

Kunsthalle Wien  
Museumsquartier

EN

Ibrahim Mahama  
Zilijifa  
9.7.–2.11.2025

The work of Ibrahim Mahama (b. 1987, Tamale, Ghana) draws upon the material legacy of colonialism, post-colonialism and industrialisation in Ghana. By collecting, preserving and creating access to objects, buildings and ephemera, his practice refers to histories that are inadequately documented.

This exhibition presents an entirely new body of commissioned work including sculpture, photography and video that develops his research on the history of the Ghanaian railway network, first created under British colonial rule during the 1890s. The mechanisms, vessels and networks employed in transporting goods and people are the starting point for a series of works that consider the act of loading, carrying and unloading weight alongside a more abstract notion of the weight of history.

The works in this exhibition were produced at Redclay, one of three artist-led institutions that Mahama has established in Ghana's northern city of Tamale. Part artist studio, part study centre, part exhibition space, they variously function as open-access resources for the local community and sites for ongoing research.

This is Mahama's first solo exhibition in Austria.

#### *Zilijifa*

The exhibition title plays upon words and phrases in Dagbani, a Gur language that is widely spoken in the local area. The word for 'train' (*ziliji*) is associated with a phrase that refers to the act of carrying something on one's head or transporting it in a vehicle (*zi-ra*) and the words for a load (*zili*), blood (*zim*) and the carcass of an animal (*jifa*).

#### *The Physical Impossibility of Debt in the Mind of Something Living*, 2025

The 'carcass' in Mahama's exhibition is a German-built diesel locomotive which is hoisted off the ground, bisecting the room and creating a dark passage at the centre of the space. The engine is one of several British- and German-built trains that Mahama has acquired from scrap metal dealers over the last three years. The trains were brought to Ghana to run on lines intended to connect the territory then described as the south of the Gold Coast with other British colonies in the region, thus providing a network to carry timber, minerals such as bauxite and so-called 'cash crops' such as cocoa, to the port for onward transport to Europe. Such infrastructure fundamentally shaped the economics of the country, creating villages, trading stations and opening Ghana up to 'development' while removing its abundant natural resources.

The railway was significantly diminished in the decades following Ghana's independence in 1957. Mahama's sculpture employs parts from three different locomotives that originate from Stuttgart. They date from the 1980s and 1990s when Ghana was undergoing a period of 'structural adjustment' and borrowed funds from international agencies (such as the International Monetary Fund) to acquire trains for the network. Here they appear hollowed out, stripped of their interior and cut into panels to form the shell of the train. It lies at the heart of a project that focuses on the material degradation of the railway,

deploying parts of the line and rolling stock to illustrate the burdensome yet precarious nature of the colonial project:

'...[the trains] are made of steel, and the Gold Coast was near the sea so the trains have rusted over time, and I'm interested in the idea of this heavy material which is so fragile when kept near water. It can dissolve in a few decades. So I started looking at ways in which I could collect it. The rail lines are different, they are pure cast iron – it could take a thousand years for them to rust away. But the train bodies are thin and could disappear over a century..'

The train is supported by several thousand enamelled iron 'head-pans', a vessel commonly used in Ghana to carry goods and materials. Chipped, rusted, dented and torn, they evidence heavy use. Mahama acquired the pans from people in Tamale and Accra, exchanging new for old. Here they are presented empty and stacked in columns underneath the train in place of the railway. The work draws an equivalence between the two objects that facilitate trade and transportation, presented here as empty vessels holding a void.

#### *If Beale Street Could Talk & A Dialogue*, 2025

Other works combine remnants of the railway with images that refer to the physical act of bearing weight with the body. *If Beale Street Could Talk* is a series of photographs which Mahama made with people in the community around Redclay and framed with scrap metal from the railway. The images are taken in front of colonial and post-independence era trains that are part of the open access collection at Redclay. Mahama is 'interested in the memory embedded in these objects, particularly the history of labour in them, given the fact that the railway was built for the extraction of raw materials.' This collection acts as a resource for understanding the history of Ghana through objects and materials that are not kept or conserved.

A number of the people in the photographs have a background as *Kayayees* (head porters) who earn their living from carrying agricultural goods and other materials in pans balanced on their heads. Many of the *Kayayees* in Ghana migrated from rural communities to the city in search of work. The title of the work references a 1974 novel by James Baldwin which addresses themes of love, sacrifice and the struggle with racism and oppression in New York in the 1970s.

The history and use of the headpans also forms the focus for a video entitled *A Dialogue*. Filmed at markets in Accra and Tamale, it features a series of short excerpts from interviews with local residents with whom Mahama traded pans, including several women who worked as *Kayayees*. The women recount the history of their pans, when and where they were acquired, what they used them for. Some also comment on the exchange with a mixture of amusement and bewilderment.

