

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**



**Michael Rakowitz**, *The invisible enemy should not exist*, 2018  
Courtesy of the artist and Castello di Rivoli

***Michael Rakowitz: Imperfect Binding***

**Drafted by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Iwona Blazwick, Marianna Vecellio**

**October 8, 2019 – January 19, 2020**

**Opening: Monday October 7, 2019**

Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art is proud to present the first survey exhibition in Europe featuring Iraqi-American artist **Michael Rakowitz** (Great Neck, NY, 1973, lives and works in Chicago), winner of the prestigious Nasher Prize 2020, announced on September 5, 2019. This award recognises yearly a living artist whose body of work has had an extraordinary impact on our understanding of sculpture. Previous award winners have been Doris Salcedo, Iza Genzken, Pierre Huyghe and Theaster Gates.

The exhibition is co-organised with Whitechapel Gallery, London, and drafted by **Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev** and **Iwona Blazwick** along with Castello di Rivoli Curator **Marianna Vecellio** and Whitechapel Gallery Curator **Habda Rashid**. In Spring 2020, it will travel to the Jameel Foundation, Dubai.

Rakowitz's complex body of work includes **sculptures, drawings, installations, video, collaborative and performative projects**. The exhibition presents **major artworks envisioned in his over-twenty-year practice traversing architecture, archeology, cooking practice, and geopolitics from ancient times to nowadays**. His artworks speak with an urgent voice to **historic turning points due to wars or other trauma**, with an acute perspective poised to critique the **paradoxes and contradictions of globalisation**.

On view at Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art from October 8, 2019, the exhibition establishes a dialogue with *Lamassu*, 2018, a human headed winged bull that Michael Rakowitz reconstructed from an Assyrian statue as part of his project *Fourth Plinth*, standing on Trafalgar Square's, London, until March 2020.

**Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev**, Director of Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, states: "Highly sensitive and empathetic towards human suffering and pain, Rakowitz is well known for his relational and public participatory projects, also conveyed within art contexts such as museums or galleries."

In his review of the Whitechapel presentation of this same exhibition in '[The Guardian](#)', art critic **Adrian Searle** has stated; "Michael Rakowitz's fascinating [...] show is filled with surprises. It is also an exhausting experience. Rakowitz's work feeds on backstories and explications. [...] Stick around, you might learn something – and find yourself moved, and angered, and overwhelmed."

The exhibition begins with the project *paraSITE* (1997–ongoing) - temporary inflatable shelters for the homeless of American metropolises that were designed by the artist shortly after graduating from MIT in Boston. These shelters take into account the needs and personality of each individual. They are made of plastic bags connected to the pipes of building ventilation systems so that the hot air, otherwise dissipated, warms up and inflates these structures.

*Dull Roar* (2005) is a large architectural installation recreating a building of the American Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri. This popular utopian architecture complex of the 1950s, initially built to offer people "sun, space, and green", turned into a site of conflict and segregation, prompting its demolition in the 1970s. Rakowitz's work alludes to the event of this demolition, the resonance of which has made it the symbol of the end of architectural Modernism and social utopias in architecture.

*White man got no dreaming*, 2008, involved most of the inhabitants of the Indigenous Aboriginal community of The Block in Redfern, Sydney (Australia), a central area earmarked for demolition as part of a gentrification plan, on the occasion of the 16<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Sydney in 2008. Taking his cue from the utopian model of the *Monument to the Third International* (1919), designed (yet never built) by the Russian artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin, Rakowitz worked closely with the community to build a tower of the same shape and size, using building leftovers from homes intentionally and ritualistically demolished by some inhabitants in advance of the potential loss of their neighborhood. The work, addressing the themes of Aboriginal life in Australia, establishes new parallels with the history of visionary architecture and its failures.

The poetic juxtaposition between two historical catastrophes, geographically and historically far removed from each other, is at stake in *What dust will rise?*, 2012, created on the occasion of Rakowitz's participation in dOCUMENTA(13). Making use of the travertine from the Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan, where in 2001 Taliban extremists destroyed two precious Buddhas dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Rakowitz, supported by Northern Italian master craftsmen stone carvers, carved a number of books out of the Bamiyan stone in the shape of some ancient volumes. These volumes originally belonged to libraries in Kassel, Germany, that were destroyed by the Nazis during World War II.

*The flesh is yours, the bones are ours*, 2015, pays homage to Armenian craftsmen, who decorated the Art Nouveau facades of Constantinople (Istanbul) palaces during the Ottoman Empire, yet suffered heavy persecution and exile at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century caused by Turkish nationalism. These decorations bear traces of the centrality and presence of Armenian culture at the height of Ottoman multiculturalism. This project by Rakowitz refers to the cultural losses that occurred prior to, and in the aftermath of, the "Great War", World War I, and the consequences of these losses. Along with numerous small plaster casts – produced from the original molds used by

masters of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to adorn the Art Nouveau facades of the palaces of Istanbul – Rakowitz disseminates on the floor and the surrounding walls modern friezes. *The flesh is Yours, the Bones Are Ours* was acquired by the **Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT** for the Collections of Castello di Rivoli.

For the conception of *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007 – ongoing), the artist has been working for years with *papier mâché* made from Arabic-English newspapers to recreate life-size reproductions of the 15,000 artefacts gone lost, stolen or destroyed during the Second Gulf War, or Iraq War (2003-2011). In his reflection on what is lost or in danger of disappearing, the artist brings out existential experiences and even personal memories, where contemporary history, poetry, and pragmatism are intertwined.

