

A Nuanced and Intimate Portrait of Iraq: A Review of Michael Rakowitz at Rhona Hoffman

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Michael Rakowitz, installation view of "The invisible enemy should not exist," 2023, glass vitrine, Middle Eastern food packaging and newspaper, glue, dimensions variable/Photo: Rhona Hoffman Gallery

"With war comes destruction, the loss of thousands of years of human history," reads a quote from Iraqi archaeologist Selma Al-Radi that perfectly encapsulates the essence of "Michael

Rakowitz: Listening back to Fragments." The exhibition, uniquely combining two of Rakowitz's projects, "The invisible enemy should not exist" (2007-ongoing) and "Radio Silence" (2018), offers a profound exploration of cultural memory, loss and reclamation.

“The invisible enemy should not exist” is a series of sculptures made from Arabic-English newspapers, Middle Eastern food packaging, cardboard, museum labels and sound elements—a project the artist began in 2007 in direct response to the looting of antiquities from the National Museum in Baghdad following the 2003 U.S. invasion. Rakowitz, who is of Iraqi descent and uses materials found in the United States, where he now resides, aims to signify moments of cultural visibility in the diaspora. This ongoing effort is set to recuperate over 7,000 missing items, searching through the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute database, as well as information posted on Interpol’s website. “Listening back to Fragments” carries a nearly spiritual quality, as the objects, presented in minimalist antique cases that emphasize their cultural and historical significance, seemingly hover between past and present. Rakowitz’s creations, which he prefers to call “reappearances” rather than reconstructions, go beyond mere replicas; they address the challenge of acknowledging the loss and devastation of cultural heritage, while also highlighting the strategic displacement and looting of assets as part of a broader historical narrative.



Michael Rakowitz, “The invisible enemy should not exist – Chair Back,” 2022, Middle Eastern food packaging and newspaper with glue on panel, 21” x 30 7/8”/Photo: Rhona Hoffman Gallery

“Radio Silence” (2018) is a participatory performance and radio show presented by Mural Arts Philadelphia and conceived with independent curator Elizabeth Thomas, engaging American veterans of the Iraq War and the Iraqi refugee community. It fosters a dialogue through personal stories, cultural traditions, music and found sound, culminating in a live performance and a seven-episode radio program. Exploring deep themes of speechlessness, silence and resilience

in the context of the Iraq War and its aftermath, the series captures a story of lost sounds, silenced voices and the enduring spirit of those impacted by the conflict, offering a rich portrayal of Iraqi culture, history and individual resilience.

Together, these projects underscore Rakowitz's commitment to themes of war, displacement and cultural heritage. Overall, "Listening back to Fragments" serves as a powerful reminder, urging the viewer to reflect on the complexities of history and the enduring power of art to preserve and reinterpret our shared humanity.

"Michael Rakowitz: Listening back to Fragments" is on view at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 1711 West Chicago, through March 2.