuisine, recipes from Rakowitz’s Iraqi-Jewish mother, free to visitors. The servers are American Iraq War veterans, and the next serving is 6 p.m. Friday.

With “Enemy Kitchen,” the Iraqi-American artist, a 43-year-old native New Yorker who lives in Evanston and teaches at Northwestern, wanted to use cuisine to encourage dialogue. What does it mean to eat the food of the “enemy,” a question he first posed when he debuted the truck in 2003? What does it mean to eat it off the paper-plate replicas of Saddam’s china that Rakowitz has made?

Or, as the artist asks in the exhibition catalog, “How could this generous hospitality be the fruit of such hostility?”

“Backstroke” is, on every count, a provocative exhibit, but it is also a surprisingly playful one, too, considering the deadly serious themes it treats.

“It’s not something I ever expected to happen, this show,” Rakowitz said. “To be appreciated this way, it’s a real honor.” (Note: Rakowitz is the husband of Tribune freelance art critic Lori Waxman; Waxman had no involvement in the conception or execution of this article.)

The exhibition title is borrowed from a translation of a title Rakowitz found on the cover of a bootleg copy of the “Star Wars” film “Revenge of the Sith.” It speaks to the artist’s concerns with cross-cultural misunderstandings and commonalities. One of the pieces showcases the similarities between the Star Wars Darth Vader helmet and those used by elite forces close to Saddam, a similarity that was not coincidental. Another reimagines Saddam’s giant, commemorative, crossed-swords Victory Arch with lightsabers as the weaponry.

“It turned out that Saddam and (his son) Uday were huge ‘Star Wars’ fans,” Rakowitz said. “And, you know, Saddam had this whole dream to bring the Arab world into space.”



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Artist Michael Rakowitz is preparing an exhibition "Backstroke of the West" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, including pieces that make up a body of work called "May The Obdurate Foe Not Stay in Good Health."

When curator Omar Kholeif was exploring possibilities for the show, he realized Rakowitz had won a series of big art prizes and commissions and his work was in the collections of major museums, but he had never had a solo or survey exhibition in a major museum.

“It was insane when I found that out,” said Kholeif, the museum’s senior curator and director of global initiatives. “This exhibit will hopefully position Michael as one of the most important artists of his generation. This is someone who literally is taking art history and merging it into popular culture and trying to create an experience of storytelling.”

He’s doing so without much regard for traditional boundaries, either. His mixed-media installation “The Breakup” cast the Beatles as players in the Middle East. “John leads the group so must = Egypt,” Rakowitz writes. “Paul = Israel b/c publicly declares independence from Beatles, transitions from ally (Palestine?) to belligerent state.”

In addition to framed works, the project grew to incorporate a series for Palestinian radio on the Beatles breakup hosted by Rakowitz and a Libyan flag bearing a direct message to McCartney about playing a concert in the country held up a Libyan activist at a McCartney Wrigley Field concert in 2011.

The exhibition “is never something that I’m going to say is about any one thing,” Rakowitz said. “I don’t like to overburden, over-determine the work. I love for people to project into it and take out what they want,” he said (an assertion that may raise an eyebrow among those contemplating how very much text Rakowitz includes).

“But it’s a collection of works that the curator Omar Kholeif found himself really drawn to. And so there’s a good 20 years worth of projects here. And, you know, as I look back on it, it’s all about, like, these displacements but also these efforts to reconstruct, and in full scale, a

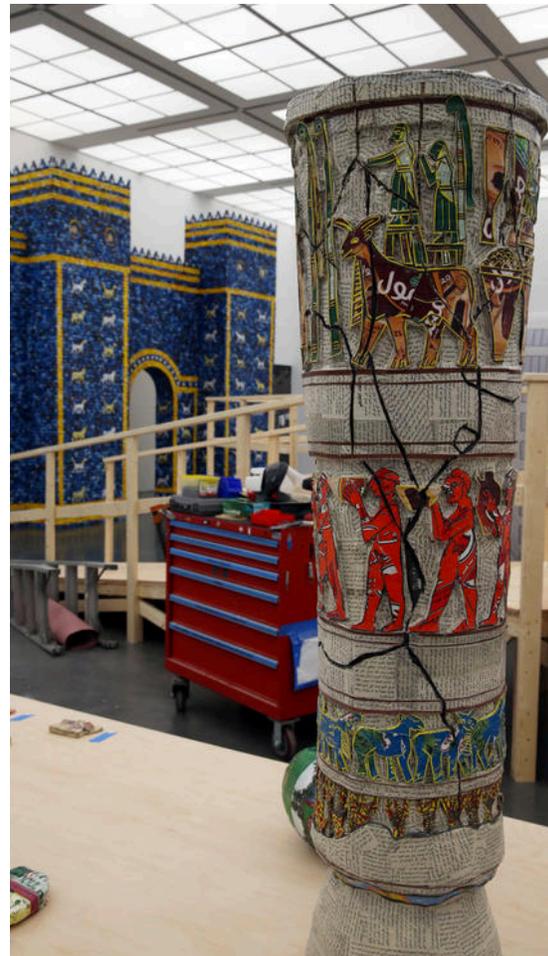
situation or condition that existed elsewhere” — to offer up, the artist said, “the spectral presence of something that's disappeared.”

Explicitly along those lines, several of the works are Rakowitz’s re-creations, in mundane materials such as newspaper and food wrappers, of antiquities looted or destroyed in Iraq and, more recently, Syria.

And his Ishtar Gate, he pointed out, is “a reconstruction of the reconstruction,” a version that was commissioned by the Iraqi government in the 1950s.



Artist Michael Rakowitz is preparing an exhibition "Backstroke of the West" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, including pieces like this reimagined Syrian artifact seen on Wednesday, Sept. 6, 2017.



Artist Michael Rakowitz is preparing an exhibition, "Backstroke of the West," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, including pieces like reconstructed Iraqi artifacts, foreground, and "May the Arrogant Not Prevail," rear, seen on Wednesday, Sept. 6, 2017.

At the center of the show is a sort of giant balloon or air mattress, inflating and then deflating. It's a rendition by Rakowitz of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in St. Louis and their demolition in 1972, an end to modernist architect Minoru Yamasaki's dreams of a residential ideal

At the time of the demolition, Rakowitz pointed out, Yamasaki was finishing up his largest work, the World Trade Center in New York City. And the unfinished wood viewing platform that surrounds the Pruitt-Igoe balloon is actually a replica of the viewing platform that surrounded ground zero, the demolished World Trade Center buildings.

"It goes from theory to, you know, a failed reality," he said. "So the idea is that it is constantly breathing like a lung. But it also replicates the spectacle that you see played over and over and over again — of the death of public housing."

So, again, these are heavy concerns. But the exhibition itself gives off almost the opposite feeling. With the "Star Wars" images, the "Sgt. Pepper" album cover, the food outside, "Smoke on the Water" playing over the loudspeakers, the comic book-like images on the walls, there's a sense in all of it of welcoming in the viewer.

"You walk out with an enlightened view of the world," Kholeif said. "Ultimately, there is something of hospitality and love in his work."

When: Through March 4

Where: MCA Chicago, 220 E. Chicago Ave.

Tickets: Included with \$15 suggested admission; mcachicago.org or 312-397-4010