

An interview with Ibrahim Mahama

Akin Oladimeji

Ibrahim Mahama draws upon the material legacies of colonialism, postcolonialism and industrialisation in Ghana. Through the collection, preservation and facilitation of access to objects, buildings and ephemera, his practice references histories that are insufficiently documented. He is the founder of the Savannah Centre for Contemporary Arts (SCCA), Red Clay Studio, and Nkrumah Volin, which are all in Tamale, northern Ghana. SCCA, established in 2019, aims to promote research and artist residencies. In the subsequent year, Red Clay was founded as an extension of SCCA, serving as both a studio complex and exhibition space. Nkrumah Volin, inaugurated in 2021, is a ten-storey art school with studio spaces. Mahama's artwork has been showcased internationally in both solo and group exhibitions, including prominent venues such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta 14, and White Cube in London. He was the youngest artist represented in the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. The focal point of his first solo exhibition in Austria features an installation that utilises a multitude of enamelled iron 'headpans' to support a locomotive constructed from remnants of three trains. These pans are commonly used in Ghana for transporting goods and materials, and Mahama has curated a collection of thousands, exchanging the old for the new. An accompanying series of photographic works consists of over 100 X-ray images of spinal deformities, framed within a metal scaffold sourced from one of the trains, which contemplates the damage inflicted upon the human body. In an interview conducted in Vienna on 8 July 2025, Mahama discusses various aspects of his artistic practice, as well as his exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien, entitled 'Zilijifa' (running from 9 July to 2 November 2025).

Akin Oladimeji: Maybe we could start with the first question of why you decided to become an artist. What made you think this looked like an interesting profession?

Ibrahim Mahama: When I was a child, I used to draw a lot. I was in boarding school at the age of five and drawing was the one thing that kept me grounded, in a way. And when it was time to go to high school, my father said, maybe studying arts will not be such a bad idea, because throughout your growing up, you've been very drawn to arts. Even when you failed in all courses in school, you were always first in arts, so I think there is a potential there. I thought, okay, whatever... because as a child, I had no idea what I wanted to do when I grew up. And in Ghana, you can study arts in high school, as a full programme. So I did the visual arts programme, specifically sculpture and picture-making, and history of art, which they call



Ibrahim Mahama, *The Physical Impossibility of Debt in the Mind of Something Living*, 2025, installation view in 'Zilijifa', 9 July – 2 November 2025, Kunsthalle Wien, courtesy of Redclay, Ibrahim Mahama and White Cube, Hong Kong/London/New York/Paris/Seoul, photo by Markus Wörgötter

general knowledge in art, and some maths and some economics and other subjects. And when I was finishing, one of the teachers at the time, his name was Mr Osei, had studied at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in the arts department. He came from a family of artists and he told us about the painting department, what they had to study, and then we also got to know a bit about architecture and all that. Before, I was considering whether to continue studying arts at university, or to do architecture or something different, or industrial art or whatever. But then I went for the fine arts programme, and that was it... I met all these professors who really made me believe more in thinking about art as a full-time practice.

AO: Could you talk me through the process of how this exhibition came together – from concept to execution really? Who came up with the idea? Who approached who?

IM: When Michelle Cotton got the job as the curator here [at Kunsthalle Wien] two years ago, she contacted me and said, I've been following your work for a while and I'm getting this new job in Vienna, and I would like you to be one of the first artists that I work with. So I travelled to Vienna, and she also travelled there just for us to meet and to look at the space together. So, we did that and we talked. And I said, okay, I will think about a proposal. But of course, I was already working on the history of the rail line. I initially made a first proposal, still with a train, which was cut in half and had these figurative forms attached to it, carrying its weight. Then I was thinking about it and later on I came back, and I said, no, I'm thinking about this new form where I have to collect these head pans from these women. I don't know how many, but I'm thinking about the stories and the history and everything. I made some

sketches, but also I considered the work of Damien Hirst, one of his original sharks in formaldehyde, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in The Mind of Someone Living* (1991). As a student, I used to look at that massive installation quite a lot, so I thought, okay, maybe I might take that as a starting point of inspiration to produce this work. That's why I named the train installation *The Physical Impossibility of Debt in the Mind of Something Living* (2025).

