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Refugees, the homeless and war: The 2020 Nasher Prize goes to an American who makes a bold statement

Michael Rakowitz, 45, is the second American and the second Chicagoan to receive the prize in its five-year history



May the Arrogant Not Prevail, 2010 Found Arabic packaging and newspapers, glue, cardboard, and wood Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Marshall Field's by exchange, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago / Rhona Hoffman Gallery)

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By Michael Granberry

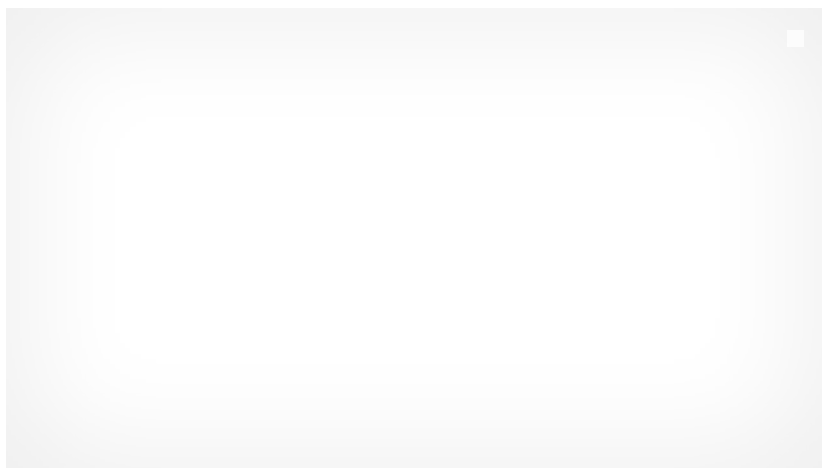
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The winner of the 2020 Nasher Prize for Sculpture is an artist whose work makes a lasting statement about refugees, the homeless and the horror of war.

Michael Rakowitz, 45, is also an American, the second in the five-year history of the prize. He was born in Great Neck, N.Y., but now makes his home in Chicago, as does previous Nasher Prize winner [Theaster Gates](#).

Rakowitz is an American of Iraqi Jewish descent whose work deals graphically and powerfully with his family's home country. He is also a [professor at Northwestern University](#). He'll receive his \$100,000 check and an award designed by Nasher architect Renzo Piano at a ceremony in Dallas on April 4.

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In making the announcement in an exclusive interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, Nasher director Jeremy Strick said members of the jury studied the work of more than 100 artists who represented "different parts of the world" and who produced "very different kinds of work. They seriously discussed a number of artists and had an embarrassment of great choices before them."

Rakowitz, Strick said, is "an amazing and brilliant choice, because of his engagement with history and the history of sculpture and the way he's making history so visible — and so relevant — at this particular time."

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Thematically, Rakowitz shares much in common with **Colombian artist Doris Salcedo**, the inaugural prize recipient, whose work carries with it a powerful underpinning of social change. In 1997, Rakowitz developed the first examples of an ongoing series titled *paraSITE* — custom-built, inflatable shelters for the homeless. He completed the project with a bare-bones budget that covered the cost of plastic bags and waterproof tape. He used the exterior vents of buildings for heating and air conditioning, whether it was winter or summer, and *voilà* — he'd created housing for the homeless, in the weather extremes of Chicago.



1/4 The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu), 2018 Installation view, Trafalgar Square, London, 2 labels, sound, drawings Photo courtesy of the artist (Zefrog / Alamy Stock Photo)





A work by Nasher Prize winner Michael Rakowitz called paraSITE that actually houses the homeless. (Museum of Modern Art / Lombard-Freid Projects)

"Michael's work deals with migrant populations and homeless populations, and some of it deals with works of art and books that have been destroyed, in Germany, Afghanistan and Iraq, where his family is from," Strick says. As a result, he harbors an intense interest "in people who have suffered through wars or genocide or political violence."

Rakowitz is not averse to a powerful protest if it means expressing where he stands.

In early 2019, [The New York Times reported](#) that Rakowitz had pulled out of the Whitney Biennial in "a protest against a museum vice chairman, Warren Kanders. Mr. Kanders is the chief executive of a company that manufactures equipment, including body armor and tear gas, for law enforcement agencies and militaries."

Rakowitz's grandparents fled Iraq in 1941, during World War II and the Holocaust. In the early 2000's, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Rakowitz conceived a project called *RETURN*, which took the audacious step of reopening his grandfather's Iraqi import-export business in a Brooklyn storefront. It did nothing less than facilitate the flow of packages between the two countries, including the importation of sweet Iraqi dates.

The elder Rakowitz had launched his business in Baghdad and moved it to New York in the 1940's, when the family was exiled.



1/3 RETURN, 2006 storefront at 529 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y.

That inspired Rakowitz to create *Spoils of 2011*, which the Northwestern University website dubs "a more provocative and personal approach to American-Iraqi relations." As his tableau, Rakowitz picked Park Avenue Autumn restaurant, where his "culinary/art experience" served up traditional Iraqi dishes on rare pieces of fine China from Saddam Hussein's personal collection.

Mingled together in the show was the sweetness of the Iraqi date syrup and the bitter provenance of the dish ware, which led to a cease-and-desist letter from the State Department, which called for the "surrender" of the plates.

Rakowitz's fascination with Iraq didn't stop there.

After the looting of the country's elite National Museum, which began soon after the invasion, he sought to reclaim or honor archeological artifacts and sites that, with crushing speed, were being compromised or destroyed.

As *The Atlantic* reported in 2018: "Fifteen years after U.S. forces toppled Saddam Hussein, ushering in a period of instability that led to the plunder of the museum while ignoring pleas to secure the building, some 7,000

looted items have been returned, but about 8,000 are still out there. And that's only counting the items that were stolen from the museum. After the invasion, thousands of other artifacts were taken directly out of the ground at archeological sites. In most cases, their whereabouts are unknown."

Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should N...*



Rakowitz has done what he could. He created *The invisible enemy should not exist*, which he launched in 2007 with the aim of recreating artifacts and antiquities that were looted or destroyed.

In 2015, the decimation of artifacts endured an ugly encore, with ISIS spearheading a new round of wanton destruction. Rakowitz responded by using the packaging from Middle Eastern food products and Arabic newspapers to recreate shattered objects in the form of image-laden sculptures, which he describes as "ghosts."

Despite the parallel to Salcedo, Strick says, "I don't think the jury sets out to select an artist who is making a particular statement of one kind or another. Nor are they looking to an artist speaking to or addressing current events. But I think through the history of sculpture, many of the most powerful works of sculpture have had a public dimension."

Rakowitz's art does make a statement, Strick says, "about the present moment and what's happening today."

He's the latest example, Strick says, of how the prize "shines a light on the practice of sculpture. It shines a light on the Nasher Sculpture Center. And, it shines a light on Dallas. It's been successful in every way. It has done a tremendous amount to raise our profile and the profile of sculpture, and we're proud of the contribution Michael Rakowitz makes to what we've created."



Michael Granberry

[✉ mgranberry@dallasnews.com](mailto:mgranberry@dallasnews.com) [🐦 @mgranberry](https://twitter.com/mgranberry)