

## NEW YORK

### Michael Rakowitz

#### Lombard-Freid Projects

In his recent work, Michael Rakowitz assumes the role of historian to demonstrate the fine line separating fiction from reality. Using velum drawings, sculptures, and arti-

facts, he maps how science fiction elements seeped into Iraq's national iconography under Saddam Hussein and tracks the origins of governmental uniforms, monuments, and weaponry to surprising sources such as Jules Verne and George Lucas.

Largely associative, Rakowitz's narrative begins with the 18th-century French invention of the hot air balloon and its ultimate use as a war device. He then follows the life of scientist Gerald Bull, beginning with his days as a child prodigy in Canada and ending with his development of supergun artillery and Project Babylon at the behest of Saddam. Most importantly, Rakowitz uncovers the direct interest of

Saddam and his sons Uday and Qusay in the "Star Wars" movies, and how that interest manifested itself in various aspects of the Iraqi collective image. These anecdotes and others serve as a convincing basis to Rakowitz's thesis that Saddam's rule was ironically informed by Western influences.

While 13 drawings relay the didactic product of Rakowitz's research, two large sculptures embody the interpretation of his revelations. *Victory Arch (Strike the Empire Back Series)* (2009) is Rakowitz's version of the famous 1989 Baghdad monument commemorating the victory of Iraq over Iran. It is composed of the same elements as the original—two hands holding crossed

swords, with enemy helmets strewn below. Yet in this rendering, the hands—originally fashioned in bronze after Saddam's—are papier-mâché made from the allegorical romance novels rumored to be penned by the leader himself (copies of the books are also on view). The swords of Qadisiyya appear as light sabers glowing with the colors of the Iraqi flag, while the enemy helmets are composed of maimed GI Joe figurines set in clear plastic and shaped into configurations that resemble Darth Vader's helmet. While imposing a playful spin on Saddam's triumphant vision for Iraq, Rakowitz retains a critical eye in applying the iconography of sci-fi villains to Iraqi national symbols.

*From the Earth to the Moon* (2009), a supergun-cum-telescope made of balsa wood and plastic military models, provides a fake view of the moon through its lens. This piece combines elements of several sub-stories concerning Bull's Project Babylon for the Iraqi government, Saddam's aspirations to govern space through satellite dismantlement, and the persistent myth that the leader's smiling face was spotted on the moon's surface following his 2006 execution. Despite Rakowitz's tendency to overlook the oftentimes disturbing historical origins of sci-fi imagery and his highly selective view of Iraq's past, the information communicated in these works paints a haunting and mind-boggling view of reality. The notion that one of the cruelest leaders of the 20th century was influenced even slightly by a purely fantastic creation leaves an indelible impression.

—Yaelle Amir

Above: Roxy Paine, *Maelstrom*, 2009. Stainless steel, installation view. Below: Michael Rakowitz, *Victory Arch (Strike the Empire Back Series)*, 2009. Mixed media, installation view.

