ael Rakowitz | Photo: John McKenzie, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art

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Michael Rakowitz's 'hanging garden' for asylum seekers takes root

A living installation at the Baltic Centre in Gateshead uses horticulture to send a political message while also offering solace

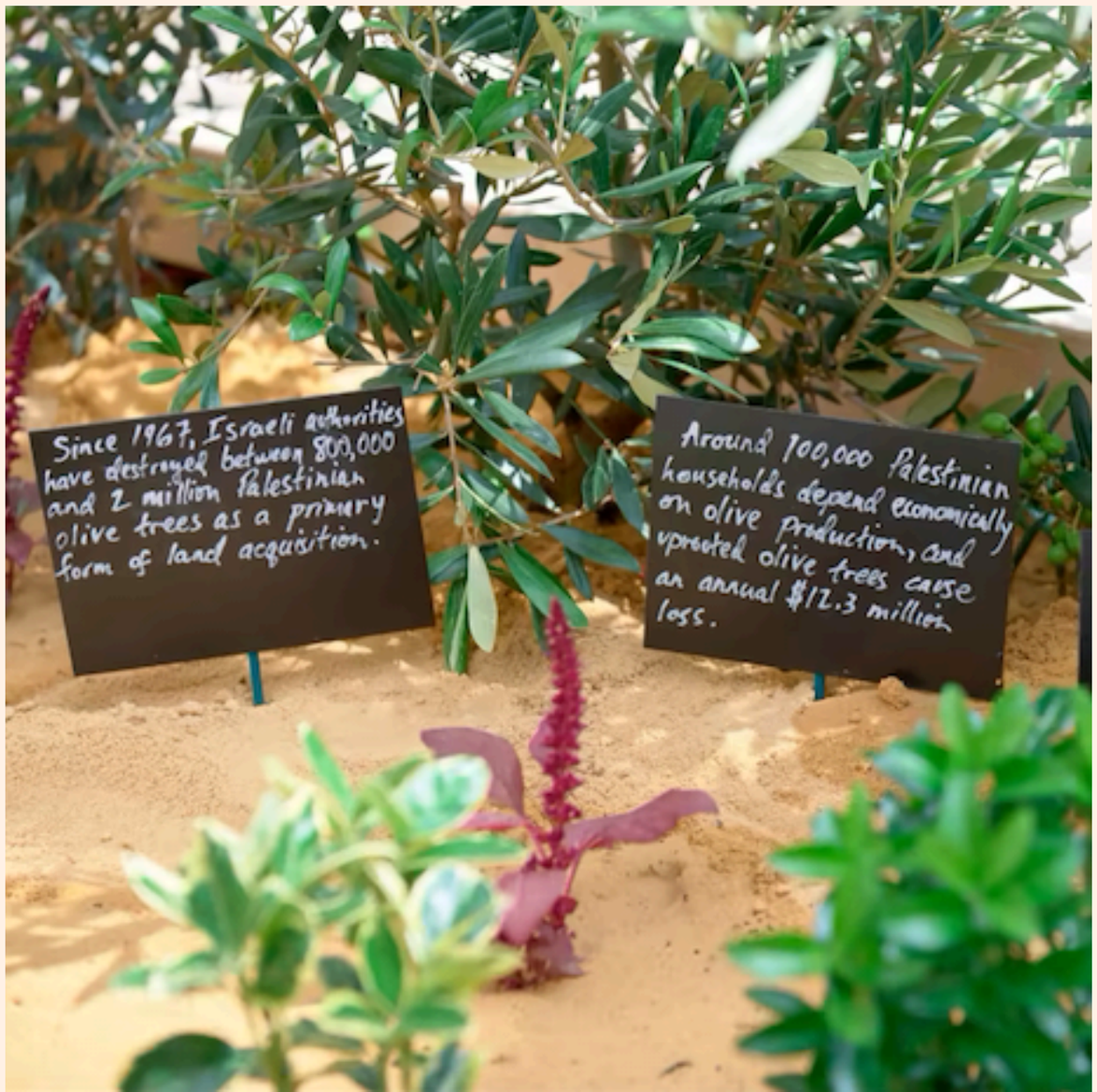
Maya Jaggi YESTERDAY

Sparkling turquoise streams fed by a mighty aqueduct, lush rows of variegated trees and shrubs: a bearded Assyrian king, in a red-and-gold hilltop palace, surveys his paradisiacal gardens.

This ancient scene, captured in recycled-cardboard-and-foil relief on a monumental wood panel, forms the centrepiece of *The Waiting Gardens of the North*, Michael Rakowitz's inspiring installation. This transforms the sky-lit top gallery of the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in north-east England into a fragrant greenhouse — a fount of memory and a catalyst for human exchange.

Chicago-based Rakowitz, whose Iraqi-Jewish maternal grandparents fled Baghdad in 1946, is best known for the Assyrian winged bull that occupied Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth in 2018-20. Rather as this hybrid *lamassu* "reappeared" a sculpture destroyed in 2015 by Isis, Baltic's entrancing panel reimagines a gypsum wall relief chiselled by 19th-century archaeologists from the North Palace of Nineveh (today's Mosul in northern Iraq), and now in the British Museum. It depicts the gardens of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in the seventh century BC, which predated, and conceivably inspired, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

The two gardens, built under two ancient empires, seeded Rakowitz's collaborative project, commissioned by Baltic with the Imperial War Museums' IWM 14-18 NOW Legacy Fund. The £2.5mn partnership programme supports UK art exploring the heritage of conflict.



