

*Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West  
Spoils*

My name is Michael Rakowitz. I'm an artist based in Chicago. And I'm here today at Creative Time's offices in New York City to surrender the Iraqi plates that belonged to Saddam Hussein to the US State Department that I used for my project titled *Spoils*.

In June of 2010 I was approached by Creative Time to participate in a collaboration between artists and the chief chef at Park Avenue Restaurant, Kevin Lasko. And the project that I ended up proposing was called *Spoils*, and the project basically consists of a dish where Kevin Lasko incorporated Iraqi date syrup into a main dish on the menu, and the dish was then served on plates that were looted from Saddam Hussein's palaces following the US invasion in 2003.

I was expecting reactions to be complicated because the project is indeed provocative and puts the diner into a position of having to take a position, of actually choosing whether or not to be served this delicious food on a surface that's loaded with very complicated history. So, what I was really exploring was the relationship between the sweetness of the Iraqi date syrup—which itself is supposed to be a harbinger of good things to come; it has a lot of metaphorical power in Iraqi culture—the bitterness of the surface upon which it's served, in terms of it being a plate that was used by Saddam Hussein, and then the diner's tongue. So, that kind of dynamic triangle was something that I was very interested in exploring, and it's not anything that's loaded with a pleasant experience.

On November 23, the restaurant received a cease and desist letter asking them to refrain from using the plates and asking them to follow procedures where they would essentially turn over these goods that the Iraq Mission to the UN believed represented Iraqi cultural property.

This plate belonged to King Faisal II of Iraq, who was assassinated in 1958 when he was 23 years old. And one of the photos after the coup d'etat that dethroned him showed the plates piled up outside his palace.

And these plates were actually looted from Saddam Hussein's palaces, so he himself had used the plates that were in the possession of the former Iraqi monarch. And this is actually Wedgwood china made in England. They were a gift from the Queen of England to the King of Iraq.

In this way I think the project follows through with a lot of the traces that I was interested in in terms of where the object went, where it belongs, the history that's loaded inside of it. I'm somebody who doesn't believe in the destruction of monuments and in the tearing down of symbols of power that people may have resisted or may have resented. I think that's part of a place's history. And I think that when those symbols are erased you're dealing with an unhealthy amnesia that countries and people tend to fall into.

US Marshal: We're dropping them right off now at the – to the Iraqi –

*Michael Rakowitz:* Embassy?

*USM:* – embassy, yeah. To the recognition on 79th Street.

*Creative Time employee:* Four copies. And two copies of the –

*USM:* The Iraqi PM was in town with Bush yesterday –

*MR:* Yeah. With Obama.

*USM:* Obama. You've got me on Bush now. But he was hoping to bring them back on his trip back.

*MR:* Wow.

*USM:* So, I don't know if it's gonna happen that quick or not, but that's why they wanted to do it today.

*CT:* That's why they wanted it so quickly.

*MR:* Wow.

*USM:* Yeah, it came all the way from DC the request to get this done today.

I was a little bit surprised that the Iraq Mission to the UN would want back the symbols that the US and many of the people in Iraq had seemed so eager to dispel and to destroy.

The address of the Iraq Mission to the UN is 14 East 79th Street.

We're standing in front of the Iraq Mission to the UN, and we're here because the US Marshals are turning the plates over to the Iraqi government. What they told us in Creative Time's offices was that they wanted this to coincide with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's visit to Washington. He was in DC yesterday meeting with President Obama. And they're looking to bring the plates back home to Iraq on the same flight as the current Iraqi prime minister.

I think the way that embassies and missions work is that you're technically on Iraqi soil, or you're on the soil of the country of the embassy, and so we're on Iraqi soil. So, this is the first time my family's been back.

*Michael Rakowitz:* So, they'll be returned to Iraq?

*Iraqi Mission employee:* Yes.

*MR:* Tomorrow?

*IM:* We don't – I'm not sure, but very soon.

*MR:* Okay.

*IM:* Very soon, yeah.

*MR:* Will it go in a museum or . . . ?

*IM:* Should be.

*MR:* Should be? Yeah. What I heard was that the plates were a gift from the Queen of England.

*IM:* That's right.

*MR:* Wedgwood china. So... and then, the more recent china, all different places. Limoge, Italy . . . Thank you so much.

*IM:* Okay.

*MR:* And good luck.

*IM:* Thank you.

*MR:* And inshallah. Good times ahead.

*IM:* Thank you very much.

*MR:* Thank you.

*IM:* Thank you. My pleasure.

I had no idea. I honestly thought that we would be in some kind of office where people were getting passport visas or something else, and I never expected this level of state presence. I mean, these people walking in and out of the room, opening the door, shutting the door. It was like a striptease. And then they let us into the room and we had this very frank discussion about the plates, and they were very happy to receive them back and said that they were part of their cultural heritage. So, I'm a little in shock. Pretty incredible.

*Rachel Maddow:* Best new thing in the world today is obviously the end of the Iraq War. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta saying today in Baghdad that Iraq is now fully responsible for directing its own path. The war ending as it should, Iraq now becoming its own sovereign country without our flag flying over it anywhere, without our troops anywhere in it. That's easily the best new thing in the world, maybe this decade.

But there's another Iraq story that is ending as it should. It doesn't beat the end of the war, but it's pretty good. This fall, a Chicago-based artist got together with a New York City arts group and a restaurant. They put together an ambitious, big-thinking art project. They found on eBay dinner plates believed to have been looted from Saddam Hussein's palaces after the US invasion. They bought the plates and as an interactive art installation they served on Saddam's flatware and plates venison with tahini and date syrup and pomegranates. The project was called *Spoils*. The artist said he wanted diners to think about how the plates got to their table. "This is about the symbols of power in that regime that have now come into the ownership of the populace that were living under Hussein," he told *The New York Times* last month.

But you can't just buy Saddam's dinner plates on eBay. Not legally, anyway. When the art group was formally notified that the plates really belonged to the Iraqi people and needed to be returned, they agreed to give them up. So, earlier this week, in what *The New York Times* described as a strange but cordial visit, the artist helped the US Marshals pack up the plates so they could be delivered to the Iraqi Mission at the UN. By Tuesday afternoon the plates had made their way to DC, where Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki was in town to meet with President Obama. The plates were then scheduled

to fly back to Iraq with Malaki on his private plane on Wednesday, which is to say this ambitious, big-thinking art project ended as it should have. The Iraq War is over, Iraq is a sovereign nation, and one of the very small things that means is they get their stuff back, too.

Now it's time for The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell. Have a great night.