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MICHAEL RAKOWITZ'S ART OF RETURN

Through playful, outraged interventions, a sculptor seeks to reclaim a lost Iraq.

By Raffi Khatchadourian

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Rakowitz's parasite sculptures, custom-built to house homeless people in American cities, were inspired by Bedouin tents. Photograph by Paul D'Amato for The New Yorker

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Michael Rakowitz was looking for Kubba, a stall in London's Borough Market that serves Iraqi cuisine. The air was temperamental: a cold mist clung to hair between bouts of drizzling rain. Rakowitz had arrived on a red-eye from

Chicago, where he runs a nine-person studio, producing sculpture that shows frequently on the international art circuit. He had wrapped himself in a dark coat and a checkered kaffiyeh, which pushed up against his wavy, disordered hair. The stall had just opened, and he had never been to it. His phone was no help. “It should be here,” he said, looking up from a map quizzically.

Kubba’s owner, the chef Philip Juma, is a friend and a collaborator of Rakowitz. Last year, they prepared an Iraqi dinner at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, to celebrate the launch of a cookbook that Rakowitz had edited. The book was tied to his most visible public installation: a large sculpture in Trafalgar Square, inspired by an Iraqi monument built in ancient Nineveh—a gypsum carving of a winged protective spirit, called a lamassu, which was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. Rakowitz had “reappeared” the lamassu using the ephemera of exile: cans of Iraqi date syrup in five different brands. To underscore that the project was as much about the present as about the past, the cookbook included dishes by Juma and chefs like Yotam Ottolenghi, as well as by Rakowitz’s mother, who was born to Baghdadi Jewish parents in India. Its title is taken from a Mesopotamian proverb: “A house with a date palm will never starve.”

Although Rakowitz is known as a sculptor—this year, he was awarded the hundred-thousand-dollar Nasher Prize—the act of making things is often secondary to his art. He frequently deploys found objects to create what *Artforum* once called “simple but dizzying interventions.” The pieces can be playful, sometimes invoking his own pop-culture obsessions, like the Beatles, or food. In 2011, at a Park Avenue restaurant, he staged a “happening,” titled “Spoils,” which involved a meal of venison atop date syrup and tahini, served on plates looted from Saddam Hussein’s palace. (He had purchased them on eBay.) When the Iraqi government demanded that the plates be returned, Rakowitz considered it part of the work, and rushed to get them to Iraq’s Prime Minister, who was visiting Washington. They were ferried to Baghdad on a government plane—journeying, through diaspora, from tyrant to elected leader.

“Spoils” ended when the plates were surrendered, but many of Rakowitz’s other pieces evolve over years, sometimes blurring into the world beyond art. “These things are part of a *lived* work,” he told me. In 2004, a year after the invasion of Iraq, he reconstituted an import-export business that had belonged to his late maternal grandfather, Nissim bin Ishaq Daoud bet Aziz, and offered to export to Iraq anything that anyone wanted, free of charge. He called the piece “Return,” and ended up shipping three items: a bootleg CD-ROM of Microsoft Office 98, a battery for a discontinued Nokia phone, and a Paul Auster novel. (“They were portraits of the sender and the receiver,” he told me.) Later, as he expanded on the idea artistically, he also began to broker samples of Iraqi goods to American grocery stores.

Rakowitz, who is forty-six, wears a handlebar mustache, shaped in a half-Ottoman, half-hipster style, with curls at each end. His typically unshaven face is expressive, shifting between uncertainty, empathy, melancholy, and thoughtfulness. Like a character from W. G. Sebald, he is searching and inquisitive, immersed in historical memory, often pursuing the trace routes of exile, with the apparent hope that the ensuing art might heal the traumas of dispossession, of war, of expatriation.

As Arab Jews, Rakowitz’s family had to navigate a triple dislocation: in Iraq, in America, and among other Jews they encountered as émigrés, who could not comprehend their attachment to Arab culture. Nissim Daoud was born in Ottoman Baghdad in 1899, when a thriving community of Jews made up a quarter of the city’s residents. But, in 1941, an Iraqi nationalist aligned with the Nazis orchestrated a coup, and began stoking ethnic tension, which erupted in a pogrom that killed two hundred Baghdadi Jews. Daoud fled to Bombay, part of an exodus that in the coming decades would reduce the city’s Jewish population to less than ten. From India, Daoud helped British intelligence monitor Nazi activity in the Middle East. After India achieved independence, he moved again, settling on Long Island.

Rakowitz grew up living with his family in his grandparents' house. "They were the first installation artists I ever met," he told me. "Their home was an immersive environment. What was on the floor, what was on the wall, what came out of the stereo, what came out of the kitchen was from Iraq. It was tinged with a brokenhearted longing." Although Rakowitz has never been to Iraq—perhaps he never will go, he told me—the influence of his family's estrangement is legible in much of his work. "Michael tries to bring forth something that is dead," his mother told me. "He converts a discarded thing into something else—to say, 'Look, acknowledge us.'"

