The Rakowitz exhibition at Malmö Konsthall stirs powerful emotions

Malmö Konsthall is haunted by Iraqi ghosts. Lina Al-nahar sees glimpses of hope. Nadin Al Khalidi experiences a mausoleum. Rakel Chukri examines why Michael Rakowitz art doesn’t leave anyone unaffected.
There was a painting hanging above the kitchen table in Jönköping, depicting the Assyrian king Assurbanipal and his men on a lion hunt. The fierceness of it all was fascinating: daredevils in chariots among roaring lions.

Our relatives had similar paintings. Assurbanipal and company were superheroes to us. These pictures connected us, the diaspora, to Mesopotamia – one of the few bonds we had left. It was more than pure nostalgia. It was the hope that someday there would be a place were we could live in peace after centuries of persecutions and massacres. Perhaps not a land of our own, but at least a free territory somewhere in the Middle East.

'Ve' were the Christian minority of Assyrians that used to inhabit large portions of the Middle East but now are scattered all over then world. The place of our fantasies was called Beth Nahrin, "Between the Rivers", and was spread out between the mighty rivers of Eurfrat and Tigris. And in the heart of Beth Nahrin resided of course the ancient city of Nineve.

A few years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the dream of Nineve was awoken anew. There were signs pointing to relative independence for Assyrians and other minorities in the region. Then IS entered the scene in 2014. The cult didn’t just tear Iraq apart, but all hopes and dreams for Nineve as well. For many, this represented the seal of permanent exile.

And so it was 2015. IS propaganda videos of Jihadists annihilating antique sculptures in Mosul using sledgehammers and angle grinders were spread all over the world. The ancient city of Nimrud, holding king Assurnasirpal II’s palace, was blown to smithereens. The mighty Lamassu statues – winged bulls with human heads – that were raised to protect the city from evil proved powerless.

The actions were condemned from all corners of the world. It was the destruction of the cultural heritage of all mankind. However, for many people originating from the area this was first and foremost a deeply personal loss.

2019 comes along. A lost banquet hall has risen again at Malmö Konsthall. A secular miracle turning destruction into creativity.

Bas-reliefs destroyed by IS in 2015 have been meticulously re-constructed by the Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz for the exhibition "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist (Room G)." High lords and winged creatures with animal heads deck the walls. They are neither minimalistic nor sallow, draped as they are in colourful attires and adorned with flowers and jewels. They exude life, not death.

As if possessed, I have returned to the exhibition time and time again after the opening in September. It’s the first time an exhibition hall has felt like home. The motifs have filled me with intense joy and deep despair. A beautiful yet painful reminder of everything that has existed, as well as everything now lost to us.

I can’t get enough of these works of art. I want to be near them. And I’m not alone. Right here, in Malmö, these objects create a special bond.
Lina Al-nahar points out a packaging that she recognises. Chicken stock. Michael Rakowitz has re-created the bas-reliefs from the Nimrud palace using wrappings from Iraqi products imported to the US. The materials are cheap but the result is majestic.

Lina Al-nahar has been here more often than I. She can’t turn her eyes from the works either.

- He catches something. It’s not just the historical aspect, it’s the colours, the size and the room. It’s alive, it’s not just spiritless art on the wall.

She describes IS as the worst thing that has happened for many years. That’s no light statement, given the many wars that have been inflicted on the Iraqi people in modern times. But Michael Rakowitz’ art has brought new hope.

- The cultural heritage lives on inside us. It will prevail.
Lina Al-nahar walks with familiar steps towards the oasis of palm trees residing in a corner of the Konsthall. The date palms are the pride and joy of Iraq. She explains to me how the dates shift colour as they ripen.

– I’m home. I grew up on a date farm in Iraq so I can easily climb palm trees.

Her mother, who was a leader for a feministic movement, was executed. Consequently, Lina Al-nahar was taken in by her grandparents in the city of Karbala, ten miles south of Bagdad. They picked the fruits early in the morning and sold them at the market later the same day.

Lina Al-nahar fled to Malmö in 1993. She continued the family tradition of political work, and took active part in Vänsterpartiet (The Left Party).

