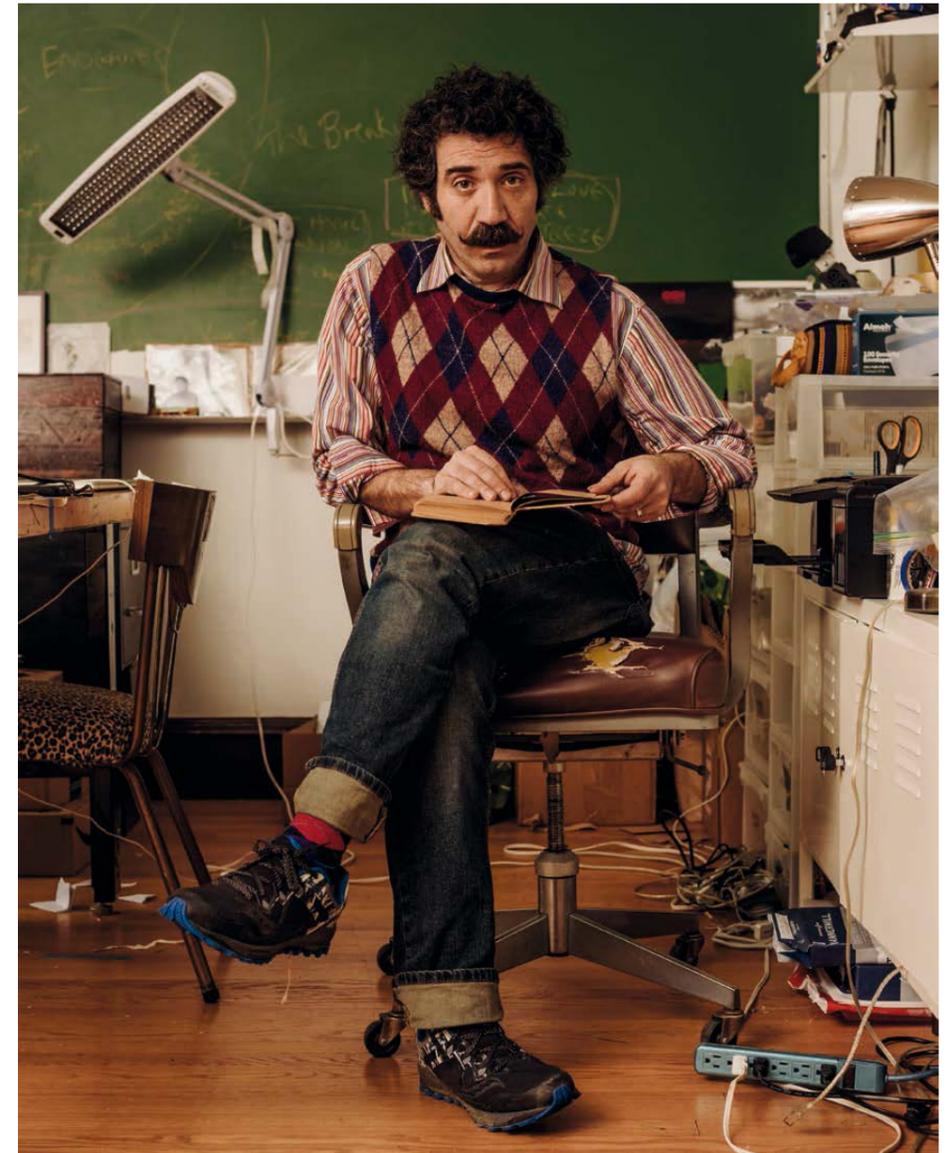