For this project, Rakowitz also rebuilt part of the Northwest Palace of Nimrud, south of Nineveh, which ISIS destroyed in 2015. Using packages for Middle Eastern foods such as cans of date syrup, the artist highlights how war and boycotts affected Iraqi food industry, the second most profitable source of export besides oil prior to the war.

Finally, the exhibition presents the video *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, 2017, made with a stop-motion animation technique, recently acquired by Castello di Rivoli thanks to a gift. The work films an action figure plastic doll in dialogue with ancient Mesopotamian votive statuettes, inside a vitrine at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. It was inspired by a most surprising real event: when in February 2005 a group of Mujahideen released a video showing an American soldier being held hostage and threatened to be killed at gun-point unless an exchange for Iraqi prisoners was offered, the American company producing the action figure 'Special Ops Cody' recognised its toy in the video, thus debunking the threat.

On the occasion of the exhibition, **a comprehensive and scholarly illustrated catalogue**, edited by Castello di Rivoli, has been published. It contains essays by Christov-Bakargiev, Habda Rashid, Nora Razian, Ella Shohat, and Marianna Vecellio along with an interview with the artist by Iwona Blazwick. The publication also includes an exhibition chronology and an anthology of critical texts and interviews, organised and compiled by Marianna Vecellio.

As an addition to the survey, **a newly commissioned artwork** by Michael Rakowitz is presented in the frame of the exhibition. Paying homage to the Cerruti Collection and the sets of skills the collector and entrepreneur Francesco Federico Cerruti (Genoa, 1922 – Turin, 2015) brought to Italy over the years of his company Legatoria Industriale Torinese (LIT), **Rakowitz commissioned Luciano Fagnola, a master crafts bookbinder and friend of Cerruti's, to rebind a Hebrew and Arabic-Jewish prayer book** printed in 1935, belonging to the dispersed Iraqi Jewish community, from which the artist's maternal family comes from. Even though damaged volumes should be buried, according to Jewish tradition, the artist brought his own to Turin to repair their words and generate a new artwork from memories and collaboration with a binder. This artwork, titled *Imperfect Binding. A Homage to Francesco Federico Cerruti*, 2019, is on view at Castello di Rivoli and has been gifted to the museum.

**A new multiple by the artist, deriving from this artwork, is on sale at the museum Bookshop in an edition of 100, signed and numbered.**

<https://www.castellodirivoli.org/shop#>

**This exhibition has been made possible also thanks to the support of Giuliana Setari, Dena Foundation; Jane Lombard, New York; Barbara Wein, Berlin; Rhona Hoffman, Chicago; Pier Luigi Lanza**



More Info:

<https://hyperallergic.com/512711/michael-rakowitz-whitechapel-gallery/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/04/michael-rakowitz-whitechapel-review>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/arts/design/nasher-prize-michael-rakowitz.html>

**To download the images:**

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/nv9y8y4bnb6fn4p/AAAMO1xFa9PQMJ6nlbutrkjSa?dl=0>

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## Biography

Michael Rakowitz was born in Great Neck, New York, in 1973. His parents are Frederic Rakowitz, an American of Eastern European and Hungarian origin, and Yvonne David, of Iraqi Jewish origin. Forced to abandon a family heritage of almost half a millennium when Jews faced difficulty living in Baghdad, his maternal grandfather Nissim Isaac Daoud bin Aziz (subsequently Anglicized to David) left Iraq with his wife Renée Shamoon and their two children in 1941. Yvonne David was born in Mumbai in 1945 and by early 1947, the family was en route to New York. Nissim Isaac David settled with his family on Long Island and opened a branch of Davisons & Co., one of the major US import-export companies for the Middle East, which ceased to operate in the 1960s.

Rakowitz made numerous journeys with the family from childhood on, visiting places like the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico, as well as Israel/Palestine, which were to make a deep impression on him. He displayed particular sensitivity from an early age to human suffering, both the diasporas that affected his own family history directly and the great scourges of the contemporary world, such as poverty in the large American cities.

Skilled in drawing, Rakowitz began his artistic training in the early 1990s as a student of graphic arts at Purchase College, New York. His first works date from 1993, when his teacher of sculpture, Allan Wexler, invited him the same year to take part in the group show *Blast #3: Remaking Civilization*. Rakowitz's contribution was a work in paper representing paper clips. In 1998 he enrolled in the Public Art Program in the Department of Architecture of MIT in Cambridge MA, where he studied under Krzysztof Wodiczko (Warsaw, 1943), Dennis Adams (Des Moines, 1948) and Joan Jonas (New York, 1936), and developed a particular interest in the relations between sculpture, collective ritual and urban space.

Rakowitz's first culinary performance, *Hubuz*, was in 1997, when he baked bread with the female community of Kerak, Jordan. The work exemplifies his focus on collaboration and involving local communities in participatory action. The same year, during an architectural residency in Jordan, Rakowitz studied the structure of Bedouin tents. It was in 1998, on returning to the United States after this experience, that he embarked on *paraSITE*, an ongoing project involving inflatable shelters for the homeless, the nomads of Western metropolises.

In 2004, following the American-led invasion of Iraq, Rakowitz began to explore Iraqi culture, a field often overshadowed by the narratives of war, through projects of a collaborative and participatory nature. One of these was *Return* (2004), in which he reconstructed Davisons & Co., his grandfather's import-export business, to create a shipping system, something prohibitively expensive at the time, and establish otherwise impossible relations and communication between distant realities.

The numerous international events to have featured Rakowitz's work include the 16th Sydney Biennial (2008), dOCUMENTA(13) in 2012, the 10th and 14th editions of the Istanbul Biennial (2007 and 2015), and the 8th and 14th Sharjah Biennial (2007 and 2019). International museums hosting his works include Tate Modern, London and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.