The exhibition has given her an opportunity to unite the two places she call home for the first time. Sweden and Iraq. But the feelings are not easily summarised. On the one hand, pride over the Iraqi cultural heritage. On the other, the recognition of the brutal fate of her family. Saddam Hussein killed her mother, imprisoned her grandmother and forced her father to flee the country.

– Time has taught me that other people can’t really deal with our pain. Either they treat us as victims – “that poor woman has lost her mother” – and I don’t want any of that. Or they get completely devastated and don’t know how to handle the situation. So you just turn it off.

But it’s hard to turn it off right here. Earphones are hanging from the ceiling in one of the rooms, playing Radio Silence – an audio work in which Michael Rakowitz collects stories from Iraqi refugees and American war veterans.

Lina Al-nahar doesn’t want to get stuck in misery. She made it after all, she says. Her children can carry themselves with pride, knowing the source of their mother’s strength.

She points out that political refugees have great expertise in swiftly switching codes.
The pain will always reside within the Iraqi people. But there are also many sources of joy. Why not bring that up as well?

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So let's do just that. And the joy is palpable.

When Michael Rakowitz presented his exhibition at Malmö Konsthall the 14th of September he exclaimed: "I'm happily married to Malmö". The reception in the city had resembled an uninterrupted wedding party.

On the opening night, some 1112 visitors socialised inside the replica of king Assurnasirpa II's banquet hall. Afterwards Rakowitz couldn't help but wonder if the Assyrian king himself ever entertained so many guests in one sitting.

The Iraqi Cultural Association in Malmö, where Lina Al-nahar holds the presidency, was co-organiser of the feast. People were drinking wine, hipster beer or traditional yoghurt beverages, and you could of course eat dates to your heart's content. A veiled great-grandmother in a wheelchair could be seen in the busy crowd, sitting next to a secular woman with dark, unruly curls.

As the Iraqi choir hailing from the Association started to sing, Michael Rakowitz stood beside the stage with a broad smile on his face.

Lina Al-nahar smiles as well when the opening party is brought up.

– I'm going to cherish that moment for a long time. We didn't perform for anybody else yet everyone in the room was delighted to see us enjoying ourselves.
It was about six months ago that Malmö Konsthall reached out to The Iraqi Cultural Association. Aside of the opening ceremony, the Association was also asked to assist in organising tours with personal stories from Iraq together with guides from Konsthallen.

Lina Al-nahar describes the meetings with Rakowitz as amazing. And the discussions with Malmö Konsthall’s director Mats Stjernstedt and Project Coordinator Angela Cesarec have been respectful and marked with genuine interest.

Still, she was initially hesitant. She reflects on her first reaction:

– Oh, no. Not yet another Swedish project aimed at consuming Iraqi-ness, and afterwards it’s “thanks and goodbye”. But here, we could meet at equal terms. It’s a beautiful thing!

The Association invited Rakowitz and staff from Malmö Konsthall to dine with them.

– Lord, what a feast! There and then, I think Konsthallen got it: This is not just an art project, this is about Iraqi people from different backgrounds getting together to celebrate and have a good time.

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Speaking of background. Every time I’ve visited Konsthallen I’ve been struck by the fact that Michael Rakowitz’ exhibition stems from the tension between the West and Iraq. Stories are being told about colonial powers initiating wars and valuing art above human life.

From this conflict arises a fanciful image of Iraq. A utopia that quashes reality. The sectarian violence that has ripped the country apart after the American invasion isn’t represented in the exhibition hall.
This makes me uneasy. I think about the horrid fate of the Yazidis. The Kurdish struggle. The religious leaders that pin Shia and Sunni muslims against each other. The fact that the Christian population has been reduced from 1,5 million to a couple of hundred thousands in two decades.

And then we have the minorities that no longer exist in the country. The Iraqi Jews. Michael Rakowitz’ own family history goes back at least 500 years in Iraq.

1930’s saw the persecutions intensify. In June 1942, the Farhud pogrom struck Bagdad. The exact number of murdered Jews remain uncertain, but it was the beginning of the end of Jewish life in Iraq. Shortly after, Rakowitz’ grandfather – Nissim Isaac Daoud bin Aziz – left the country. Via India, he and his wife came to USA in 1946.