We found Kubba around a corner. When Rakowitz saw Philip Juma, a thin young man of Iraqi Christian heritage, he quickened his pace and embraced him. "*Asbat eedak*," he said—"Bless your hands," traditional Arabic praise for someone who works in the kitchen. As we stood in the damp air, Juma placed steaming dishes before us, and Rakowitz explained why he had come. The lamassu in Trafalgar Square, a temporary installation, was scheduled to come down in a month; he wanted to secure a home for it. He also had a new commission, in the seaside town of Margate, where T. S. Eliot worked on "The Waste Land."



Rakowitz has "reappeared" hundreds of artifacts looted from Iraq. Photograph by Paul D'Amato for The New Yorker

As Juma cooked, Rakowitz spoke about the Margate project, which was inspired by a monument in Basra that Saddam had dedicated to soldiers who died in his ill-planned war with Iran. Along a waterway separating the two countries, the likeness of uniformed men, cast in metal at an imposing scale, stood and pointed accusingly toward Iran. Ostensibly, the monument was a

memorial, but it also functioned as a dictator's warning to Basra's Shiite population, whose faith spanned the border. After the 2003 invasion, Iraqis living nearby destroyed it. One told the *Times*, "We don't want our children growing up to hate Iran."

Rakowitz told Juma that he wanted to transform the original into a symbol of peace. "I worked with veterans," he explained. "They have become not just pacifists but devoutly dedicated to dismantling the military-industrial complex." His sculpture would be of a British vet who had been stationed in Basra when the Saddam-era monument was torn down. Instead of pointing accusingly over a border, it would point toward Parliament, which had made the decision to go to war in Iraq. In Margate, Rakowitz planned to erect it near a nineteenth-century statue of a man looking out for shipwrecks, which commemorated a rescue mission in which nine rescuers died. The sculptures, facing opposite ways, would stand at human scale, each in its way speaking of sacrifice and deliverance.

"I was trained by artists who were always interested in the quiet, in the counter-monument," Rakowitz said. Whereas Saddam's monument asserted authority, the Margate sculpture was meant to expose vulnerability. It would be cast in concrete and embedded with war mementos contributed by veterans and residents of Margate, which was heavily bombed in the Second World War. "You are going to see these things in the piece, like fossils," Rakowitz told Juma. But the physical installation would be only a part of the work. "It's not just the sculpture," he said. "It's the social space that the sculpture activates." He was hoping to cook an Iraqi meal with Juma beside the work.

"I'd have to get away from here," Juma said.

"We'll figure it out," Rakowitz said.

Juma smiled, and set down his take on *knafa*: mozzarella, crumbled pistachio, orange-blossom water.

"This is evil!" Rakowitz said and grinned.

The meeting was a social visit, but it was also, in a sense, part of the piece. As the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko later told me, "Art can set the conditions for different parts of society to connect, to change their thinking on the site of the work and *during* the process of making it. That is expected in Michael's work. There is something diabolical, in a good sense, about the man. He is a kind of magician, someone who connects things that should not be connected, someone who can surprise."

In Borough Market, rain began to gather overhead, and seagulls cawed. As we left Kubba, Rakowitz talked about the mementos that he was gathering for the Margate sculpture. "I am always building a collection for these works," he said. In his studio, in Chicago, there is a chalkboard diagram that he has not erased since 2015: a memorial to a cherished conversation. "I'm never going to be neat," he told me, ruefully. Several years ago, he saw Leonard Cohen's Olivetti typewriter on eBay and bought it; likewise, an Iraqi military helmet inspired by Darth Vader. Both purchases evolved into projects. "I am a firm believer that if you sit with an object long enough it starts to tell you about itself," he said.

Rakowitz stopped walking and pulled out a worn plastic bag containing azure beads and a broken thread. "Lapis lazuli, from Afghanistan," he said. "They broke about a year ago, but in Iraq you are always supposed to have a blue stone. It's protection against evil, and ever since I was a kid I have never left the house without a blue stone."

The beads were a gift from a collaborator in Bamyan, where, in 2001, the Taliban destroyed ancient Buddhas carved into travertine cliffs. Rakowitz, moved by their absence, organized a stone-carving workshop there, to train Afghans in the art of their

ancestors. He planned to tell the story at the Documenta (13) exhibition, at a museum in Kassel, Germany. But, as he worked, the project changed. Learning that Allied forces in the Second World War had bombed the museum, destroying some of its rare books, he asked an Afghan artist to sculpt simulacra of the volumes using Bamyán travertine. As Rakowitz saw it, the ravaged artifacts could be made to reëmerge, to haunt and to rehabilitate, with “one cultural trauma suturing another.” He called the work “What Dust Will Rise?”

The piece echoed Rakowitz’s early interest in sculpture, which began in high school, when a stone carver invited him to apprentice. “To this day, stone is the material that I love the most,” he said, though he rarely uses it now. “The removal of material is something that I took to. It was therapeutic.”