I thought by taking the carcass of the train and scooping out everything and then putting it on top of these head pans, it almost becomes like this monster that you can somehow go through. So I used that as a starting point. I made a note on that, and I sent it to Michelle. And she was very excited. She said she felt it was really good and that she really liked it. I said, okay, fine. Let's build upon it, so we started thinking about the production, what it would cost to produce the work, collecting the pans, producing X-ray forms, printing them, negotiating with the market traders to make the X-ray forms, etc, and also getting the welders who could help us to be able to disassemble the train lines and re-weld them together. The same for the train itself. It took quite a long time, physically, in terms of the fabrication of the work. It took about a year to produce these pieces. But the inspiration for it probably started in 2013, when I began looking at working with remnants of the railway.



Photo courtesy of Redclay, Ibrahim Mahama and White Cube, Hong Kong/London/New York/Paris/Seoul

AO: I've seen various exhibitions of yours, for example at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, England, in 2019, but I don't remember much photography. Why was it crucial to include these 125 images here (*Go Tell it on the Mountain* 2025)?

IM: I've had a few photos in different exhibitions. In my show in Manchester there was a series of images of women with tattoos. And the women with their tattooed arms are the same

women that I'm doing the x-rays on here. So, I've been interested in different parts of the body. I was interested in the tattoo in relation to the history of migration, how people would move from the rural areas in the north to the south in order to be able to work as market traders. But you can also trace that to the history of the eighteenth century when the soldiers who were to fight in the war had to come from the north, or those who had to work on the railway also came from the north or even from Nigeria and other places. A lot of the workers on the railway, which was being built in the Gold Coast, were actually Nigerian because the British announced far and wide that they would pay one shilling a day to work on this. They created these camps in the rainforest, because in the beginning they started thinking about the building of it. Because of the wars they had fought, they knew that they were susceptible to tropical diseases. So they had to get a huge labour force from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and northern Ghana in order to be able to build the railway. I thought all that history was somehow implied in the tattoo on the arm and then on the spine, the defects on the spine in relation to the contemporary migration patterns in relation to work.

AO: How did they get the tattoos? What do they signify?

IM: The tattoos are like biodata. It's the name of my father, my father's father, my mother, my grandma, things like that – because historically, when people were travelling, especially in the mid-twentieth century and before, if you died on the journey, or anything like that, how could your body be identified? Or people were dying in gory accidents, and sometimes they were dismembered and then the body, or a part of the body, was a way of identifying them.

AO: My grandma had a tattoo and maybe that's what it signifies. You've explained how the materials in the exhibition carry meaning beyond their physical form. I'm interested to know if there are conversations or movements in Ghana or globally that this work is responding to.

IM: I think it's more or less responding to the global human condition, because we're living in a time where we have increasing wars and things like that, and particularly with what is happening in Palestine. I know that in Palestine, a lot of the families were beginning to write the names of their children on their bodies, because when a missile comes down and sometimes the bodies are dismantled, an arm is found somewhere and then there is at least a name in order to be able to give the child a fitting burial. There were a lot of these conditions in the postwar period... that's why people like Nkrumah were important, because Nkrumah always said that in the postindependence era, what is independence truly? Is it that now you think you have your freedom? No, you still don't have your freedom if you don't own the means of production and other things. So certainly, how do we go back to education, production, things like that? When Nkrumah was overthrown in the mid-1960s, prior to that he had already invested a lot of money in building factories, schools, hospitals, etc. There has since been a very heavy decline. And I think your country, Nigeria, has also been part of that narrative for many decades now. The question is, how do we use the bodies of people from the local space as a starting point to be able

to address these global conditions? Because in Congo you have kids who are still mining, cobalt mining, and that ends up in the cellphones that are being made by the multinationals. There are bodies of young women from there, because I'm thinking about the most precarious bodies, but I also think that I'm measuring that precarity in relation to other bodies around the world.