In 1942 the Jewish population was estimated to 150 000. Today there’s less than ten people left.

This was the starting point for an art project in Dubai, May 2013. For the first time since the exodus, Iraqi-Jewish food was to be served in the Arab world.

For the duration of one week, people gathered around Michael Rakowitz' dinner table at the restaurant ”Dar Al Sulh”. Many had roots in Iraq and intricate discussions aroise on the subject of culinary origins. When the discourse shifted to the expulsion of the Iraqi-Jews, it became obvious that the younger generation of Iraqi’s didn’t know about the history. But the older guests remembered and pondered on the whereabouts of their old neighbours.

The scholar Ella Shohat – Rakowitz partner for this culinary project – writes in an essay that the forced amnesia linked to the Arabic Jews discards the experiences of the Iraqi people.

As I read the word amnesia, I realise a flaw in my reasoning. The exhibition in Malmö isn’t a utopia divorced from reality. Rather, it’s a radical statement. By not differentiating between Iraqis and Iraqis, Rakowitz is advocating for an inclusive identity that holds Jews, Christians, Muslims, Yazids, and so on.

By means of nostalgia – the common cultural heritage, traditional food – he creates a space in which images of the enemy and polarising historical discourses can be challenged. The notion of a utopian Iraq does not only represent an opportunity for grief, but also a chance for reflection. Much has been lost, but some people have even lost their right to call themselves Iraqis.
The palace in Nimrud was demolished by the hands of IS in 2015. Rakowitz points out that the destruction began in the 19th century when some 400 reliefs were sent to Western museums. Sometimes, the museums just required the heads. Rakowitz has articulated this symbolic beheading by the use of black sections, as above: "The invisible Enemy Should Not Exist (Room G, Northwest Palace of Nimrud, Panel 19)" (detail).

Photo: Lars Brundin
– Michael is one of us, Lina Al-nahar proclaims.
– He is an Arabic Jew and that made the Iraqis proud!

She says this was made apparent at the opening ceremony, as it appealed to Assyrians and secular atheists as well as Sunni and Shia Muslims. The diversity is a trade mark for the Iraqi Cultural Association. Its members recall the time before the 1990's when it didn’t matter if you were Sunni or Shia, and since many of them are political refugees, they acknowledge the Jewish struggle. In general, however, the understanding of these issues is limited.

Leading up to the opening, Lina Al-nahar spread information about Rakowitz’ family history and his grandparents exodus from Bagdad in the 1940’s.

– I really want to throw light on that story. That’s the only way our children can grow stronger and that’s the only way we can shape the future.

The knee-jerk anti-Semitic affiliation affecting all Middle Eastern people is tiresome to Lina Al-nahar. She wasn’t worried as the opening approached but admits that the thought did hit her: Would someone have a bad reaction?

But you saw it with your own eyes, she says. There were nothing but happiness at the opening.

– It’s so important that we commit to the histories that are missing in the books. Regardless if they’re concerning Assyrians, Jews, Shia Muslims or what have you. If you are to do away with prejudices and myths, you have to empower all people. It’s about time we learn more about each other.

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I mars 2018 invigdes Michael Rakowitz skulptur ”The invisible enemy should not exist” på Trafalgar Square, London. Ursprungsstatyn förstördes av Islamiska staten 2015.

Bild: AP Photo/Matt Dunham
Growing up on Long Island, Michael Rakowitz listened to his grandparents nostalgic tales from Bagdad. The older generation spoke Arabic and prepared food from the old country. His grandfather ran a business importing dates, among other items.

Michael was seventeen years old in 1990 when the Gulf War broke out. As he and his mother followed the conflict on the TV screen, she said to him: "There are no Iraqi restaurants in New York, you know.”

Rakowitz has returned to this episode several times in interviews. That’s when he realised the level of invisibility of his family’s culture. The US showed no interest in the cradle of civilisation, beyond the bounds of precious artefacts, oil and articles on Saddam Hussein.

