Fruitmarket

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# Ibrahim Mahama

## Songs about Roses

audio version of this guide

Exhibition Guide

13.07.24–06.10.24

CREATIVE SCOTLAND

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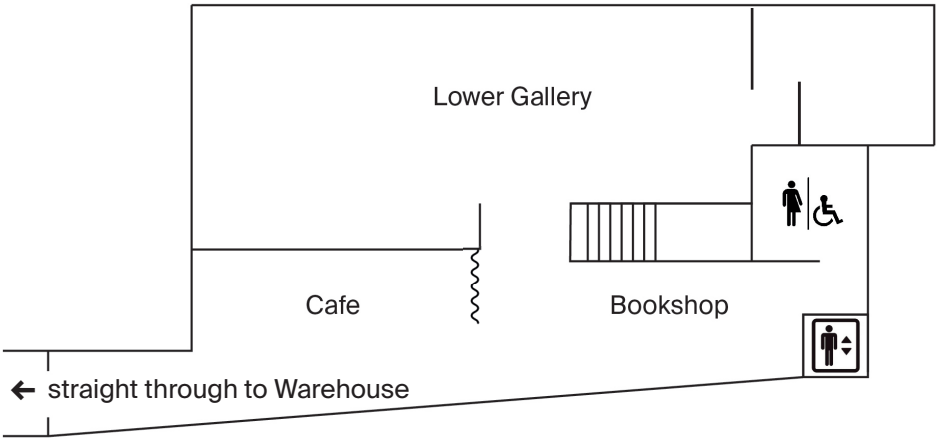

Lower Gallery
Cafe
Bookshop
straight through to Warehouse

For Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama (b.1987, Tamale) art is about 'the exploration of freedom'. Seeing artists as time travellers of sorts, he is interested in materials and histories that encapsulate the moment at which Ghana gained its freedom from British colonial rule in 1957. In the years that followed, the country hit 'crisis moments' as Mahama puts it. In returning to the dawn of Ghana's independence, he evokes the hope that this moment represented for the future, using it as a spark to 'reinvigorate the consciousness of people' today.

In this exhibition Mahama uses the lens of Ghana's now defunct colonial-era railway network to think through issues of nationhood, citizenship and global exchange. Built in the early twentieth century by the British in what was then known as the Gold Coast, the railway was used to transport resources – gold, cocoa and minerals – on which British colonial wealth was built. The railway network gradually fell into disuse following independence.

**Lower Gallery**

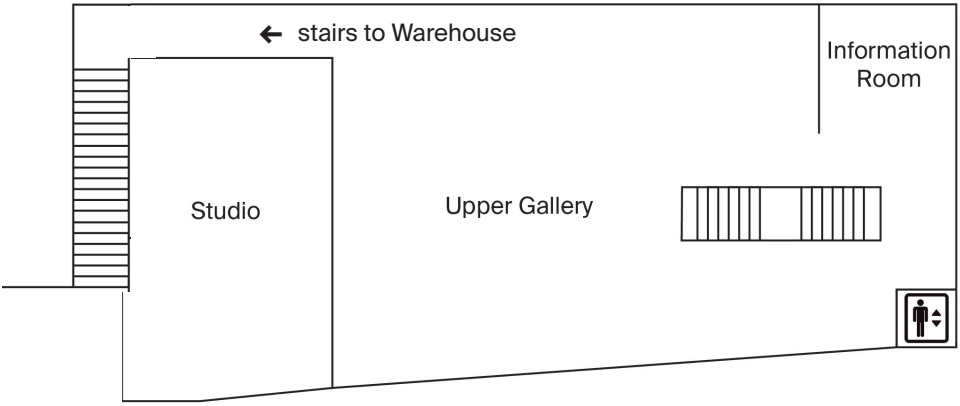
In the lower gallery many of the photographs that make up *Buy When Death Sells* (2024) show Mahama's work with the local population in Ghana at art institutions he founded using the proceeds of his artwork sales in Europe and America. Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art opened in 2019, followed by Red Clay studio complex in 2020, and Nkrumah Volini, an educational institution based in an old grain silo, in 2021. We see Mahama's collaborators bringing derelict trains and tracks to Red Clay in Tamale (northern Ghana). Acquired mostly from Sekondi Locomotive Shed (the operational hub of Ghana Railway Company) in south-west Ghana, the trains become sculptures, studios and classrooms and are also stripped for materials to use in artworks. The photographs of *Buy When Death Sells* are mounted on purchase order forms from the paint division

of the Ghana Industrial Holding Company (GIHOC). This organisation was set up in the 1950s in order to manage the transition of industries, transport and food production from British to local management.

*Ghana Mann* (2024) and *My Dear Comfort* (2024), also drawn on archival materials from GIHOC, are based upon photographs taken at Red Clay of men bringing railway tracks onsite. In these semi-staged images, Mahama aims to show the human body at work, the stresses and strains of labour, deliberately echoing historical imagery of the railways being built by local workers in the early twentieth century.