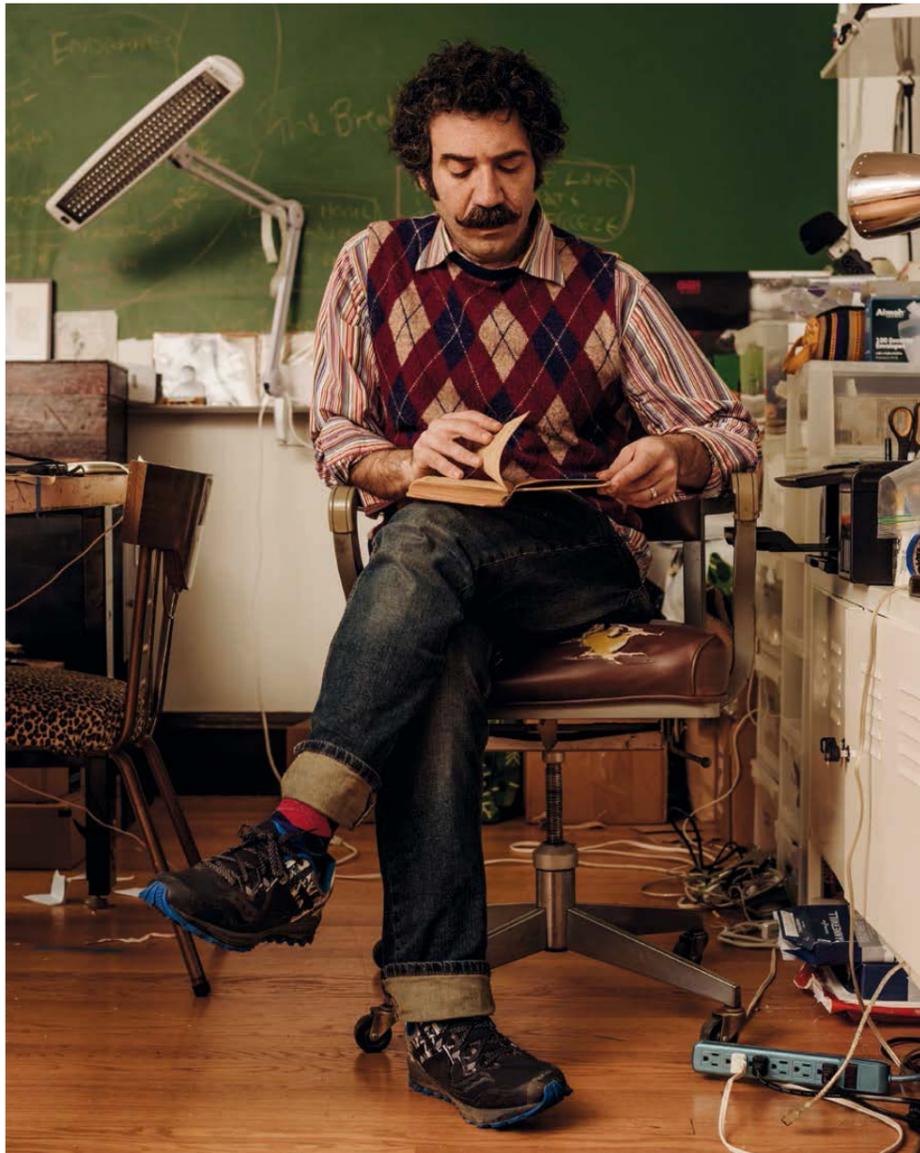