As the 2003 Invasion of Iraq unfolded, Rakowitz looked on with horror as the outside world grieved for stolen works of art, but not for the Iraqi people. This was the starting point for "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist". In 2007 he started to manufacture replicas of 7000 artefacts stolen from the National Museum of Iraq in Bagdad. In 2015, works destroyed by IS were added to the project.

The goal, however, was never to re-create that which was lost. He wants his resurrected objects to haunt the halls of Western art collections, as ghosts.

Since last year, a magnificent Lamassu sculpture made by Rakowitz is towering over Trafalgar Square in London. It’s constructed from 10 000 cans of date syrup – a beloved product in his childhood home.

The Lamassu is there to haunt the place and to act as a reminder of Syrian and Iraqi refugees desperately seeking shelter.

Someone suggested that the sculpture would be better placed next to the British Museum. His answer: No fucking way. As it stands, the ass of the Iraqi beast is turned in the direction of the museum. Just like it ought to be.

When presenting his exhibition in Malmö, Rakowitz came down hard on the dominant museums responsible for the acquisition of the treasures of Mesopotamia. When he realised that the almost 2600 year old Ishtar Gate is located at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, he thought to himself: What is it doing there?
This theme is echoed in the short movie "The Ballad of Special Ops Cody", presented in one of the exhibition rooms. An action figure in the image of an American soldier is exploring a museum in Chicago. He asks the Mesopotamian sculptures: "Don’t you wanna go home?" Here’s your chance, he says, and the cabinet opens.

What’s the meaning of this? A place for everything and everything in its place? That would seem like an unpalatable simplification since the step to "A place for every man and every man in his place" isn’t that far. Issues of origin and what it means to belong are complicated. And an excessive focus on the Western sphere jeopardises the visibility of those we claim to be protecting.

Substantial diasporic communities hailing from the Middle East have lived in the US and in Europe for several decades. The cultural heritage lives on by means of publishers, TV stations, music and grocery stores. It was common in my parents’ generation to accentuate the importance of roots, giving their children names like Ishtar, Nineve, Hammurabi, Nimrud, Sanherib, Enkidu, Nehrin and Assurbanipal.

Some still nurture hope of one day returning to their homelands. Others have given up. Or perhaps they’ve realised that their children and grandchildren – even themselves – have to come to terms with double or triple identities, associated with a myriad of physical locations.

They would indeed be hard-pressed to present a uniform answer to the question: Don’t you wanna go home? How many of them can even speak of a home in singularis? I know I can’t.
Maybe that’s the reason for me crying every time I’ve visited Konsthallen? Perhaps. Sometimes I’ve felt like an anachronism, growing up with pictures of Assyrian kings on the walls. Sometimes I mourn the fact that these beautiful bas-reliefs only exists because of IS and its regime of terror. That the hope for Nineve is crushed.

And sometimes I’ve cried tears of joy as I’ve revisited the fantasy world of my childhood. Rested my eyes on the delicately constructed details. The braided beards, earlobes heavy with lavish jewellery, wrists embellished with flowers, the bizarrely muscular forearms.

Extending the conversation has made me realise something though: The beautiful ghosts at Malmö Konsthall stir up emotions of different kinds, since our experiences differ so much from one another.

It’s a discordant experience that’s hard to explain. But that’s also the unifying quality.

In the audio work Radio Silence, Michael Rakowitz tells the story about a doctor that fled from Iraq to Philadelphia. His sons were badly injured in an explosion during the Iraq War but the doctor is unable to talk about the trauma. So Rakowitz includes a pause to illustrate the speechlessness.

For a short while, there’s nothing but birdsong.

Perhaps because complete silence is unbearable.

I realise I have to invite the musician Nadin Al Khalidi to the exhibition. If anyone can fight the silence, she can.

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– Everything that’s associated with Iraq is, to me, rather macabre.

Nadin Al Khalidi stares at one of the monarchs hanging on the wall. She also notices the artist’s use of chicken stock wrappings for the Nimrud installation.

We’ve met several times before. First time was eleven years ago when I covered Hewar, a cultural café in Bagdad that managed to stay open throughout the wars. It was there Nadin Al Khalidi first came across music from Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Today she’s a long established musician and sings in Arabic in the esteemed band Tarabband.