Ibrahim Mahama, from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 2025, courtesy of Redclay, Ibrahim Mahama, White Cube, Hong Kong/London/New York/Paris/Seoul, and APALAZZOGALLERY, Brescia

AO: Due to the nature of the work, you do lots of collaboration. You have studio assistants and people at the museum here in Vienna as well as local people in Ghana helping you. Do you thrive on collaboration, or do you find it highly challenging, especially in an environment like Ghana? Because I know Nigeria can be a very stressful place to try and organise things, so I wonder if your country is the same.

IM: It's both, I think. It's both, because it can also be very inspiring. Because when you're working with lots of people, they also bring their own experiences to things, and they might do something in a way that you would never have thought about. Like all these pans I've collected, I could never have produced them. Even if I had a new pan, it wouldn't have the same impact as what I have here on display. History produces it and the conditions produce it. So I like to think that the pans and the trains and all that are also collaborators in themselves. But of course I've worked with the railway workers, with welders, with different kinds of artisans in order to



Photo by Ibrahim Mahama, courtesy of Redclay, Ibrahim Mahama and White Cube, Hong Kong/London/New York/Paris/Seoul

produce different details for various parts of the work. And you learn from all these things. It is more inspiring than any other thing because you learn quite a lot from it. And it also expands the scope of the aesthetics that can come out from the work.

AO: Speaking of learning from things, you didn't feel people might be unable to access the film you made, where people speak a local language but there are no subtitles?

IM: No, the point was not to include subtitles. The idea is just to be able to see a group of people working on different levels to produce the form that you're experiencing. Because sometimes the audience want to know too much. In the other film in the exhibition, the subtitles are in English and German. But with this one that you asked about, I just want people to enjoy looking at the images.

AO: Yes, it's good for people to make up their own decisions about what's going on. And I think I was able to understand by your intonation and facial expressions some of what you were saying.

IM: Exactly. I was talking to some of the market traders in that film. When we were exchanging those pans in the studio, the women would all come there. Sometimes we went to the communities, but in the beginning, we were asking them to come to the studio so that they could also see the studio, the collection, the exhibitions, the archives and everything. To understand that the work, the pans we're collecting from them, we're thinking of it from an archival point of view, because we think that the embodiment is within the pan, their life form,

and that combined with another pan and another pan tells a much bigger story. But when they came to the studio, there was so much chaos because a lot of them had come from very faraway places and they were frustrated: they said, oh, give us the pan already so we can go home. And we were trying to speak to them, trying to emphasise that it's not just about getting a pan and going away. We had to tell some of them to be patient. In addition, there were some other women who came earlier and we had to serve them first. So, it's just practical things.

AO: In the video, I saw local people appreciating the art in your Red Clay space. It seems like you're able to widen people's experience of what art is. It looks like you are doing something interesting there by broadening their horizons.

IM: Of course, that's the whole point of it, because we don't want the work we do to be totally alienated from the communities that inspired it because all the labour that goes into making the objects that we collect for our work, they're extremely profound. The point is, how do we reconstitute that in such a way that the local population become part of the conversations within it and not totally removed from it?

AO: I've been doing lots of research on Jelili Atiku, who you must have heard of. One of the reasons why I find his work fascinating is the fact that he does performance art on the streets of Ejigbo in Lagos. He collaborates with local people, he's recognised, and then they hear about him travelling abroad and they're like, oh, okay, maybe this art thing is not so useless.

IM: Exactly!

AO: Thanks for talking to me.

IM: Thank you.

Akin Oladimeji is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is currently in the first year of a PhD at University College London (UCL) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.