

Michael Rakowitz

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

27 September 2019–19 April 2020

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In 1851, a Williams alumnus, the Rev. Dwight Whitney Marsh (1823–1896) Class of 1842, procured for the college two Neo-Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud, near present-day Mosul, Iraq. In 2007, Chicago-based artist Michael Rakowitz (b.1973, Great Neck, NY), grappling with the calamitous effects of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq—in particular the looting of some 15,000 artifacts from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad—launched *The invisible enemy should not exist*. This ongoing project involves creating new versions of the stolen or destroyed stone carvings, vessels and figurines in brightly colored papier-mâché. Weaving these two narratives together across time and place, this exhibition invites a reconsideration of what objects ask of us. How, and why, do their embedded meanings, as well as their needs, shift over time? What can or should we do about it? Rakowitz’s project is one of material memory, history, ethics, responsibility, humor, attention and community. It asks us to attend anew to these ever-shifting meanings and think deeply about how to best care for objects as well as for each other.

After graduating from Williams, Marsh attended seminary and traveled to Mosul in 1850 as a missionary.¹ It was there that his drive to save “nonbelievers” met with a frenzied desire to collect the world’s patrimony on behalf of Western institutions and governments. “I sit in the ashes of Nineveh and mourn over death-struck churches

whose desolations are more overwhelming. I beseech my country, while I see England pouring out her treasure like water, to save slabs made in the image of beasts and birds, and creeping things, to let her wealth flow to untomb and save living souls made in the image of God.”² Despite this plea, Marsh, having developed a friendship with British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard, whose extensive excavations included the buried ruins of the Northwest Palace of King Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE), secured two stone reliefs for his alma mater. These were the first of their kind to come to an American academic institution and were the first major works of art gifted to Williams College. In an 1855 letter sent to College President Mark Hopkins, Marsh describes his motivation for the gift:

My great desire & prayer is that students who look upon the relics of the past may think wisely of time & be led to take a deeper interest in the efforts made to rescue the degraded from the beastliness of their present life, & the eternal dangers impending. Would that every active imagination would hear the stones cry out. Asia has claims upon New England. When the young American beholds in your cabinet...may they remember that God is older than the ages.³

For Marsh the pedagogical value of the reliefs as a window into a distant and culturally exotic past is inseparable from his religious agenda. His words underscore the ways in which, for him, the reliefs corroborated scripture, serving as material evidence of a grand but spiritually deprived pagan

civilization whose inevitable demise was described in the very pages of the Bible.

In their relatively short time at Williams, a mere 168 out of their some 3,000 years, the reliefs have led varied lives. Due to their size and weight, waning public interest and no clear curricular context, they spent much of their time in deep storage.⁴ They reemerged in 2001 on the occasion of the Williams College Museum of Art’s (WCMA) 75th anniversary in a dedicated gallery, where they have since remained on view. While at times their presence in the museum has been triumphantly celebrated, more recent presentations have sought to address the ways in which our relationship with these and many other objects in our collection implicates us in the histories of colonialism and their ever-present repercussions.⁵

Michael Rakowitz’s *Room Z, Northwest Palace of Nimrud*, presented here in dialogue with the WCMA reliefs, adds yet another layer of complexity, nuance and possibility to our understanding of the role of the museum and our responsibility as both stewards and citizens. The larger project out of which *Room Z* developed, *The invisible enemy should not exist*, takes its title from the direct English translation of *Aj-ibur-shapu*, the name of the ancient processional route that led through the Ishtar Gate to the inner city of Babylon.⁶ In the context of this exhibition, the “invisible enemy” might also be read as the colonialist

and evangelist efforts to camouflage the subjugation of populations in the language of scientific inquiry, the pursuit of historical knowledge and the peaceful word of the gospel.

Drawing on his Jewish Iraqi heritage and family history of exile in which cuisine and community play a central role, Rakowitz uses wrappers from Middle Eastern foods and Arabic newspapers available to diasporic populations in cities across the United States to reconstruct the artifacts that have gone missing in the conflicts in Iraq. The artist understands his project not as rebuilding or reconstructing, since the originals, and in particular the lives of those who made them and cared for them, can never be replaced, but rather as “reappearing” the objects: “They can only ever be ghosts of their originals, and, like all good ghosts, their job is to haunt.”⁷ Rakowitz represents ancient stone votives in what is essentially everyday detritus or, in his words, “material as well as social compost.”⁸ The materials he uses are inscribed with their own stories, which are repurposed and reimagined as the artist’s ghostly creations readily cede power to their referents.

Rakowitz expanded his project of recuperation to include the Northwest Palace of Nimrud in 2015, when what remained of the site and its artifacts after centuries of harsh climate, looting and excavation, was bulldozed by members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), who deemed it to be blasphemous. Inaugurated in 860 BCE,

the palace served as Ashurnasirpal II’s home and the seat of government at a time when the Assyrian empire encompassed present-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and parts of Egypt, Turkey and Iran. The palace’s construction was itself the direct result of wars of conquest that furnished the massive slave labor force needed to build such an opulent structure.

Rakowitz reconstructs Room Z in its original scale, recreating the reliefs that were *in situ* at the time of the ISIS attack. Empty spaces with gallery labels refer to those reliefs that had been previously taken and are in international collections. In an imagined coming together, the physical presence of Rakowitz’s “reappeared” reliefs marks a past that can no longer be seen, while the glaring white-walled absences and labels serve as stand-ins for those objects that have continued their lives in contexts—such as a small New England college—far removed from their original one.

