**Galleries 1, 8 & 9**

**4 June – 25 August 2019**

**Exhibition Michael Rakowitz**

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**Large print Guide**

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Sculptor, detective, stone carver and some time chef, Iraqi-American artist **Michael Rakowitz** (b. 1973) lives and works in Chicago. He studied at Purchase College, SUNY, New York and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and is currently Professor at Northwestern University.

He came to prominence in the 1990s with *paraSITE* –custom-built inflatable shelters for homeless people made from garbage bags that plug into buildings’ heating vents to create warmth and space in winter. Another renowned public work is *Enemy Kitchen* presented in Chicago during the US Iraq offensive. This food truck served Baghdadi recipes prepared by Iraqi refugees, assisted by US veterans of the Iraq War.

In this exhibition the artist draws on the histories of buildings and objects to create enthralling environments.

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Through eight installations made over two decades he moves from mid century America to post war Iraq; from turn of the century Istanbul to post Soviet Budapest. A consummate storyteller, Michael Rakowitz reveals what architecture and artefacts tell us about suppressed histories. His work explores the aspirations and failures of modernity and its legacies of conflict and exile. It also delights in the accidental, comedic and hopeful strategies that communities in extremis adopt to survive.

**Dull Roar**

2005

Wood, inflatable vinyl structure, plastic, motors, pencil on vellum drawings

While studying public art in the Department of

Architecture at MIT, Michael Rakowitz recalls that the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in St. Louis, Missouri was cited as an example of Modernism’s failures. It was designed by Minoru Yamasaki in 1954 to provide decent housing for all, with access to greenery and sunlight. Despite

its democratic intentions African American and white residents were housed separately. In 1955 a Federal District Court ordered its desegregation, but the buildings remained largely occupied by African American residents,

as whites declined to live with their black neighbours.

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Due to lack of public investment the blocks became rundown and the site of social unrest.

In 1972 the estate was dynamited and the rubble served as landfill for luxury homes in the suburb of Ladue, Missouri.

Rakowitz’s tower inflates and deflates mirroring the socially utopian ambitions of the Modernist project and its apparently inevitable failure. His drawings explore the sociopolitical and economic contexts that typically lead to its demise. The artist nonetheless remains committed to the potential of visionary buildings: ‘Their residual ideas exist as pragmatic metaphors, statements demanding a culture capable of enabling their existence, poetic critiques of reality’.

**White man got no dreaming**

2008

Demolished aboriginal houses, wires, copper pipe, wood;pencil on vellum drawings

This work was created for the 2008 Sydney Biennale, in collaboration with the Aboriginal community who live in a neighbourhood of Sydney known as The Block. Together they remade *The Monument to the Third International*, designed in 1919 by Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), from the wood, metal and cable of their own homes. Tatlin’s model tower, which was never realised, is a symbol of utopianism.

The Block neighbourhood was acquired by the

Aboriginal Housing Company in 1972 to provide

affordable housing for their community.

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However in the 2000s the local government saw its development potential as real estate and allowed its housing stock and infrastructure to deteriorate.

The artist proposed building the tower as a call to

action. Crowned by the Aboriginal flag it links visionary Soviet architecture with the Aboriginal concept of Dreamtime – a creation myth explaining the origin of the world. They also fulfil Tatlin’s intention of making his Monument a broadcast tower by transmitting Koori Radio, a local Aboriginal station. Rakowitz also references the work of Soviet Constructivist Gustav Klucis (1895 – 1938), who designed the *Radio Orator*

to broadcast news of revolution from a structure that could be moved around the streets of Moscow.

Through four drawings Rakowitz recounts the

community’s stories, the history of Tatlin’s tower, and how it relates to the social structure of the Aboriginal neighbourhood of The Block.

**What dust will rise?**

2012

Bamiyan travertine, glass, vitrines, bullets, shrapnel, meteorites, Libyan desert glass, trinitite, fragments, damaged and unbound Iraqi Jewish prayer books

Rakowitz created a site-specific work for the international exhibition dOCUMENTA (13) that, in 2012, was presented in the cities of Kassel Germany and Kabul Afghanistan. He discovered that Kassel had suffered two book burnings: the Nazi conflagrations of Jewish literature in 1939 and the accidental bombing of the Fridericianum library by the British Royal Airforce in 1941. Luckily a librarian had photographed many rare

and important publications. Rakowitz also travelled to the Hazara region in Afghanistan, and to the site of the destroyed Bamiyan Buddhas.