As an undergraduate at SUNY Purchase, Rakowitz was drawn to Donald Judd’s Minimalism and to Richard Serra’s monumentalism, until he enrolled in a class taught by Allan Wexler, who had a more symbolic approach to sculpture. In one piece, Wexler took apart a Braun coffeemaker, then rebuilt it to expose its inner workings. In others, he examined the Seder as a form of art. “It’s performance—it’s the projection of magical meaning onto objects,” Rakowitz recalled.

From Purchase, Rakowitz found his way to a graduate program for public art at M.I.T., which had six faculty members and about as many students. Rakowitz lacked fluency in art theory, and at first felt lost. He crafted tiny pieces in bottle caps, which he surreptitiously screwed onto bottles in stores. He liked the idea of a surprise micro-exhibition, but, he told me, “I think my teachers felt it was contentless.” Wodiczko, who taught there, encouraged him to be more finely attuned, to engage in “fearless listening.”

On a winter break, Rakowitz travelled to Jordan, for a government-sponsored program in al-Karak, a town with a grand citadel built by Crusaders, to develop the area’s historic stone architecture for tourism. He quickly drifted from the program; the trip brought him closer to Iraq than he had ever been, and he found himself less interested in relics than in the daily life of the Near East. Visiting a Bedouin encampment, he studied shelters made from tapestries. “I was amazed,” he told me. “The tents were set up differently every night, to react to wind patterns—in some cases for ventilation, in some to make sure the tent would not collapse.”

Back in Boston, Rakowitz was walking out of a movie one night when he noticed a homeless man sleeping under a building’s ventilation grate for warmth. “Immediately, in my head, there was this constellation: the wind from the desert, and this wind that is the by-product of a building’s heating system,” he told me. “In both cases, there were nomads, and I saw what it would mean to harness all of this air and to materialize it, like a cloud.” He imagined shelters for homeless people, made from garbage bags and duct tape, that could attach to building vents. They would inflate and be heated by the exhaust. He would call them *parasites*.

Rakowitz built the shelters according to their inhabitants’ preferences, making them acts of expression, too. One day at M.I.T., he discussed them with the artist Joan Jonas, recounting the homeless men’s biographies and desires: one wanted a shelter resembling Jabba the Hutt; another, a dome. “She says, ‘You know, the work is beyond just the shelter,’” Rakowitz recalled. “‘You’re talking about dispossession. You’re telling me this is about Massachusetts. You’re actually talking about Baghdad.’ It was incredible. She gave me permission to story-tell.”

After completing his degree, Rakowitz moved to New York, where he continued making *parasite* shelters. (He still builds them every winter.) At the time, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was cracking down on homelessness, and, when the *Times* learned of Rakowitz’s project, a Metro-desk reporter covered it as an anti-Giuliani agitation. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, then a curator at

PS1, read the piece, and liked that the shelters were not easily understood as art. “His love for the specificity of each individual attracted my attention,” she told me. She invited him to show at the museum. When Rakowitz learned that PS1’s environmental controls were too poor to protect climate-sensitive works, he ran a pipe between a gallery space and an outer wall, to balance its temperature. “It was really shocking to me,” she recalled. “I thought I was giving him a break. Instead, he saw PS1 as a place that needed help.”

Rakowitz had an appointment near the Thames. By the time we began heading over from Borough Market, it was dusk, and the streets glistened under the lights. He fell into a reflective mood. “When I was growing up, I had a lot of trouble with numbers,” he told me. “Learning how to read the clock was stressful. My grandmother told me about these singing towers in Baghdad that told the time. I didn’t know it then, but she was talking about minarets.” In the late nineties, Rakowitz devised a piece that connected his grandmother’s story with an object from his collection: a mosque-shaped alarm clock, which Muslims used in places where broadcasting the call to prayer was discouraged. Equipped with the clock and a megaphone, he went to the tops of high buildings and broadcast the call five times a day.

The American-led invasion of Iraq, in 2003, had a momentous effect on him. “I was split down the middle,” he told me. “The place that my grandparents had fled from was being bombed by the place that they had fled to.” As coalition bombs fell on Baghdad, he recalled his teen-age experience of the 1991 Gulf War—how, during a run of CNN programming, his mother, Yvonne, had remarked, “You know, there are no Iraqi restaurants in New York.” The comment stuck. In 2001, during the invasion of Afghanistan, New Yorkers had showed solidarity by lining up at an Afghan café called Khyber Pass; at the onset of the Iraq War, two years later, there was no comparable place to go. This absence seemed to touch on a deeper cultural invisibility—one that had made it easier to initiate the attack and harder to heal its wounds. In response, Rakowitz enlisted Yvonne and launched his first culinary intervention, “Enemy Kitchen,” cooking Iraqi dishes and teaching recipes.