There is an actual coming together as the narrow halls of Rakowitz’s *Room Z* lead to the Stoddard gallery in which WCMA’s ancient reliefs (neither of which come from Room Z) are displayed alongside the artist’s 2017 video *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*.⁹ The video was inspired by a hostage situation in 2005 in which an Iraqi insurgent group posted a photo of a captured U.S. soldier named John Adam, threatening to behead him in 72 hours unless their demands

were met. When no such enlisted soldier could be found, the incident was revealed to be a hoax perpetrated by an Iraqi youth. The photo instead depicted Special Ops Cody, a highly realistic, special edition action figure available for sale on U.S. military bases in Iraq and Kuwait.

After following the story with interest, Rakowitz tracked down a Cody action figure and created a video that follows the doll on a journey of curiosity and empathy through the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. Cody's repeated attempts to connect with and liberate the Mesopotamian votive statues from the vitrines that have both "hosted" and made them "hostage" for decades are met with wide-eyed, ossified inaction on the part of the figurines. Voiced by Iraq War veteran Gin McGill Prather—whose own harrowing tale of identifying the bodies of detainees threads through the narration—Cody serves, in Rakowitz's words, as a "body to be inhabited," a transmitter for the stories of both people and objects.¹⁰

The ghosts in Rakowitz's work are haunting but also reassuring as they reacquaint us with what might otherwise shift solely into the realm of memory or become forgotten entirely. Ghosts in the spirit sense are not restricted to time and place, moving freely among dimensions. Objects share this quality, too. They do not stay neatly put in the moments and places of their creation any more than people do; indeed less, as they often endure well beyond

our own corporeal capacities. Neither do they care to adhere to national or political boundaries, nor do they have any interest in ownership and the power that attends it. Museums, however, have been built on these very notions. How can we in museums today responsibly care for (curate, from the Latin *curare* "to take care of") objects that have come to us through embedded systems of oppression? Rakowitz navigates the slippery domain of objects through a concept he calls "(g)hosting" that is inspired by a Duchamp multiple containing the words "A Guest + A Host = A Ghost."¹¹ If we are to learn from Rakowitz's work, an answer to the museum's dilemma might indeed lie in our own version of (g)hosting: being both host and guest in our institutions, welcoming in and ceding control, sharing our collection with others on equal terms with curiosity and empathy, and allowing objects to speak rather than always speaking for them.

Lisa Dorin, Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs, and Curator of Contemporary Art

Endnotes

- 1 The Protestant missionary movement in America had its beginnings at Williams College, where in 1806 five members of a religious group on campus met to pray for the spiritual welfare of the people of Asia. As they took refuge in a haystack during a thunderstorm, they “sought council one of another and sought direction of Him who said, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel.’” Within four years of the Haystack Prayer Meeting, several members of the group founded the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Calvin Durfee, *Biographical Annals of Williams*, (Boston, Lee and Shepherd; New York, Lee Shepherd and Dillingham, 1871) p. 117.
- 2 *The Missionary Herald* vol. XLVII no 6., June 1851, p. 191.
- 3 D. W. Marsh to Mark Hopkins, August 7, 1855, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 4 The two reliefs currently in WCMA’s collection came from Layard via Marsh in 1851. Due to their successful reception, a third was acquired by Marsh at the request of the college in 1855. By the early 20th century they had gone out of favor and were placed in storage. In 1941 Karl Weston, Class of 1896, Amos Lawrence Professor of Art, and first director of the college museum, sold the third relief to the Minneapolis Institute of Art and used the proceeds to acquire 25 other objects of art that included works by Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt van Rijn and Winslow Homer, as well as Egyptian, Aztec and Roman material. Elyse Gonzales, *Stones of Assyria: Ancient Spirits from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, WCMA exhibition brochure, 2001.
- 5 Some of these include: *Celebrating 75 Years—The Stones of Assyria: Ancient Spirits from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, 2001–2; *A Collection of Histories*, 2011–13; and “*The Field is the World.*” *Williams, Hawai’i and the Making of Material Histories*, 2018.
- 6 Erected in 575 BCE by King Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BCE), the gate was excavated by German archaeologist Robert Koldewey and brought in the 1930s to the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, where it remains today.
- 7 Michael Rakowitz, quoted in Iwona Blazwick, “Michael Rakowitz: A Transatlantic Interview” in *Michael Rakowitz*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Marianna Vecellio (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Turin: Castello di Rivoli; Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), p.37.
- 8 “Michael Rakowitz (G)hosting,” discussion panel at Whitechapel Gallery, London, July 6, 2019.
- 9 The *Winged Guardian Spirit* comes from a corner of Room F, which led to the throne room in the north suite, while the *Guardian Spirit* comes from an unidentified location in the palace’s west suite, about which little is known, as it was poorly preserved at the time of excavation.
- 10 “Michael Rakowitz (G)hosting,” discussion panel.
- 11 Blazwick, “Michael Rakowitz: A Transatlantic Interview,” 38.

Thank you: from the studio, Annie Raccuglia, Frances Lee; from the gallery, Jared Quinton, Breanne Johnson, Anastasia Karpova Tinari, Rhona Hoffman; from Williams and WCMA, Christopher Swift, Eileen Baumgartner, Holly Edwards, Adi Nachman, Brian Repetto, Diane Hart, Rebecca Dravis, Elizabeth Gallerani, Nina Palaez, Pamela Franks; and special thanks to Michael Rakowitz. -LD

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