About Michael Rakowitz
Michael Rakowitz is an American artist of Jewish-Iraqi heritage whose work focuses on cultural history. While some of his works spotlight one area of the world, such as the Middle East or the United States, other works are international in nature. His works address topics ranging from loss to marginalized social communities.

The invisible enemy should not exist, 2007 – ongoing
Rakowitz is working on an epic project to recreate 8,000 Middle Eastern objects that have been lost forever due to war and looting. This ongoing project is titled The invisible enemy should not exist—a translation of the name of a road that ran through the Ishtar gate in ancient Babylon.

Rakowitz creates these objects using Iraqi newspapers and packaging from Middle Eastern food products. One of the largest of these sculptures depicts a Mesopotamian Lamassu—a mythological winged bull that once guarded the gates of the ancient city of Nineveh in Iraq. Rakowitz made his Lamassu from 10,500 date syrup cans. In Iraq, people have cooked with date syrup for generations. He displayed this sculpture in London’s Trafalgar Square, a busy public site where many people could see it and reflect on the lost cultural object.

Works on view in the Nasher’s Corner Gallery reconstruct relief panels from Room F of the Northwest Palace of Nimrud that was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. Assyrian palaces were large structures that served as the home for the king and the royal family, and a place for ceremonies and official meetings. Important rooms were decorated with reliefs carved from gypsum and painted bright colors.

Michael Rakowitz recreated the panels using Middle Eastern food packaging and newspapers, glue, and cardboard on wood structures. He uses the panels to recreate the layout of the rooms where the reliefs were displayed.

- Name a food or product that your family uses regularly. Now think of the product’s packaging. Does it come in a box? A jar? A tin can? Is it wrapped in plastic?
- Imagine recycling the packaging from this product to create a giant sculpture. Create a sketch of the sculpture you would create.
- Michael Rakowitz creates his sculptures with help from local communities. Who would you like to help you create your sculpture?
The Nasher Prize is an annual international award presented to a living artist whose work has had an extraordinary impact on the understanding of sculpture.

The Donna Wilhelm Family Fund is the Education and Community Sponsor of Nasher Prize.

The Ballad of Special Ops Cody, 2017
In 2005, an Iraqi insurgent group posted a video online of a captured US soldier named John Adam. They threatened his life if prisoners being held in U.S. detention centers in Iraq were not freed within 72 hours. The U.S. armed forces took the claim seriously, but could not locate a John Adam within their ranks. They discovered that the “person” in the photos was actually Special Ops Cody, a realistic action figure sold at U.S. bases in Kuwait and Iraq. Rakowitz drew upon this event to create a thought-provoking video about the effects of war on everyone involved. In the video, a Special Ops Cody figure moves through the galleries of The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, interacting with Assyrian antiquities like those that were looted and destroyed in Iraq.

The Ballad of Special Ops Cody will be on view at the Nasher in March and April of 2020. Please be aware that this film contains narration describing injuries and deaths suffered during the Iraq war.

paraSITE, 1998 – ongoing
In his paraSITE series, Rakowitz creates temporary shelters for homeless people. He first listens to the specific needs of the person who will use the shelter, then constructs custom-built, inflatable dwellings using waterproof tape and clear plastic bags. Inspired by how the Bedouin people in Jordan set up their tents differently each evening to accommodate changing winds, Rakowitz attaches the shelters to the exterior vents of buildings. The warm air from the vents both inflates and heats the structures. Rakowitz has constructed paraSITE structures around the world and has shared plans and instructions for the project in various publications for the homeless. At a cost of only $5 each, the shelters are a useful form of public art that not only provides for people in need, but ensures that they are visible to passers-by.

- What everyday materials could you use to create safe spaces for people without a home? Make a sketch of a design that could be comfortable and practical.
What dust will rise?, 2012
Reconstructing lost works of art is just one of the ways that Rakowitz addresses the loss of culture. In 2012, he took a different approach to address the loss of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

Over 1000 years ago, two massive relief sculptures of Buddha were carved into the stone cliffs of the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan. Adorned with metal, color, and gems, these statues towered over the valley. Rakowitz first learned about these Buddhas when he studied stone carving at the age of 15.

- Have you studied ancient artifacts around the world?
- What skills do you think were used to create them?
- What is the current condition of those artifacts?

In 2001, Taliban forces completely destroyed both Buddhas. When visiting the site, Rakowitz was surprised when local residents explained to him that they believed the statues were still very present. In their minds, the absence of the artifacts simply redefined their presence. Rakowitz decided that instead of rebuilding the sculptures, he would reintroduce the skillsets used to first create them. He set up a series of workshops that taught the local community how to carve stone.

- What happens to a country when an artwork or cultural symbol is removed or destroyed?
- How can we work to preserve and protect these memories?

Timeline

c. 680 BCE Lamassu created at Niniveh

c. 575 BCE Ishtar gate constructed

c. 500 CE Bamiyan Buddhas created

1845 CE Lamassu excavated at Niniveh

1899-1912 CE Ishtar gate excavated and moved to Berlin

1973 CE Michael Rakowitz born

1990-1991 CE First Gulf War

2001 CE Bamiyan Buddhas destroyed by Taliban

2003-2011 CE U.S. invasion of Iraq / Second Gulf War

2005 CE Iraqi insurgents threaten Special Ops Cody figure

2007 CE Rakowitz begins the invisible enemy should not exist

2015 CE Lamassu at Niniveh destroyed by ISIS
Additional Resources

Video: Michael Rakowitz on rebuilding ancient palace destroyed by ISIS
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cygpFBeEt0k

Video: Michael Rakowitz and MOCA Chicago curator Omar Kholeif share a plate of kubba shwandar as they reflect on Rakowitz’s work, hospitality vs. hostility, Star Wars, and translation
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvhFrUL9-ys

Video: Michael Rakowitz talks about his mobile art project, *Enemy Kitchen (Food Truck)*, which serves Iraqi cuisine with US veterans acting as servers and sous-chefs.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz62vepA_Dg

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Social Studies: Knowledge and Skills, History | §113.18. (Grade 6) (b) (1) The Student understands that historical events influence contemporary events; and (2) The student understands the influences of individuals and groups from various cultures on various historical and contemporary societies.

Social Studies: World History Studies, Knowledge and Skills | §113.42. (High School) (b) (25) The student understands the relationship between the arts and times during which they were created.

Fine Arts: Art, Historical and Cultural Relevance. | §117.302. (Level 1, High School) (C) (3) Historical and cultural relevance. The student demonstrates an understanding of art history and culture by analyzing artistic styles, historical periods, and a variety of cultures. The student develops global awareness and respect for the traditions and contributions of diverse cultures.