### *Go Tell it on the Mountain, 2025*

125 X-ray images are presented within light boxes made using metal from locomotives and buses acquired from scrap metal dealers in Tamale. The images show the damage inflicted upon the human body by the daily activity of carrying the headpans.

Mahama estimates that over a decade one *Kayayee* bears a weight equivalent to carrying '200 of the locomotives on the body'. Working in collaboration with *Kayayees* in Accra and Tamale, he made over 150 X-rays of spinal deformations, some of which are inserted into this scrap metal scaffold. Mahama explains: 'a railway line is basically a spine on the earth that allows an object to move from one place to another.' At once a symbol of- and a system for colonial and capitalist extraction, Mahama's critique figures the railway as an infrastructure that was literally built on the backs of Ghanaian people. The title of this work quotes an important, early, semi-autobiographical novel by James Baldwin from 1953. Mahama refers to Baldwin's powerful artistic influence on the civil rights movement and 'the promise within [Baldwin's] ideas', specifically 'ideas of liberation, progress and freedom'. With this reference he draws attention to the longer history of labour and injustice embedded within these objects, including the manual labour force in the European factories where the trains were produced.

### *Just above my head, 2025*

A five-channel video work documents the process of collecting the materials for the works in this exhibition. The installation combines footage of the markets in Nanton, Nyankpala, Savelugu, Tamale and Tolon where new steel headpans were traded for the used pans that form the base for *The Physical Impossibility of Debt in the Mind of Something Living*. Other scenes show the pans and a series of locomotives being transported by road to Redclay. The work also documents the strenuous labour involved in installing the trains on the tracks that Mahama has constructed there.

*Just above my head* plays upon the convention within artist films of using the camera to document (the otherwise invisible) studio practice and process embedded in making an artwork. Images of Redclay show a studio that is at once a site for artistic production and an open 'museum' or educational resource. The footage captures the labour involved in moving, sorting and preparing materials as well as the photographic shoot and the welding of the metal for the frames. This production happens alongside the daily activity of welcoming school children and other visitors to Redclay. Mahama thinks of his studio 'as a political ground' where the materials that he works with 'together with all their historical values' can be shared. He explains:

'In 2014 when I sold my first work I decided to invest that money in building a studio space... Going to Tamale to build this space meant choosing not to live at the centre of the art world... An artist studio is not a factory, it's a space where the artist is constantly reflecting in order to be able to produce but the question is: Can we share that production system with the world around us?'

The studio and production system at Redclay thus seek to serve future generations:

'...if we can inspire kids and demystify the world that they live in then we can think differently about the world, and the world that they can build.'

### Biography

Ibrahim Mahama (b. 1987, Tamale, Ghana) has held exhibitions at Kunsthalle Bern (2025); Fruitmarket, Edinburgh; Barbican Centre, London; (both 2024); Kunsthalle Osnabrück (2023); Frac des Pays de la Loire, Nantes (2022); University of Michigan Museum of Art (2020); The Whitworth, University of Manchester; Norval Foundation, Cape Town (both 2019); Tel Aviv Art Museum (2016) and K.N.U.S.T. Museum, Kumasi (2013). His work has also been exhibited at Sharjah Biennial 15; the 18th Biennale Architettura, Venice; the 35th Bienal de São Paulo (all 2023); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2021); Centre Pompidou, Paris; the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (both 2020); the 56th and 58th Biennale Arte, Venice (2015 and 2019) and at Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel (2017). He was the Artistic Director of the 35th Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts (2023) and is the recipient of the inaugural Sam Gilliam Award from the Dia Art Foundation. Mahama lives and works in Accra, Kumasi and Tamale where he has founded several artist-led community initiatives including Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in 2019, Redclay in 2020 and, most recently, Nkrumah Volini (all in Tamale).

### Limited Edition

Ibrahim Mahama has created a limited edition print as part of Kunsthalle Wien's new series of artists' editions. *Quiet as it's kept* (2025) reproduces an image from *If Beale Street Could Talk* in an edition of 50 signed and numbered digital prints. All proceeds support Kunsthalle Wien's programme.

### Public Programme

- 8.7. 18:00 . . . Conversation between Ibrahim Mahama and Baerbel Mueller (EN)
- 10.7., 14.8., 28.8., 11.9., 25.9., 9.10., 23.10.
- ↪ 18:30 . . . Guided Tours (DE)
- 24.7. 18:30 . . . Guided Tour (EN)
- 13.9. 17:00 . . . Curator's Tour with Hannah Marynissen (EN)

Guided tours are offered in English, German, Einfacher Sprache [Plain German] and Austrian Sign Language.

Full programme details for the exhibition are available online:



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