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He ran workshops with local people to revive a tradition of stone carving that had been suppressed by the Taliban. Using the library’s photographs Hazari and Italian craftsmen recreated many of the books out of stone, 20 of which are presented here. The artist discovered that the Hazari’s chisels were forged from suspension springs and axels harvested from military vehicles abandoned in Afghanistan by successive invading super powers. Recalling the stone books that once emblematised sacred texts for illiterate congregations, these sculptures transform cultural trauma into monuments to knowledge. Unlike traditional museum labels, the artist handwrites his captions on top of display furniture so that he can share new findings, demonstrating that perspectives of the past continue to accumulate.

**The Breakup**

2010 – ongoing

Mix-media installation

This multi-media installation includes a live concert recording, printed ephemera, fan club memorabilia and a radio show. It focuses on the period between the birth of John Lennon in 1940 and the breakup of The Beatles in 1970, which coincided with the death of the Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918 –1970). Rakowitz foregrounds the chronological coincidence between The Beatles’ formation in 1960 and the first attempts towards Pan-Arabism, a political movement led by Nasser that aimed to unite all Arabic-speaking countries

under one identity; and the breakup of the band with the dissolution of Pan-Arabism.

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The display presents drawings and collages inspired by the 150-hour set of audio tapes generated during the filming of the 1970 Beatles documentary *Let It* *Be* by Michael Lindsay-Hogg. The film recounts The Beatles’ last attempt to repair their relationship. Paul McCartney’s dream that The Beatles would make a triumphant comeback with a concert in North Africa, for

which amphitheatres in El Jem in Tunisia and Sabratha in Libya were considered. Despite Paul’s wishes, Ringo Starr and George Harrison had the final word. The sound of the band’s last live performance drifted into the streets of London from the rooftop of Apple Records

in Saville Row in 1969, coincidentally at the same height as church bells and minarets: a final call to prayer for Beatles’ fanatics.

**The flesh is yours, the bones are ours**

2015

Frottages, Plaster casts, Wood table, bones, writing Vitrines: Cosmology, Architect as Dragoman, 1870–1871, Garabet Cezayirliyan, Tophane and 1915

Commissioned for the 2015 Istanbul Biennale this installation was inspired by the Art Nouveau facades of modern Istanbul. It comprises plaster casts of the original moulds used to create Istanbul’s architectural friezes; and rubbings or *‘frottages’* made from their reliefs. Rakowitz discovered that their beautiful botanical motifs were designed by Armenian artisans such as Garabet Cezayirliyan. The artist collaborated

with one of his trainees whose account of being

apprenticed to the master inspired the title of this work: it is a customary Turkish saying to convey that the teacher is granted influence over the learner. **Continues on next page**

Rakowitz’ installation celebrates the architectural

facades’ design aesthetic while revealing the poignant story of how they were made; and the dark fate of those who made them. In 1915, Cezayirliyan’s Armenian compatriots were to suffer persecution and exile by the Ottomans in what became known as the Armenian Genocide.

The work has contemporary resonance in its

recreation of a frieze made by Cezayirliyan for the Emek Cinema, whose 2013 demolition was a flashpoint for the Gezi protests against the destruction of a public park: as the artist has remarked it was ‘a moment when gentrification intersected with genocide.’

**The invisible enemy should not exist**

**(Room N, Northwest Palace of Nimrud)**

2018

Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue,

cardboard on wooden structures, labels

This work is a life-size reconstruction of Room N of the Northwest Palace of Nimrud, destroyed in 2015 due to a reprisal from ISIS. It was in this room that Ashurnasirpal II, Assyrian sovereign from 884 to 859 BC, received guests as they arrived for banquets.

The colour schemes of the recreated reliefs follow

those of the originals sculpted in the 9th century BC. In keeping with other works in *The invisible enemy should* *not exist* series they are made using packaging from Iraqi products; for this piece the material is sourced from Assyrian grocers in Chicago who fled the northern regions of Iraq.

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These wrappings are cut and shaped likefabric to match the original objects. The deliberate gaps in the display of the reliefs not only represent missing looted or destroyed works, but also correspond to those taken by archaeologists in the 19th century and that arecurrently displayed in Western museums.

**Maquette of Michael Rakowitz’s proposal for the Lamassu, Mayor of London’s Fourth Plinth Programme**

2017

Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue

This model represents the artist’s winning proposal for the Mayor of London’s Fourth Plinth commission. The Lamassu is a large winged bull with the head of a man that from 700 BC guarded the entrance to the Nergal Gate in Nineveh, Iraq. The figure was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. The Lamassu was unveiled in Trafalgar Square inMarch 2018 and will be on display until 2020.

