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Michael Rakowitz. Courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center.
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MICHAEL RAKOWITZ WINS \$100,000 NASHER PRIZE

Michael Rakowitz, the Chicago-based, Iraqi American artist known for producing powerful works that often address complicated histories and events, such as the death of Tamir Rice—the twelve-year-old boy who was fatally shot by a Cleveland police officer in 2014—and ISIS’s systematic campaign to destroy cultural heritage, has been named the winner of the \$100,000 Nasher Prize.

Awarded by the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, the prize recognizes artists who “elevate the understanding of sculpture and its possibilities.” Rakowitz will be presented with an award designed by Renzo Piano, the architect who designed the center, at a ceremony in Dallas on April 4, 2020. The forty-five-year-old artist is the fifth recipient of the honor. Previous winners include Isa Genzken (2019), Theaster Gates (2018), Pierre Huyghe (2017), and Doris Salcedo (2016).

Since his career began in the late 1990s, Rakowitz has created works that are the product of intensive research and that attempt to spur social change. In 1997, he began developing his ongoing series “paraSITE,” custom-built, inflatable shelters designed for and in collaboration with people who are homeless. Today, more than ninety structures have been made and distributed in cities such as Baltimore, Berlin, Boston, Chicago, Ljubljana, and New York.

After the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Rakowitz began making works that consider his own heritage—his mother’s parents left Iraq when the country’s Jewish population started to face discrimination in the early 1940s, eventually settling in New York. For *RETURN*, 2006, he reopened his grandfather’s former import/export business in a Brooklyn storefront, where packages and letters could be sent and received from Iraq.

Rakowitz also started to use his practice to grapple with issues such as displacement and the aftermath of political conflicts. For his ongoing project *The invisible enemy should not exist*, 2007–present, he is working to reconstruct some seven thousand artifacts that were looted or destroyed in the raiding of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad as well as by ISIS in 2015.

“Michael Rakowitz’s work bridges, on the one hand, social sculpture—what we’ve come to call relational aesthetics—and embodied *material* work on sculpture, with a great sense of humor and a great sense of empathy,” says Nasher Prize juror Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. “Michael’s work is about healing and about how to take the problem of cultural destruction and transform that into a resource for a very optimistic vision of the reconstruction of our society.”

Rakowitz was selected for the award by the 2020 Nasher Prize jury, comprising Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of Castello di Rivoli; artist Phyllida Barlow; Pablo León de la Barra, curator at large, Latin America at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Lynne Cooke, senior curator at the National Gallery of Art; Briony Fer, professor of the history of art at the University College London; Yuko Hasegawa, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Hou Hanru, artistic director of MAXXI; and Sir Nicholas Serota, chair of Arts Council England.

Rakowitz’s work has been featured in several international exhibitions, including Documenta 13, the tenth and fourteenth Istanbul Biennials, and the Sharjah Biennials 8 and 14, as well as at institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; MassMOCA, North Adams, Massachusetts; and Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy. He was invited to participate in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, but decided not to exhibit his work in protest of the museum’s vice chairman Warren B. Kanders, the chief executive of Safariland, a defense company that manufactures tear gas. Following months of protests that called for his resignation, Kanders stepped down from his position in July.

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