Detail from Rakowitz's installation 'The Waiting Gardens of the North' . . . © Michael Rakowitz | Photo: John McKenzie, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art

. . . with references to the impact on local peoples of their land being occupied © Michael Rakowitz | Photo: John McKenzie, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art

Baltic was last year recognised as a Gallery of Sanctuary for its work with refugees. *The Waiting Gardens of the North* is an evolving indoor garden planted and tended partly by those housed in the area while their asylum applications are processed — a Kafkaesque bureaucratic limbo that can last a long time. Their wish is that the plants "take root while they wait, hopefully, to take root themselves", the artist said at a preview. "A hanging garden for lives hanging in the balance."

Mindful that western societies often embrace stone-cold antiquities more warmly than they do people from those regions, Rakowitz fuses antiquity with vernacular modernity. His *lamassu* was sculpted from 10,500 empty date-syrup cans, referencing not only the products' tortuous journey from Iraq to avoid trade barriers, but also the Arab diaspora that consumes them, including refugees.

> **"These are plants 'as portals for people living here to connect back home; to see them take root'**

The cardboard panel is similarly covered in a collage of found packaging. But these foodstuffs are from local west Asian, south Asian and African grocers, their wrappers bearing scripts from Arabic to Gujarati. The colours, including the gold foil of bouillon cubes, match traces detected on the bare-stone original which, Rakowitz tells me, he first saw in the 2018 British Museum exhibition *I Am Ashurbanipal*. Coloured light was projected on to the once-polychrome panel in a way he found "beautiful, almost animating it".

Like the *lamassu*, this installation is part of *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, a series begun in 2007 to recreate antiquities looted or destroyed after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. His "ghosts" also draw attention to traumatic gaps left in Arab history by the "insatiable appetite of the west for objects of the east [which] created the economy where they can be trafficked and destroyed."

Three years ago, Rakowitz asked the British Museum to match the gift of his *lamassu* to Tate by returning an original to Iraq. Though he scorns as "colonial largesse" the response — that the museum had allowed 3D-printed replicas to be made for the University of Mosul — his first garden has other aims.

Rakowitz's 'Waiting Gardens of the North' © Michael Rakowitz | Photo: John McKenzie, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art

Behind it are personal memories of his Iraqi grandparents' kitchen plot on Long Island: their house was, for him, an "immersive installation" of what they had lost. It also evokes botanical gardens in besieged Kabul, where "people would spend 20 minutes staring at a tree. Like an art work, a plant creates states of contemplation."

The relief stands in a sandy bed of plants, as the panel extends into real space. The layout has workstations — from tea-drying to spice-grinding — based on the palace blueprint, while raised wooden beds echo the panel and lines of grey slate stand in for irrigation channels. Some plants take root in gabions, like weeds in a ruined palace. A curving aqueduct papered with date-cookie packets holds a bed of catmint, whose violet-blue blossoms will in time evoke flowing water.

The 3D extension nods to 18th-century English gardens, whose follies embodied the pagodas on Chinese porcelain, creating, for Rakowitz, a "space of desire . . . not just imagination but activation". Migrants "waiting on their status" were asked which plants they most missed. Charities such as The Comfrey Project, which treats displacement trauma with therapeutic horticulture, helped create a plant inventory reflecting places of origin. The plants, Rakowitz says, are "meant as portals for people who live here to connect back home; to see them take root".

Detail from Rakowitz's 'Waiting Gardens of the North' © Michael Rakowitz | Photo: John McKenzie, Baltic Centre

The artist's handwriting is ubiquitous on blackboard labels in the soil, which weave personal narrative, history and geopolitics into horticulture. Potted date palms at the entrance are reminders that Iraq once led date exports, with 30mn palms before the Iran-Iraq war; after the 2003 invasion, "only three million trees survived."

Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Hanging Gardens were, by legend, for his wife Amytis, who missed her native Media, today's Iran: "A garden to cure homesickness."

"Seeing a familiar plant in another country is like a friend," scientist Nicolette Perry, director of Dilston Physic Garden, tells me. "Everywhere around the world uses the same group of plants." Herbs to improve memory and mood, such as sage and peppermint, grow as part of the installation, with recipes for tinctures. Rakowitz, whose father was a doctor, is alert to the healing power of both horticulture and art, including "dirt therapy" used by war veterans. Gardening, he says, produces "that curiosity and care that art has had for me".

The garden is designed to be harvested. Also a chef, Rakowitz once edited a recipe book entitled *A House with a Date Palm Will Never Starve*. In *Enemy Kitchen*, he taught his mother's Iraqi recipes, when Iraq "wasn't visible beyond oil and war".

A ‘language café’ session at which Michael Rakowitz . . .

. . . shares stories and food with participants

Notes beside the plants quote sanctuary-seekers from Namibia to Sri Lanka who bring knowledge often lost in more urban societies. Dotted amid the foliage, their papier-mâché sculptures range from ancient heads to aeroplanes. “Refugees are not seen as having knowledge,” Eleni Venaki, director of The Comfrey Project, tells me. Yet, she suggests, conversations around plants can shift the balance of power towards mutual curiosity and discovery.

Discussing the British Museum response to his letter, the artist speaks of the need for “repair and reciprocity”, for restorative justice, not just restitution or repatriation, that “allows us to think together.” This verdant gallery-garden, where “those looking for home are welcomed as equals”, takes a vigorous step on that path.

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