The more he explored Iraq as a subject, the more his art drew on his associations with it. The following year, he and Yvonne had a series of intense conversations about his grandfather. Nissim Daoud had died when Rakowitz was young, but the two shared a deep bond. “They were like one heartbeat,” Yvonne recalled. Rakowitz’s first playthings were Daoud’s worry beads; when he was a teen-ager, his mother gave them to him, along with Daoud’s electric razor. “His hairs were in there,” Rakowitz told me. “I was breathless. It was an instant memorial.”

When Rakowitz reopened Daoud’s import-export company, in 2004, he was interested in the human dimensions of trade with a war-torn society. “I wanted to show how a system worked, but I didn’t feel like I needed to be an objective, disembodied voice,” he said. His title, “Return,” hinted at a personal yearning. The items he shipped had, like him, never been in Iraq; could one think of them *going back*?

“Return,” which began as a rented mailbox in Queens, grew into a career-defining project. One day in 2006, Rakowitz was in Brooklyn, shopping in Sahadi’s, the grocery on Atlantic Avenue where his grandparents had shopped, when he encountered a can labelled “Second House Products Date Syrup.” He was intrigued. His grandfather had made date syrup with a mortar and pestle; later, his children bought it imported. When Rakowitz took the can to the register, Charlie Sahadi told him, “Your mother’s going to love this. It’s from Baghdad.”

Rakowitz looked at the label: “Product of Lebanon.” Baffled, he asked how that could be, and Sahadi explained that it was a marketing deception, begun before the 2003 invasion, to circumvent sanctions. Dates—once Iraq’s second-largest export—were

smuggled across the border, labelled, then shipped onward. After Saddam's fall, the practice continued amid wartime restrictions.

Rakowitz wondered if he could use his grandfather's company to import the dates and sell them with their identity unmasked. The fact that Iraq had a barely functional government and was mired in war only made the idea more alluring; the shipment would have to overcome the obstacles that people faced. He returned to Sahadi's, seeking advice.

"It's really bad business," Charlie Sahadi said.

"I know," Rakowitz said. "But it's really good art."

With Sahadi's help, he arranged for an Iraqi exporter to ship a ton of dates. Then he found a retail space on Atlantic Avenue and put decals on the windows with the name of Nissim Daoud's firm, Davisons & Co., along with his grandfather's image and his own. In English and Arabic, he advertised "free shipping to Iraq" and a supply of Iraqi dates.

Rakowitz stocked his store with the falsely labelled date syrup, and with dates grown in California from Iraqi seeds. On a wall, he created a time line documenting the history of Iraqi date farming. Then, four days a week, he sat behind a counter, coördinated with exporters, and engaged with walk-ins seeking to place orders or just to talk.

The simple conceit—importing a ton of fruit—quickly turned into a project of novelistic complexity. First, the dates were trucked to the Jordanian border, where they sat for days in a convoy filled with fleeing Iraqis, only to be turned away because they had not been tested for traces of radioactive particles dispersed by American munitions. An attempt to route them through Syria encountered more obstacles. Rakowitz's chief partner had fled to Jordan; a date farmer was kidnapped and killed. Weeks went by. The dates deteriorated.

On Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue, Rakowitz reconstituted an import-export business run by his grandfather, who fled persecution in Iraq. From the store, he sold imported dates and date syrup—poignant objects for an émigré community whose heritage was complicated by war. Photograph courtesy the artist

As the delays mounted, people across the United States reached out: émigrés from Yemen and Morocco. At the store, one Iraqi man described how he had admonished Colin Powell. Another scanned Rakowitz's time line and muttered, "Seeing all this makes

me nostalgic, sad, confused, and sick to my stomach.” His name was Shamoon Shamoon, but he had changed it to Shamoon Salih, hoping not to perplex Americans. He had thick glasses, a broad mustache, a kind face.

Shamoon ordered some dates. “Just a little something for *thikra*,” he said. Rakowitz asked him to explain the term, and he told a story, from the fifties, about a leftist exiled to Turkey by Iraq’s monarchy. At the border, the man asked an officer for a bag of dirt to take with him. “The officer said, ‘What’s the big deal? They have dirt in Turkey,’” Shamoon recalled. “The man said, ‘This is *thikra*. This is the memory of the dust of the beloved homeland.’”

Rakowitz’s ton of dates were too spoiled to be delivered. But, during the project, he learned that DHL was operating in Baghdad, and he decided to use it to import a smaller batch—a hundred and ten pounds, bringing his total cost to eighty-five hundred dollars. The morning he went to retrieve them, he awoke with tears in his eyes. Whatever “Return” had revealed socially or politically, it was also about how an American like him could feel the sting of exile. “Do I have the right to feel in all this?” he asked. “I have never set foot in Iraq. I don’t know if I ever will.”

