

## RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY

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Caroline Goldstein, February 18, 2021

### ‘They Come Back as Ghosts to Haunt Western Museums’: Watch Artist Michael Rakowitz Recreate Looted Artifacts to Give Them New Life

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.



Production still from the Art21 "Extended Play" film, "Michael Rakowitz: Haunting the West." © Art21, Inc. 2021.

One of the defining moments of Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz’s career happened when he was just 10 years old. “I remember my mother bringing us to the British Museum in London,” Rakowitz recounts in an [exclusive new interview with Art21](#). She led him to the Assyrian galleries and pointed out a relief depicting the lion hunt of Ashurbanipal.

“What is this doing here?” she asked.

That was when Rakowitz began to understand that museums are not always neutral repositories for artifacts, but can also be tombs for objects that colonizers wrested from their homes and the people who created them.

The artist has since attempted to replicate the thousands of cultural artifacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq—a project which he acknowledges may be impossible to complete—as part of an ongoing series titled “The invisible enemy should not exist.”

One of the works, the bas-relief *Room F, section 1, Northwest Palace of Nimrud* (2020), is made from Middle Eastern food wrappers that the artist used as papier-mache to recreate a wall relief from a palace in Mosul that was destroyed by ISIS in 2015.

“I started to think about what it would mean for those artifacts to come back as ghosts to haunt Western museums,” Rakowitz says in the interview, which is part of Art21’s *Extended Play* series, adding that since he began the project in 2006, scores more cultural sites, like the Mosul palace, have been decimated by ISIS and other extremist groups.



Production still from the Art21 “Extended Play” film, “Michael Rakowitz: Haunting the West.” © Art21, Inc. 2021.

Rakowitz often dresses his “ghosts” in the contemporary guise of imported food. “If a ghost is going to properly haunt,” he says in the video, “it has to appear differently than the entity appeared when it was living.”

At Hamilton College’s Wellin Museum, the artist was commissioned to recreate another of the palace’s chambers: Room H, which was originally a reception area filled with steles, sculptures, and reliefs. In the 19th century, many of those objects were shipped out of Iraq to institutions like the British Museum, the Louvre, and even the Wellin Museum itself. In Rakowitz’s reproduction, only the objects that were still in situ when ISIS destroyed the palace in 2015 are replicated, haunting the very kind of Western museum that now houses the objects of his own past.

*Watch the video, which originally appeared as part of Art21’s Extended Play series, below. The brand new 10th season of the show is available now at [Art21.org](https://www.art21.org). “Michael Rakowitz: Nimrud” is on view at the Wellin Museum through June 18, 2021.*