In *Ghana Mann*, German-built Henschel trains are pulled along by a crowd. These kinds of trains were imported to Ghana as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme in the years following independence, with the aim of maintaining and extending the railway network, an ambition which was short-lived. For Mahama, these German trains represent a particular kind of potential, a microcosm of the larger vision for an independent Ghana, a future that might have been. As he has said, 'you can imagine time collapsing upon itself through the position of the objects there [at Sekondi], knowing their history and trajectory. The vastness of their potential contradicts their current state of collapse.' In *Ghana Mann*, the trains are metaphorically dragged into the future, and with them, as Mahama sees it, the hope they once represented for an independent nation.

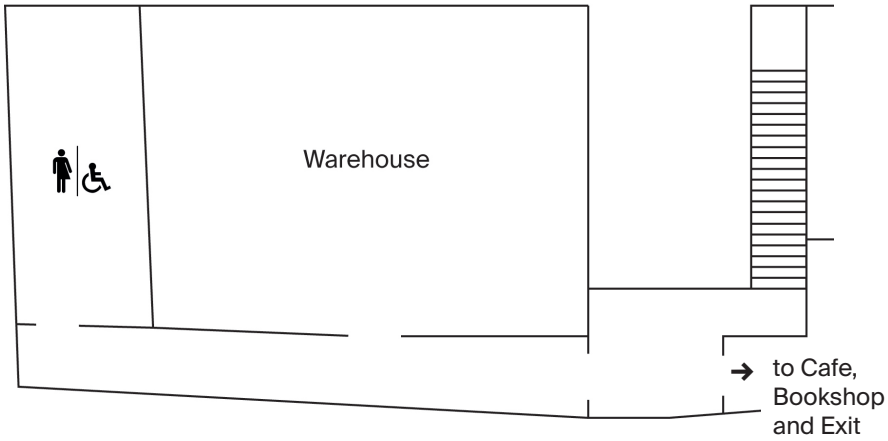
At the far end of the gallery a series of ten photographs (2024) shows the tattooed arms of women who have worked as studio assistants for Mahama. The tattoos include the women's names, family names and places of origin, in a common practice that allows travelling workers to be identified in case of industrial accidents. Mahama is interested in the way that labour, and the economy it feeds into, can be traced through material means.




## Upper Gallery

The women's arms are photographed against the large wall-based works that appear in the upper gallery – *Meriga, Nkrumaso, Puumaya, Kumwensia,* and *Zabgu* (all 2024). These are made using the interior lining (wood and leather) of the trains that Mahama has acquired. In a deft kind of circularity, they are tattooed with names seen on the women's arms. This is characteristic of the way that Mahama ekes out the value from every part of a material or process.

*Ghana Mann Papapaaaa* (2024) is a triple portrait of the influential artist, intellectual and teacher karî'kachä seid'ou, Professor at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, where Mahama studied. seid'ou is a quietly revolutionary figure at KNUST, and more widely in the Ghanaian art world. When he first started teaching, art in Ghana was produced primarily for the tourist market – seid'ou asked how one could transform art from commodity to gift. His radical approach heavily influenced the way in which Mahama works.




**Warehouse**

In the Warehouse, *SEKONDI LOCOMOTIVE WORKSHOP* (2024) celebrates those who worked at Sekondi before Ghanaian independence with ranks of life-sized charcoal portraits mounted on railway tracks. Their portraits are based on group photographs taken at occasions such as retirement parties. As railway staff, they had a unique insight into the processes which saw Ghana's resources leaving the country under colonial rule and were therefore amongst those who fought most vocally for independence. Mahama aims to bring their contribution back into the narrative of his country's fight for self-governance.

This historical moment of transition is juxtaposed with images of Ghana today, in a seven-channel film projected onto the Warehouse walls. We see Mahama's collaborators reclaiming materials for use in artworks, working at Sekondi and at the old GIHOC paint factory. In particular, they are collecting materials for the installation entitled *Parliament of Ghosts*, first shown at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester in 2019. There are also images of day-to-day work in the

street markets in Accra where Mahama and his collaborators acquire second hand materials for use in artworks.

In the voiceover, a young woman talks about the possibilities of a youth parliament in Ghana, as she urges the country to 'give the youth a chance to govern themselves'. With more than 70% of the population under 35, and a higher concentration of young people in urban areas, these ideas come from a very real need for representation. Her practical ideas about housing, water, farming and industry are imbued with hope for the future. While Mahama works from the perspective of Ghana, he is driven by questions we might all ask about how a nation is built and what good citizenship looks like.

**Major new monograph.**
We are making a major new book to celebrate *Songs about Roses*, with imagery of this exhibition and all Mahama's major work to date, plus new writing from Aby Gaye and Godelive Kasangati and an interview with Ibrahim Mahama.

**Talks and events.**
For full details of all upcoming talks and events pick up a What's On leaflet, connect to our website or follow us on our social channels.

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Download the free Bloomberg Connects app to access audio and video guides to the exhibition, with exclusive insights from Ibrahim Mahama about his art practice.

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**Exhibition supported by The Henry Moore Foundation, White Cube and the Ibrahim Mahama Supporters' Circle.**

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