With his store crammed with onlookers, Rakowitz slowly unpacked the dates, documenting the varieties. (“Deep red. Like wine. Tiny.”) On the final evening of the project, three months after it began, he noted in his log, “Just before the store closes, Shamoon Salih returns for his taste of *thikra*. He looks at the boxes, smiling slightly and nodding, assessing the four different varieties. He slowly put his first date in his mouth, closes his eyes, smiles, and softly says, ‘This is forty-six years in the making.’”

The idea of “reappearing” destroyed Iraqi monuments came to Rakowitz one afternoon, when he was sitting in his store thinking about an article that he had read on the looting of Iraq’s National Museum. “It didn’t matter if you were for the war or against,” he told me. “This was a loss for all of humanity.” Yet Rakowitz was struck that the concern for the lost objects did not extend to the Iraqi people. He had been invited to exhibit work the following year, and he wondered how he could bring back the looted artifacts in a way that summoned both the cultural and the human loss.

He knew that he didn’t want to make realistic copies of the objects. “If these come back as ghosts, they should wear the skin of a provenance that is more confusing,” he told me. Surveying his shop, he sensed the mislabelled date syrup speaking to him. “It was almost like the pressure of xenophobia had been visited on these cans,” he said. “They were too scared to tell me where they were from—a terrified object.” Inspired, he began using such materials—food labels, newspaper clippings, and other disposable items that could be found in an émigré’s house—to re-create the artifacts in papier-mâché. “I wanted to keep the wound alive, and show the urgency, the impossibility, of making these things again,” he said.

Rakowitz set out to “reappear” every object lost from the museum. When ISIS destroyed ancient stone panels from the Northwest Palace, in Nimrud, he added those, too: two hundred exquisitely carved wall-size reliefs. Borrowing a phrase from ancient Babylon, he called the project “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist.” He has been working on the “reappearances” for thirteen years.

This January, at Jane Lombard Gallery, in New York, I saw his rendition of a chamber from the Northwest Palace, which archeologists call Room F. He had measured the precise dimensions and, using two-by-fours, hung his papier-mâché panels where the originals would have stood: a tree motif in a corner, a godlike creature on a wall. They were vibrant and playful but also suggested a whispered lament. Between the panels, Rakowitz had left empty spaces, indicating where stone reliefs had once stood. These had been spared destruction, but only because archeologists removed them from Iraq decades before ISIS arrived; one was in the Brooklyn Museum, a subway ride away. It was hard to know which absence was more haunting: the destroyed panels that

Rakowitz had brought back in effigy, or the vacant spaces, representing art that still existed but was just as lost to Iraq. Interpretations spun out of the arrangement: was it about the destruction of heritage, about cultural imperialism, or about *tbikra*? Paradoxically, the piece seemed to be built on layers of emptiness.

The embankment along the Thames was crowded with commuters, and Rakowitz thrust his hands in his pockets as we pushed against an evening wind. He was calling his Margate sculpture “April Is the Cruellest Month”—a reference both to “The Waste Land” and to the fall of Baghdad in 2003—but the piece was in effect an addendum to “The Invisible Enemy.” Half an hour outside London, in Erith, a mold was being formed of a young British veteran, Daniel Taylor, who had volunteered to model for the sculpture.

That summer, Taylor had been shuttled to Pinewood Studios, where the James Bond movies are filmed, and dressed in combat gear, before being photographed in a room fitted with a hundred cameras to capture a 3-D image. A robotic milling machine then used the data to carve his likeness from a block of polyurethane foam. This was being used to make the mold, which had to be strong enough to sustain a thousand pounds of concrete and mementos.

As we walked, Rakowitz told me that he had met Taylor only briefly—just long enough to explain his basic vision—but that they were planning to talk at length that evening. Heading to Taylor’s apartment, he explained that his work with antiwar veterans had begun in 2012, when he decided to buy a food truck for “Enemy Kitchen,” and staff it with Iraqis as chefs and former soldiers as their servers. The veterans, like him, had a relationship with Iraq that was intimate but distant; troubled, no matter the good intentions.

The food truck led to other projects, which gave him insight into the complex traumas that soldiers can endure. “It’s not just about P.T.S.D.,” Rakowitz told me. “It is moral injury.” In 2017, he began working with a former medic, Gin McGill-Prather, on a piece involving a doll called Special Ops Cody, which American service members in Iraq could buy at the PX and mail to their children. In 2005, insurgents had obtained a Cody, taken a blurry photo, then claimed that it was a captured soldier and threatened to behead him. The military scrambled to locate the captive, until it realized that he did not exist.

“I had to get that doll, and for three years I tried to hunt it down,” Rakowitz told me. “Finally, I did, but I had no idea what to do with it.” Then he learned that, when the insurgents carried out the hoax, McGill-Prather had been deployed at a detention facility outside Umm Qasr, near the Kuwaiti border. At the time, American troops had fired on the facility’s captives, and McGill-Prather helped identify the dead: gruesome work that, in one case, involved taking a retinal scan of a man whose eye was blown into his head. “She had a reckoning with that,” Rakowitz said.

