



Michael Rakowitz. Return

Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius
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Chicago-based sculptor, activist, detective, radio broadcaster and occasional chef, Michael Rakowitz (b. 1973 in New York) is one of the most celebrated contemporary artists working with cultural heritage and museums. 'Return' is the first of two solo exhibitions by this American artist of Iraqi descent to be held in Lithuania in 2020 and takes place at the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) in Vilnius. Later in the autumn, a second exhibition by Rakowitz will be presented at Radvila Palace in collaboration with the Lithuanian National Museum of Art.

The title of the exhibition derives from the artist's eponymous installation *RETURN* (2004–ongoing) presented at the CAC premises. The exhibition simultaneously responds to other returns in Rakowitz's work, manifested through memory, polyphonic narratives, testimonies, history, and foresight. The exhibition occupies three spaces of the CAC and comprises four works, which employ sensitivity and humour to expand on notions of migration, nostalgia and the destinies of both people and objects that are trapped in a whirlpool of complex cross-border political relations. Although the regions enlightened by the artist – the Middle East and the US – are geographically remote from Lithuania, the issues raised in his work resonate wherever repressive regimes have destroyed cultural artefacts and people's lives.

The aforementioned installation *RETURN*, on display in the CAC South Hall, consists of date palm trees, a video work, and a collection of artefacts. Using dates and their syrup – indispensable ingredients of Iraqi cuisine – Rakowitz, with humour, sharp insight and a particular type of melancholy, tells stories of his family – a diaspora of Iraqi Jews living in New York – and others of similar destiny found in the context of broader and sometimes simply absurd geopolitical peripeteias.

Another work, *Enemies and Kitchens* (2012–ongoing), exploits date syrup further and displays a collection of objects from the artist's performance series *Enemy Kitchen* (2003–ongoing). Shortly after the events of September 11, Rakowitz witnessed people queueing at the Afghan restaurant Khyber Pass in New York to support the diaspora of the region who, in that moment, were subject to repeated harassment. Moved by the spectacle, together with his mother, the artist compiled a set of Baghdadi recipes and taught them to various audiences. For the work, Rakowitz conceived a symbol: he repainted the Chicago flag in the colours of the Iraqi flag, once again demonstrating how tightly everything and everyone in this world is connected. The work subsequently

developed into a food truck, which has been intermittently operating in Chicago since 2012. The meals provided are cooked by Iraqi refugees assisted by US Army Iraq War veterans. *Enemy Kitchen* inverts established power structures, while its customers simply share stories over food that temporarily brings distant Iraq closer to them through its flavours.

The work *Radio Silence* (2018) presented in the lobby of the second floor of the CAC consists of seven audio recordings. Created especially for America's vivid Iraqi community in Philadelphia, the piece takes inspiration from the story of the late Bahjat Abdulwahed, a radio and television broadcaster who lived in Baghdad and was later forced to emigrate to the US. The work intertwines memories, trauma and dreams from Iraq and America. Recordings of Abdulwahed and conversations with other Iraqi refugees and Iraq War veterans reveal a collection of stories that transcend the boundaries of geographical territories and resonate with the experiences of people from all around the world.

Screened in the CAC cinema is Rakowitz's stop motion film *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody* (2017). In 2005, a militant Islamic group circulated a photo of captured US soldier John Adam, whom they threatened to decapitate within seventy-two hours if Iraqi prisoners detained in US prisons were not released. The Army took the threats seriously, but could not find the name of John Adam on their records. Finally, it turned out that John Adam was Special Ops Cody; a souvenir action figure, whose design was based on the features of African American and Caucasian soldiers and was only available for sale at American bases in Kuwait and Iraq. They were often sent home to the children of the soldiers as surrogates of their deployed fathers. The film's protagonist, Cody, voiced by an ex-military responder in the Army National Guard, encounters statues of Mesopotamia at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Cody suggests the Mesopotamian statues should be released and urges them to leave the glass cases and return home, but the statues remain petrified in the museum.

Michael Rakowitz's exhibition echoes many diverse stories and manifold narratives, which have been suppressed by dominant forces but still resist being silenced. Here, ostensibly mute objects acquire voice and power to act through our perseverance, endurance, sensitivity and unity.

Michael Rakowitz has had solo projects and exhibitions with Creative Time, Tate Modern in London, MCA Chicago, Lombard Freid Gallery and Jane Lombard Gallery in New York, SITE Santa Fe, Galerie Barbara Wien in Berlin, Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, Malmö Konsthall, Tensta Konsthall, and Kunstraum Innsbruck. His work has appeared in venues worldwide including dOCUMENTA (13), P.S.1, MoMA, MassMOCA, Castello di Rivoli, Palais de Tokyo, the 16th Biennale of Sydney, the 10th and 14th Istanbul Biennials, Sharjah Biennial 8, Tirana Biennale and others. He is the recipient of the 2020 Nasher Prize; the 2018 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts; a 2012 Tiffany Foundation Award; a 2008 Creative Capital Grant; a Sharjah Biennial Jury Award; a 2006 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Grant in Architecture and Environmental Structures; the 2003 Dena Foundation Award, and the 2002 Design 21 Grand Prix from UNESCO. He was awarded the Fourth Plinth commission in London's Trafalgar Square, on view through 2020. A survey of Rakowitz's work traveled from Whitechapel Gallery in London, to Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Torino, and is currently on view at The Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai. Rakowitz is Professor of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University.

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