

# Michael Rakowitz

Teaching Resource

## 2020 Nasher Prize Laureate

### 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.

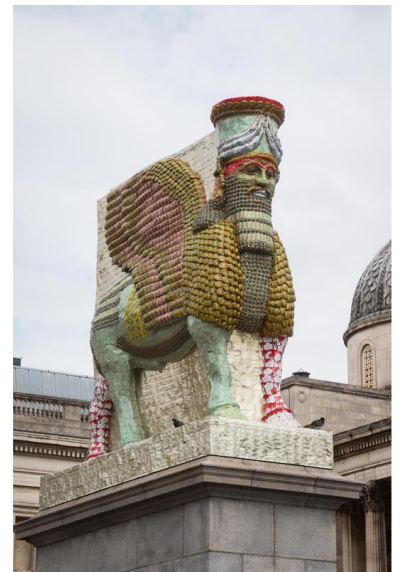


Michael Rakowitz

### *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.



*The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu)*, Installation view, Trafalgar Square, London, 2018. Middle Eastern food packaging and newspapers, glue, labels, sound, drawings. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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.



*The invisible enemy should not exist (Room F, section 1, panel 15, Northwest Palace of Nimrud)*, 2019 Middle Eastern food packaging and newspapers, glue, cardboard on wooden structures.

- 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.

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### *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.



*New York Post*, February 2, 2005

*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.



Still from *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, 2017.

### *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.



*paraSITE* homeless shelter, 1997 Polyethylene 42' x 36' x 11' (107 x 91.5 x 335 cm) Museum of Modern Art, New York Gift of Michael Rakowitz and Lombard-Freid Projects Photo courtesy the artist

- 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.

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## *What dust will rise?, 2012*

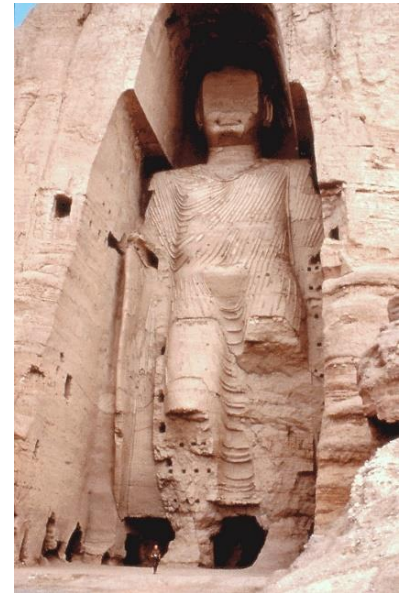
Reconstructing lost works of art is just one of the ways that Rakowitz addresses the loss of culture. In 2012, he took a different approach to address the loss of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

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.

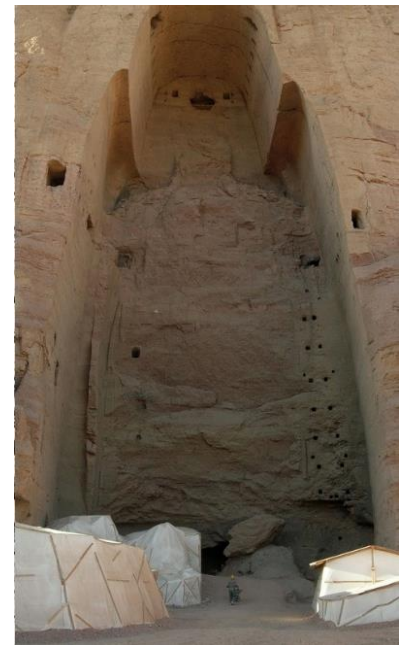
- **Have you studied ancient artifacts around the world?**
- **What skills do you think were used to create them?**
- **What is the current condition of those artifacts?**

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?**



Larger Bamiyan Buddha before 2001



Larger Bamiyan Buddha in 2008

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## 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 <i>the invisible enemy should not exist</i>
2015 CE	Lamassu at Niniveh destroyed by ISIS



Stone carving workshop at site of destroyed Bamiyan Buddhas, 2012, part of *What Dust Will Rise?*. Photo: Bert Praxenthaler.

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## Additional Resources

Video: Michael Rakowitz on rebuilding ancient palace destroyed by ISIS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyqpFBeEt0k>

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](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.

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