Michael Rakowitz talks to Peter Aspden *Master of Reinvention* in: FT Magazine, June 1/2, 2019, p. 26-23



MASTER OF REINVENTION

Michael Rakowitz's Lamassu currently occupies the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. Made from date-syrup cans, it is part of a project to reproduce all 7,000 Iraqi cultural artefacts destroyed or looted since the US-led invasion of 2003. Ahead of a retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery, the American artist talks to *Peter Aspden*. Photographs by *Whitten Sabbatini*

t is just over a year since Michael Rakowitz's most widely recognised work of art, a sculpted reproduction of an ancient Assyrian creature - face of a human, body of a bull, wings of a bird - first took its place in the heart of central London, on the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square. The copy of the Lamassu, one of the deity-statues that used to guard the entrance to the city of Nineveh, which stood on the outskirts of the modern city of Mosul in northern Iraq, is made out of date-syrup cans and packaging material. It commemorates the original monument, which was destroyed four years ago by Isis forces, having stood largely intact for more than 2,500 years.

Rakowitz, a New York-born artist with an Iraqi-Jewish family background, says he conceived the work as a kind of ghostly provocation to remind the world of the destructive forces that have blighted the land of his forebears. The sculpture is part of an ongoing series called "The invisible enemy should not exist", which, he says, is a reflection on "the threat to cultural heritage in times of war". Its long-term aim is to reproduce, in some shape or form, the 7,000 cultural artefacts that have been reported as missing, either looted or destroyed, since the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003.

The Lamassu is one of the most powerful of the Fourth Plinth works that are commissioned every two years for the square. It currently stares intently in the general direction of Whitehall and the Houses of Parliament, providing a frisson of tension in a public space that has been traditionally reserved for the celebration, rather than the questioning, of military adventure.

Rakowitz, who lives and works in Chicago, has just arrived in London to supervise the installation of his new retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery, and declares himself "so excited" to be opening it while the Lamassu is on display. He says the work was triggered by the US invasion in 2003 to oust Saddam Hussein, and its catastrophic aftermath.

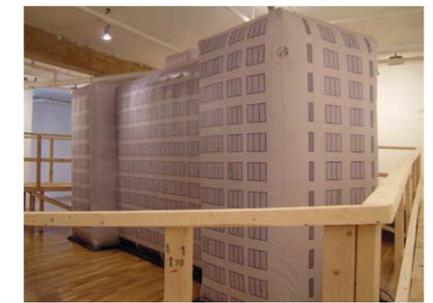
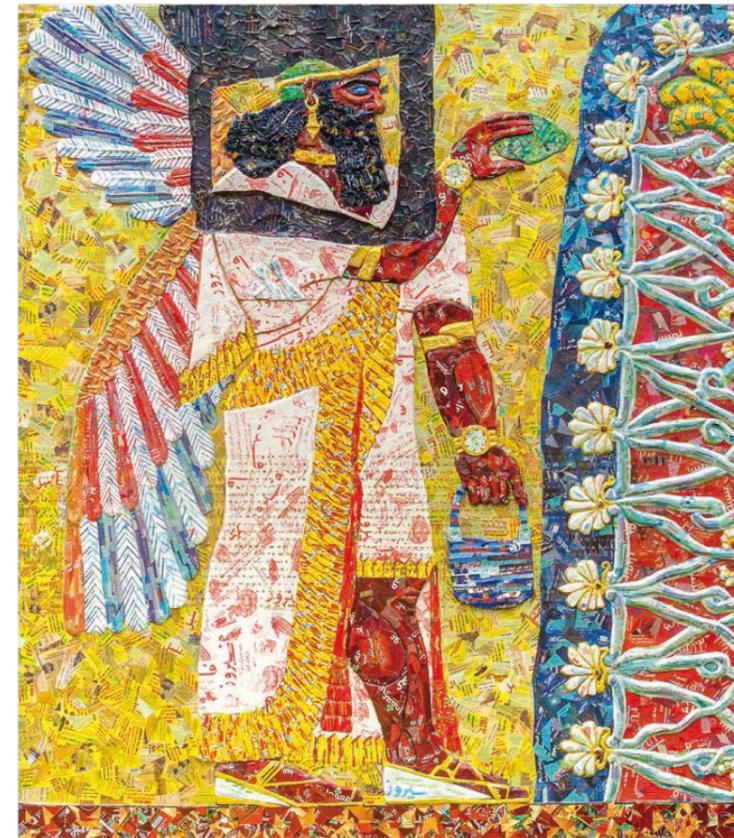
"I had grown up and been made aware by my grandparents of this place called Baghdad, which they were very proud to be from. But here it was being presented to me, by the news media, in a way that was always connected to war. I was establishing myself as an artist, and thinking about it in a serious way, and the question was, 'What do you do in a moment like that?'"

"And I started to think about all those stories told to me by my grandmother and my grandfather, that were at risk of disappearing. And then the kind of dehumanisation that happens as a result of only presenting Iraq through the green-tinted images of CNN, and of the night vision of its buildings being blown up, as opposed to being built."