– I still haven’t been able to define for myself what it is that I’m actually doing. When I was working on the latest album, I dwelled among ghosts for a whole year – pictures I’ve seen on social media and people that might not even exist anymore.

In 2015 the band performed at an amphitheater in Jordan. On stage Nadin Al Khalidi suddenly recalled seeing pictures from a similar amphitheater. The images were from Palmyra where the Islamic State had performed mass executions.

– I remember my uneasiness on stage. Standing there, one and a half hours from the place where IS forces were situated. This was shortly after the Jordan pilot had been burnt alive by the hands of IS.

To be honest, my work is undeniably destructive says Nadin Al Khalidi. Writing songs that carry feelings of flight and pain, but also love. Her experiences as an 11-year-old during the Kuwait War caused Post-traumatic Stress syndrome, but that took Nadin Al Khalidi many years to realise.
But art is miraculous, she concludes. Despite pain and sorrow, art stil emerges.

Nadin Al Khalidi agrees with Michael Rakowitz’ critical assessment that objects are valued higher than human beings. She quotes a line from a Michael Jackson song: "What about us?"

– I believe myself to be a thousand times more valuable than the objects of art that were destroyed. I also firmly believe that my friend, who was shot in Iraq, is a thousand times more important than the pyramids and should be recognised and remembered as a human being.

It's precisely that element in Rakowitz' oeuvre that strikes a chord with Nadin Al Khalidi: his interest for individual fates, and his ability to capture the longing for fellowship via common Iraqi household products. In the summertime when she spots Arabic families picnicking in Pildammsparken, a large park in Malmö, and catches whiffs of their food, her heart sinks.

– I haven’t visited Iraq since I fled in 2001. It’s like an old flame that never really goes out. And the pain will never completely fade.

She eyes Rakowitz’ works.

– This is like a mausoleum to me. Something was taken from you by force. Then you recover somehow. And then you come here only to relive everything again – with beautiful art. For me, that’s really intense. And these are not even the real artworks, she adds laughing.
When I bring up the Ishtar Gate in Berlin, I notice right away that the subject is lost on her.

– If I create a song, it's mine and I can do as I please with it. I just happen to have parents from Iraq and Egypt. I didn’t assist in the creation of the pyramids or the Ishtar Gates. I’m not an heiress.

This statement echoes her own artistic voice, which she describes as anti-nationalistic.

– I perform in Arab countries with round the clock censorship. On stage, I also speak on the subject of individual sexual freedom, and there’s always one or two people from the crowd that discretely come up to me afterwards just to say: no-one talks to us, and about us, on stage the way you do.

She identifies with Michael Rakowitz’ method of gently opening doors in order to expand and bolster diverse thought processes.

Nadin Al Khalidi’s face lights up when she tells me about Tarabband’s latest concert in a refugee camp in Joran. The audience was mostly composed of young children. They attempted to sing along, even though they had never heard the songs before.

– They couldn’t imagine an Arabic woman doing what I did. Performing and leading a band as well as speaking several languages.

She shows me a clip from the concert. A young girl suddenly stands up and turns confidently towards the crowd. She starts clapping and dancing and her friends soon follow.

When I refer to Nadin Al Khalidi as a secular, feministic symbol she protests.

– There’s no need to compare yourself to others. You just have to be able to be yourself. Do it, God damn it!

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When I met Lina Al-nahar she encouraged me to go with her to Iraq. You have to experience the country for yourself, she said. You can’t just rely on what you hear and read.

Before we part, Nadin Al Khalidi tells me that sooner or later she has to overcome her deep-seated resistance and visit Iraq once more.

– You should join me, by the way.

Perhaps that would do the trick. When visiting Konsthallen, I’ve felt like a ghost among ghosts, unable to bear all these discordant feelings welling up inside me. The child that dreamt of Nineve and lion hunts. The woman who feels at home everywhere and nowhere.

Just like Nadin Al Khalidi, I haven’t quite uncovered the meaning of Rakowitz’ exhibition.

I’ll come back, she says.

Me too, I reply.

This essay by Rakel Chukri for Sydsvenskan was translated by Björn Jumme, Malmö Konsthall.