The ensuing project was also at Jane Lombard: a short film called “The Ballad of Special Ops Cody.” In jerky stop-motion, the doll emerges from its hostage photo and steps into the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, which houses a collection of ancient Sumerian temple sculptures. Cody strides past a towering lamassu and grapples his way into a vitrine with the sculptures. McGill-Prather supplies his dialogue, improvised along guidelines set by Rakowitz. “I told her I wanted to know what a votive figurine from 2005 C.E. would say to one from 2005 B.C.E.,” he recalled. “I wanted Cody to offer them liberation, something that was impossible, and that the figures would remain petrified, too frightened to move.”

With the narration drifting between wartime flashbacks and elegiac responses to scenarios that Rakowitz staged with the doll, the video was affecting enough to raise the hair on your arms. As Cody surveys the empty-eyed, impassive figures, McGill-Prather

says, haltingly, “When I see you, your faces—I see your faces without eyes, and I think of that day. They were broken, but we destroyed them. You were broken, so we keep you locked up.”

Reaching Vauxhall, we crossed a thoroughfare into an area between the American Embassy and commuter-train tracks. Taylor and his girlfriend had just moved into a subsidized apartment there, after squatting for a time in an abandoned church. When Rakowitz knocked, Taylor appeared, wearing track pants, a turtleneck, and a necklace with a crystal. He was smiling, but with an uncertain expression. Big glasses shielded sorrowful eyes. He had sandy-blond hair that stood up when he ran a hand through it.

Rakowitz gave Taylor a warm hug, and we moved to a meticulously kept sitting room. Since leaving the Army, Taylor explained, he had lived with the constant anxiety that a sergeant would blast in and berate him for any disarray. There was some gentle electronica playing. Periodically, the rumble of passing trains filled the apartment.

Taylor folded his thin frame into a sofa, and spoke about his upbringing and his military service, which was brief and drenched in fear, and ended with a prison sentence, after he punched an officer. Later, he was given a diagnosis of P.T.S.D. and found his way to an antiwar group, Veterans for Peace. He hoped to become a therapist, to help people like him.

“We came to Kuwait, and the Americans showed us an awful, splayed piece of metal,” he recalled. “I had never seen anything so horrific. This was shrapnel from rockets being fired at us. I looked at that metal, thinking, *That* is searing through the sky at any moment! In Iraq, I prayed to fire my weapon, just so I could fight back. That’s how bad it got. When we were killing them, I actually felt happy about it.”

“Yeah,” Rakowitz said, in a near-whisper.

With his voice wavering, Taylor described a bombardment on his base, and his growing disaffection with the military mission in Iraq. “Something’s got to change!” he said, suddenly. “Which is why I have had a think, and I am going to give you something.” He ran out, then returned with a small bag containing items that he wanted in the sculpture. “These things haunt me,” he said. “I want to let go of them.”

Rakowitz asked if he should open it later. “You can open it now,” Taylor said, wiping away tears. The apartment rattled as a train passed, and Rakowitz carefully excavated the bag’s contents: flags and other mementos, including a combat medal that Taylor had earned in Basra.

Sensing the importance of the medal, Rakowitz tried to dissuade him from parting with it. “You mentioned that it is a kind of currency for you—” he began, but Taylor interrupted, saying, “I want to spend it now! I don’t want it anymore.” A bit later, he added, “I’m in a boat, doing my best to paddle, but, you know, I can feel healing coming.” Then he smiled uncertainly. “In my own selfish way, I can leave myself by the sea in Margate.”

The next day, Rakowitz took what Taylor had given him to Erith, along with other mementos that he had collected. He carried it all in a large rolling suitcase, which he dragged through the city’s industrial landscape. Brick factories dating to the First World War stood alongside windowless buildings with metal siding. Near a depot for used clothes, the pavement looked like an exploded lost and found.

The White Wall Company occupies an old building with a thirty-foot ceiling. “This was once a cannon factory,” Rakowitz said. He had been working with the company, which specializes in art fabrication, since he was awarded the commission in Trafalgar Square; White Wall had built the lamassu for him, with engineers working out how to keep a large structure constructed out of date-syrup cans from blowing over once it was set atop a plinth.

We entered through a squeaky door. An employee looked at Rakowitz’s luggage. “Did you come straight from the airport?” she asked.

“No, no,” Rakowitz said. “I’m saving on shipping!” A group of people gathered, some with White Wall, some with England’s Creative Coast, a festival associated with Turner Contemporary gallery, which was co-sponsoring the installation. While surveying the polyurethane likeness of Taylor—a seven-piece fibreglass mold was being fitted around it—Rakowitz told the engineers that he did not want the concrete to look polished. He had visited Margate to scout the location, and, he said, “I was very inspired by the chalk that is part of the cliffs in the geology—the calcite. When it went into the water, it was like sea glass. It would become smooth, but also these holes would be carved through it, and I just loved that.” He was hoping for a textured, porous effect. Nodding, a project manager said, “Bubbles would be good.”