A kind of epiphany came when he went shopping for groceries in Brooklyn. He saw a can of date syrup that was stamped "Made in Lebanon", which he thought would meet the approval of his mother, who had complained that the more frequently found Israeli version of the syrup was "too filtered, too honeyed" for her tastes. The store owner reassured him, proceeding to give him a lesson in the nuanced geopolitics of the time. "He said the syrup was actually made, not in Lebanon, but in the Iraqi capital, then put into large plastic vats, driven over the border into Syria, where it was put into cans, and then over the border from Syria into Lebanon, where it got a label and was exported to the rest of the world. And this was how Iraqi companies were able to circumvent the UN sanctions from 1990 onward." ▶

This page and far right
Rakowitz's studio in Chicago; details and works in progress from the studio





Facing page

The Lamassu on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, London (2018), part of the ongoing project 'The invisible enemy should not exist'

This page (above)

From 'The invisible enemy should not exist' (2018). Rakowitz used old Middle Eastern newspapers to recreate the Northwest Palace of Nimrud's Room N, destroyed by Isis

This page, right (from top)

A photograph of Rakowitz's grandfather (second from left), taken c1920; 'Dull Roar' (2005), an inflatable model of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St Louis, Missouri - the artwork collapses and rises

again: 'The Breakup' (2010), in which Rakowitz 'connected' various events in the Middle East in the late 1960s with the break-up of The Beatles

◀ The story prompted Rakowitz to reopen his grandparents' import and export business as a store in Brooklyn, with the aim of re-establishing commercial links with Iraq. His grandparents had brought the business from Baghdad to New York when they moved in 1946, but it closed in the 1960s. Despite the lifting of sanctions, he encountered a formidable array of bureaucratic obstacles. "I actually partnered with somebody and they said, 'It's bad business.' I said, 'Yeah, but it could be good art!' To try to import these dates from Iraq in boxes that clearly said 'Product of Iraq'. And that's how the [Lamassu] project actually ended up telling the story of the dates."

The mixture of eclectic references, coincidental happenings and socio-economic footnotes is the trademark of Rakowitz's art. He mines the world for its inherent contradictions and head-spinning absurdities, and represents them through work that links high-level politics, pop culture and the everyday traffic of common citizens. A monument is reimagined through date-syrup cans; an importing business turns into an instant metaphor for global conflict.

I ask Rakowitz whether, as he was re-establishing his grandparents' store, he was rooting for the business itself,

or feeding on his problems to make his art project more resonant. Was he an entrepreneur or an artist? Wasn't there a contradiction? "Of course," he replies. "It was very hard for me to separate myself from the tragedy, because I got very close to the people that I was working with in Iraq. I mean, it was very emotional. Like, when I reopened the company and I went on to the Baghdad business centre, a website, and I posted this request to import dates, they started to call me by my grandfather's last name, and then writing messages to say, 'It's a joy to do business with the son of our city's daughters.'"

"Now, I wish that this didn't have to exist as artwork, that it could exist as just real life, you know? But I knew by opening up the store, I was opening up a story, and there was going to be a narrative that was going to be built." The story continued to get richer: for a good while, the store remained empty, as the dates underwent various import controls. "And, without any dates to sell in the store, people would come in and ask where the dates were."

"And what they ended up with was a conversation, me telling them that the dates were winding their way through the refugee traffic. So, all of a sudden, there was this other kind of

exchange and the store became the space where that could be told. It wasn't embedded journalism, and it wasn't just another talking head on the television."

That fusion of artistic and social concern, which has in recent years become a fashionable trope of contemporary artists, was evident at the beginning of Rakowitz's career. In 1998, when he was in his mid-twenties, he made *paraSITE*, a system of inflatable shelters for the homeless, which were attached to the exterior vents of buildings' ventilation systems in various US cities. The air both inflated and heated the shelters, which were distributed to more than 30 homeless people.

The themes of urban waste, and subsequent renewal, became central to Rakowitz's work, which is frequently threaded with a sharp sense of irony. In "Dull Roar" (2005), which is included in the Whitechapel survey, an inflatable model of Pruitt-Igoe, the infamous failed housing project in St Louis, Missouri, pointlessly collapses and rises in front of us. The decaying, unloved buildings, which became an exemplar of disastrous city planning, were demolished in 1972, just 16 years

after their construction, their rubble then recycled to build luxury homes in a nearby suburb.

