

Michael Rakowitz

(Great Neck, New York, 1973)

Born in the United States from a father of Hungarian origin and a Jewish Iraqi mother, Michael Rakowitz trained as a graphic art student before embarking on the participatory projects with which he was to be awarded his first major recognition in the middle of the 1990s. His works transversally explore the themes of poverty in contemporary metropolises, the processes of gentrification, the diasporas of populations, material destruction and the reappraisal of traditions as a form of resistance to oppression.

In the wake of the invasion of Iraq by US troops, he felt the need to rediscover the culture of his family of origin. Together with his mother, he organised Iraqi cooking courses in response to the boycott of Muslim businesses in post-911 America (*Enemy Kitchen*, 2003), and began to reproduce the items pillaged from the National Museum of Baghdad, using everyday materials such as the packaging of Middle-Eastern food products (*The Invisible Enemy Should not Exist*, 2007). With stone extracted from the valley of Bamiyan, he created replicas of the books destroyed during the bombing of the museum of Kassel in 1941, symbolically and materially uniting the losses of Germany of yesterday with those of contemporary Afghanistan (*What Dust Will Rise?*, 2013).

Produced for the Istanbul Biennale in 2015, the major installation *The Flesh is Yours, the Bones Are Ours* brings the concept of disappearance onto a new level through the reappraisal of the memory of the Armenian genocide in Turkey exactly one hundred years after the start of the deportations. Around the turn of the twentieth century, entire neighbourhoods of the city were redesigned thanks to the work of Armenian craftsmen, at a time of great cultural ferment which anticipated by only a few years the heightening of tensions with the Ottoman Empire. For this project, Rakowitz came into contact with the ex-apprentices of the Armenian master Garabet Cezayirliyan, who carry on the tradition to this day. Drawing on the original prints with which the friezes were produced along with the mouldings of many buildings in Istanbul, he reproduced dozens of plaster casts, distributed along the floor and the walls of the exhibition space. The title of the work cites the Turkish saying “the flesh is yours, the bones are ours,” with which parents would acknowledge the authority of the master when entrusting their son to him for his apprenticeship. At the same time, it evokes the massacre of the Armenians, the forms of whose hands are still silently present in the decorative elements still visible in the city. Yet this is not the only tie with the genocide: the casts, in fact, are produced by mixing plaster with the ground-up bones of the cattle from the farms confiscated from Armenian families. Furthermore, the frottage drawings that complete the installation trace the skeletons of the stray dogs unearthed from Sivri Ada Island, to where thousands of them were exiled from Istanbul in the 1910s as part of a sweeping clean-up operation.

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