Everyone headed for a room holding items gathered from the veterans and from Margate locals who had participated in workshops for the project: a geode that a soldier picked up in Oman, a letter from Gaza. All the objects would be photographed before they were embedded in the sculpture; the photos would be exhibited, along with personal statements, at the Turner gallery. A Turner employee who had run the workshops walked Rakowitz through the stories: one local woman had offered a poppy to mark war traumas passed down to grandchildren. “She went to a mine crater that saw the Battle of the Somme, and every anniversary people scatter these into the crater,” she said.

“This is just amazing,” Rakowitz said, surveying the mementos. “The provenance is what gives it weight.” From his luggage, he produced more things people had given, and some mementos of his own: pearls from Umm Qasr and date seeds. “In Bamyán, one of the stores had dates from Basra,” he said. “I kept those since 2012.” He looked at them. “I am piecing together an idea of Iraq that can only have existed through the stories and the culture that has been transmitted to me.” Parting with the objects wasn’t easy, but he felt that he, too, should sacrifice something. “I’m letting go,” he said.

The Margate project—situated outside the glare of the international art world—came at a good time for Rakowitz. Since 2007, he had been making art about looted artifacts and cultural expropriation, offering a quiet critique of the art institutions that made the removal of Iraqi heritage possible. Then, in 2018, he became embroiled in one of the most overt acts of criticism of a museum in recent memory. Overnight, the glare became blinding.

Rakowitz's most visible public installation sat in Trafalgar Square—a statue of an ancient protective spirit called a lamassu, built from date-syrup cans. He says that he is inspired by the “projection of magical meaning onto objects.” Photograph courtesy the artist

Early that year, as curators working at the Whitney prepared for the Biennial, they had asked Rakowitz to screen “The Ballad of Special Ops Cody,” and to install Room G, from the Northwest Palace, in the lobby. But then news broke that the vice-chairman of the Whitney’s board owned a company that manufactured tear gas being used on asylum seekers. Employees wrote a protest letter, and Rakowitz, in support, reached out to the curators. “They were lovely,” he told me. They invited him to respond to the issue in his work. Instead, he withdrew from the show, believing that it would remain private. Soon afterward, his withdrawal leaked, and he became a headline. “The Whitney Biennial: 75 Artists Are In, and One Dissenter Steps Out,” the *Times* reported. Later, other artists in the show addressed the issue in their work, and some threatened to withdraw. By summer, the board member had resigned.

For a time, Rakowitz told me, trips overseas were a welcome escape from the spotlight. But his involvement in museum criticism continued. Returning from Erith, we had dinner at the home of an Iraqi-born artist, Jananne Al-Ani. She owned one of Rakowitz’s pieces, an Iraqi military helmet based on the Darth Vader design, cast in resin and embedded with toy soldiers. He put it on and mugged. But, as the wine flowed, he became sombre, noting that “Return” was under curatorial assault, amid another museum protest. The piece was in a group exhibition at PS1, which MOMA had acquired in 2008. The show, titled “Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991-2011,” was designed to explore a country still mired in war. Al-Ani also had a piece in it, a video evoking a drone’s targeting of Iraqi soil: aerial photos of archeological mounds and farms, set to staticky bursts of military radio chatter.

The MOMA protests centered on a board member and trustee, Larry Fink, who had ties to a company that runs commercial prisons. Just before “Theater of Operations” opened, in November, Rakowitz flew to New York and met with Al-Ani and with Rijin Sahakian, an essayist who had contributed to the exhibition’s catalogue. By then, one artist had withdrawn, and Rakowitz was uncertain what he should do. During the meeting, Sahakian mentioned that the chairman of MOMA’s board, Leon Black, headed an investment firm with a stake in Constellis Holdings, which owned the latest incarnation of Blackwater—a company

whose mercenaries had fired into a crowd of Iraqi civilians in 2007, slaughtering seventeen people. Constellis was still active in Iraq, she noted, sharing a recruitment ad depicting men firing guns. The text asked, “Ready for your next adventure?”

The three raised their concerns with the museum’s director, Kate Fowle, and the show’s curators, who told them that their worry was misplaced, because MOMA and MOMA PS1 had separate boards. Rakowitz was unmoved. “The connection is right there in the name,” he told me. Afterward, Sahakian reviewed public documents indicating that MOMA assists PS1 with management, development, and funding, and that Black was an ex-officio member of PS1’s board. His son, who works with him, was a full board member.