The demolition has been widely seen as a symbol of the death of architectural modernism but Rakowitz wants to raise more profound issues about the project's demise. "It was the end of a lot of other things, you know. Isn't it more important to think about what those other 'ends' were, besides the end of modernism? Like the end of a dream of some kind of urban America that was liberated from racism."

But as Rakowitz's reputation burgeoned, he found himself returning to themes raised by his own cultural upbringing. In 2009, an installation, "The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own", examined the improbable connections between western science fiction and the military activities of Saddam Hussein's regime. (He had been inspired by the similarities between the helmets of Saddam's army and that worn by Darth Vader in *Star Wars*.)

A year later, he made *The Breakup*, a radio broadcast and performance which audaciously drew parallels between the 1969 break-up of The Beatles, and the collapse of peace-seeking talks in the Middle East. Once more, a metaphor linking ▶



Rakowitz's studio in Chicago

◀ two seemingly incompatible subjects was pushed to the limit by Rakowitz, whose aim was to examine the effects of failed lines of communication, and the limits of negotiation.

He says he vividly remembers, as a seven-year-old, the death of John Lennon, and was surprised by the intensity of his mother's reaction. "I said to her, 'Who are The Beatles?' And she looked at me like I was an alien. And she took me up to her room, put something on the turntable, gave me the record cover, which was incredibly colourful. It was *Sgt Pepper's*. And she pointed to the lyrics and said, 'It's a story, from the first word in the first song, to the last note.' And I went, 'Wow!'"

A lifelong addiction was born, and Rakowitz became obsessed - his word - with The Beatles' final days, and with pinpointing the precise moment when they broke up. He listened to hours of bootleg tapes from the fabled *Let It Be* sessions - "like listening to your parents arguing in the next room over something", he says - and as he was considering a commission to create a work for a foundation in Jerusalem, the idea struck him: to make an allegory that compared the fate of the four quarters of Jerusalem with that of the four Beatles.

The work took the form of a radio series, "where you could tune in and you wouldn't know whether or not I was talking about music, or I was talking about the Middle East". As in other projects, the deeper he dug, the more persuasive the allegory became. At one point in the *Let It Be* tapes, the group start to discuss whether they should perform a comeback concert in Libya.

"And then they start to talk about how Paul's beard makes him look like a Talmudic student. So maybe they should also do a concert in Israel. And I'm sitting there, and I'm thinking I'm going crazy. And I stopped the tape and I asked my wife to come in and listen to it because two people can't have the same

psychotic episode at the same time, you know? So she verifies that I'm hearing what I'm hearing."

More digging, more synchronicity. A worker at the radio station in Ramallah told him that *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* had been released a few days before the Six-Day War in 1967. "He said, 'We were listening to that album! Those anthemic guitar chords in the opening song, that was [Gamal Abdel] Nasser coming to rescue us, to liberate us! And that crashing chord at the end of "A Day in the Life", that is still resonating for us."

It is a feature of Rakowitz's work that beyond its superficial appeal - on a sunny day, the Lamassu in Trafalgar Square twinkles with the gaudy impertinence of its "skin" of date-syrup cans - there is a backstory that engages the viewer on a more intellectually sophisticated level. This, I say, sets it apart from the work of many of his contemporaries. "I am attracted to work that can make you feel really good and really bad at the same time," he says of the complexity of his subjects. "And I think that there's something redemptive in the reappearance of these artefacts, these ghosts of things that are lost. You talk about a backstory, well, not everyone is going to know exactly what the felt meant to Joseph Beuys [the German artist used the material as a symbol of survival to create his "warmth sculptures"] or what the soup can meant for someone like Warhol.

"I feel really honoured to be able to talk about the elements that connect all these works, and the backstory that's in the work for me. It really is part of the work. You sit with an object long enough and it tells you about itself."

He pauses for a second. "But it can also tell you what it wants to be." 

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Michael Rakowitz, Whitechapel Gallery, June 4 - August 25