The Lamassu forms part of *The invisible enemy**should not exist* series, and as with other elements of this epic project, is made from

everyday Iraqi consumer products that include 10,500 empty date syrup cans;

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and the packaging of Middle-Eastern foods sold in the West.

As well as lending chromatic lustre to the statue, the packaging offers alternatives to media representations of Iraq dominated by oil or war. It draws attention to the date plantations and an export economy devastated by war; and a diaspora who can still reconnect with their homeland through a delicious cuisine that combines influences from across conflict zones.

The contrast between the vibrant colours that adorn Rakowitz’s Lamassu and the pale stone of the original sculpture denotes its rebirth; and the sculpture’s position on the Fourth Plinth points it wistfully homeward to Nineveh.

**The Ballad of Special Ops Cody**

2017

HD video, 16:9, sound, color, 14 min 42 sec

This stop-motion video shows an American toy soldier interacting with votive statues from the ancient region of Mesopotamia, held by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Rakowitz had seen a photograph circulated by a

militant Islamic group on the front page of the *New York Daily News* of an American soldier named John Adambeing held hostage. However the American army wasunable to identify him. Within 24 hours it was revealedthat he was a Special Ops Cody doll, sold in Americanbases in Kuwait and Iraq. US soldiers often sent them

home to their children, making them into contemporary votives.

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Special Ops Cody, voiced by Iraq War veteran

Sergeant Gin McGill-Prather, travels to the museum and apologises to the statues for the crimes committed by the United States against the Iraqi population. As he asks for forgiveness, he compares his condition as a soldier with that of the votive statues: created as emblems of a loved one and ultimately lost or stolen.

Cody encourages the statues to leave their vitrine and go home; but they stare impassively at the soldier. Cody decides to assume the same position as the statues: hands clasped to his chest, totally immobile, he is trapped with the other artefacts in the museum.

**The invisible enemy should not exist**

2007 – ongoing

Middle Eastern food packaging and newspaper, glue, labels, sound, table, drawings

This project involves the ongoing reconstruction of the 15,000 archaeological artefacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad following the city’s fall to American troops in April 2003. The Museum housed one of the most important collections of Mesopotamian art,

including monumental Assyrian reliefs from the first millennium BC and a vast collection of inscribed clay tablets: evidence of the first examples of writing.

These life-size reconstructions, made from

the packaging of Middle-Eastern foods and Arabic

newspapers, are described by the artist as ‘ghosts or apparitions’ that are not intended to replace the originals but rather record what has been lost. **Continues on next page**

Their lack of precision and placement on make-shift table emphasises the absence of the real artefacts; and echoes the tables used by archaeologists to clean and restore their findings.

The installation is completed by pencilled

illustrations of stolen archaeological finds; and the drawings of Dr Donny George Youkhanna (1950–2011), who as Director of the Iraq Museum and Chairman of the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage searched for the stolen artefacts up until his death.

Youkhanna played the drums in a Deep Purple cover band called 99%, and his presence is invoked by the sound of an Arabized version of *Smoke On The Water* (1972) performed by Ayyoub.

**The Visionaries**

2006

Wood, colour Xerox prints, architectural vellum,

graphite, hardware

We are invited to enter four flying structures set against the backdrop of a collaged drawing by the Hungarian born French architect Yona Friedman (b. 1923). In 1956, in the wake of the mass movement of people across Europe

and the Middle East during and after WWII he proposed the ‘spatial city’: a gigantic spatial grid providing infrastructure could be occupied by elevated mobile units that would be designed and positioned by their residents. This interactive relation between architect and user inspired the installation of *The Visionaries*.

In 2006 Rakowitz was invited to a residency in

Budapest in the midst of Hungary’s national elections season.

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He walked around the city wearing a sandwich

board inviting the citizens to take part in a project of the imagination. The board was both advertisement and a portable drawing studio. The artist noticed how many demolished buildings and empty lots dotted the city.

Known as ‘missing teeth’ they were either detonated by retreating German forces in the 1940s, or as punishment by the Soviets in the 1950s; or ‘urban renewal’ projects abandoned by successive governments and sold to private developers.

Rakowitz asked people to imagine what could fill

the spaces and translated their surprisingly utopian ideas into architectural collages. The final installation in this survey *The Visionaries* substitutes the grand plans of architects and ideologues that shaped Modernism with the dream projects of ordinary citizens. We leave

the exhibition with the potential of a more individually nuanced and democratic future.