Rakowitz understood that his involvement in the protest might affect his career, but any other path seemed to lead him to hypocrisy. Instead of withdrawing, he proposed altering “Return” by pausing a video that told the story of his Brooklyn store and posting a statement. The curators refused, and after three unsuccessful offers Rakowitz took matters into his own hands. With his assistant, he researched the kind of media player the museum might be using, narrowing the list to four possibilities. Then he bought four remotes, and walked into PS1, paying cash for a ticket. (“It’s good to be paranoid a little bit,” he told me, laughing.) Finding “Return,” he stopped the video and put up his statement. PS1 quickly undid his intervention—even as it allowed other artists to alter their work in ways unrelated to the institution. Frustrated, Rakowitz consulted a lawyer and demanded that his name be stripped from the piece if it could not be shown as he intended. Just before the show closed, the museum agreed to remove his name.

By then, thirty-seven participants in the show had signed a letter expressing concern about MOMA’s board, hoping for a response. (None came.) One of the Iraqi signatories, Ali Yass, had been unable to visit New York because of his asylum status in Germany. He felt so silenced that he invited activists to make small tears in his paintings on the show’s final day, as a protest. Hearing about Yass’s plan, the museum rushed to remove his work, and called in N.Y.P.D. officers to guard the space. (PS1 says that the work was “removed from view to ensure its safety.”) Distraught, Yass called Rakowitz, who consoled him. “I am furious,” Rakowitz told me, at the time.

Still, he was optimistic that art institutions would become more careful about their entanglements. In London, he had visited Tate Modern to offer his Trafalgar Square sculpture as a gift. (The idea of selling the lamassu was unthinkable, he told me.) Initially, he hoped the piece could travel indefinitely after it was removed. “There is something about it being in a constant diasporic relationship throughout its life that interests me,” he said—not letting on, until months had passed, that he had proposed to the Tate that it share custody of the sculpture with an Iraqi museum, allowing the work to travel back and forth. This spring, he told me that the Tate had agreed.

“It is truly refreshing,” he said, and shared an excerpt from his proposal. “The perpetual migration between these institutions acknowledges the contemporary Iraqi situation, in which so much of the country now exists outside of its borders due to the succession of wars and occupation,” he wrote. “It also acknowledges the desire to return.”

Pigeons fluttered across Trafalgar Square. The sun was bright. A man dressed as Yoda, holding a staff, had engineered a way to make it look as though he were levitating. Buskers sang, and crowds gathered.

The square sits between the National Gallery and the Mall, which leads to Buckingham Palace. At the center, a towering column supports a sculpture of Admiral Horatio Nelson, who commanded the British fleet against Napoleon. At the far corners are four

plinths; two hold statues of generals who assisted in the conquest of India, and a third has a sculpture of George IV on a horse. The fourth plinth was meant for a monument to William IV, but the sculpture was never made. In 2005, the mayor of London began inviting artists to design pieces for it, and it is now one of England's most important spaces for public art. We approached the fourth plinth, where the lamassu stood: a chimera, fourteen feet long, with a bull's body, a falcon's wings, and a human head, its face set in an expression of implacable calm. The date-syrup cans glinted in the sun. In the years that the piece had stood there, some of the cans had lost their color. Strangely, only those that were accurately labelled as from Iraq had not.

The monument, inspired by a design from an imperial court, was visually at home in the square, even as it asserted its own complicated story. As the showpiece of "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist," Rakowitz told me, it was "one of the most meaningful things I have had the luck to do." At its base, he met two Iraqi émigrés—friends of his, who took pictures with him and chatted, until Rakowitz broke away to silently take in the piece a last time.

As we stood there, I thought of what Rakowitz had written in the store log for "Return": "I have never set foot in Iraq. I don't know if I ever will." Later, I asked why not, and he explained by recounting a dream. "I was at an art event in Istanbul," he said. "It had ended. Some people were going to Syria, others to Palestine. Then somebody was, like, 'Are you going to Iraq? There's a flight!' I was at the ticket desk, and a friend was there, and I said, 'I don't think I should go.' She said, 'No,' and I said, 'Why?' And she said, 'Because some things in this life should still make us tremble.' I woke with that. I was, like, 'What does that mean?'" He smiled and ran a hand through his hair. "I think it means there is an immensity to it. It feels like an unpromised land, a place I don't need to go to in order to consummate my relationship with it."

He thought for a moment. "The food, the reappearance of artifacts—all of these things," he said. "When they are enunciated away from the place, it almost seems like a magic trick, being able to close distances, and protect against the will of those who say you don't belong here. It's, like, they can't keep you from having a relationship to that place just because they forced you out." Then uncertainty set in. Maybe he would go, he said, noting, "I don't want to foreclose anything."

A week later, he travelled to Sweden, to exhibit another room from the Northwest Palace. Changing planes in Copenhagen, he had felt drained, but when he spotted a gate serving an Iraqi Airways flight for Baghdad he stopped to take a photo. He sent it to me, writing, "Was tempted by this possible detour." A couple of weeks later, he was en route to Dubai. From the plane, he wrote again, a single line: "I just flew over Basra!!!" ♦

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*Raffi Khatchadourian became a staff writer at *The New Yorker* in 2008.*

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