



Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana

IBRAHIM MAHAMA: A SHEA GARDEN

One of humanity's oldest ideas, visible across cultures and time, is that objects touched by significant forces can carry memory and power. In ancient Egypt, objects placed in tombs were understood to accompany the deceased into the afterlife, their presence necessary for survival beyond death. Across Africa, objects accumulated spiritual power through contact with sacred sites, ritual use and ancestral presence: stools absorbed the essence of those who sat upon them, vessels held the spirits of lineages, textiles woven with histories carried knowledge across generations. In Europe, Christian relics such as bones of saints or fragments of the True Cross were venerated as vessels of divine presence, circulating through trade hubs like Venice, which built its power on the movement of both spiritual and commercial goods. Across these traditions, the kind of contact that mattered differed. The underlying logic, however, was consistent. Objects drew power from direct connection to what a culture held sacred.

Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' (1917) marks one of the most

consequential ruptures in art history. By submitting a mass-produced urinal to an exhibition under a pseudonym, Duchamp separated art from the requirements of technique, manual skill and aesthetics that had defined it across centuries. What made something art was no longer the hand of the maker but the decision of the artist. Conceptual art, emerging through the 1960s and 70s, pushed this further: if the idea was the work, then art could operate as social and political analysis, using objects, actions and systems as its medium. The white cube of the gallery became not simply a space of aesthetic contemplation but a critical frame through which the world outside could be examined. The Arte Povera movement of 1960s Italy extended this logic into the political, elevating burlap, coal, soil and industrial materials. Their particular contribution was to insist on the expressive charge of substance itself, on materials that represented the industrial world.

Ibrahim Mahama, born in Tamale, Ghana in 1987, came to international prominence through monumental installations using jute sacks, coal bags and railway sleepers. The genesis of this work traces to 2011, when Mahama was waiting at the Ghanaian border, watching trucks speed by transporting food and produce in jute sacks. He found himself asking: why is it easier for goods to travel across borders than for humans? This question became the foundation of a practice that would expose the hidden infrastructures of global trade.

The jute sacks at the heart of Mahama's work are produced in Southeast Asia and imported to Ghana by Cocobod (the Ghana Cocoa Board). They have multiple lives: first carrying cocoa beans for export to Europe and America, then being reused by local traders who transport rice and maize and inscribe their names on the fabric, and finally being employed to carry charcoal, their last use before Mahama collects and transforms them. As Mahama explains, 'I am interested in how crisis and failure are absorbed into this material with a strong reference to global transaction and how capitalist structures work'. Their surfaces map colonial extraction, post-independence labour, the movement of goods through systems that rendered workers invisible. Mahama refers to his process as 'time travel', rerouting the residues of colonial and postcolonial histories to create new possibilities. His materials serve as witnesses to global capitalism, objects that have absorbed meaning through contact with economic and political forces.

Mahama's practice emerges from and extends a lineage of African

artists who transformed discarded materials of trade and extraction into monumental testimony. El Anatsui, a Ghanaian sculptor born in 1944 and widely acknowledged as a foundational influence, works with discarded bottle caps and aluminium seals from liquor bottles – objects with direct colonial resonance, as alcohol was central to West African trade and extraction –, stitching them into vast, tapestry-like installations. Ordinary objects take on historical weight through use and circulation, becoming the substance of the work.

What distinguishes Mahama from his predecessors is structural ambition. He has founded three institutions in Tamale: the Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), Red Clay Studio and Nkrumah Volini, the last converted from an abandoned post-independence silo, comprising over 200 acres dedicated to exhibitions, residencies, research and community education. Soviet-era aircraft and British colonial train carriages have been repurposed as libraries and classrooms for local children. Significantly, these institutions are located not in Accra but in the agricultural north of Ghana, a region systematically overlooked by both colonial and postcolonial investment. Where his predecessors gathered the residue of economic systems, Mahama responds at a structural scale, building new institutions in place of those that failed.

In 2025, he became the first African artist to top ArtReview's Power 100 list and won the Gold Award at the inaugural Art Basel Awards in

Shea Tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa*), West Africa



Miami Beach, recognised both for his artistic excellence and for building institutions through which art and creative practice become a common resource.

The Murano glass collaboration between Ibrahim Mahama and Galleria Barovier&Toso, with Apalazzogallery, extends this methodology by a new material dialogue. The installation occupies a compact, low-ceilinged space stripped of its doors and windows, open to be viewed from outside through the empty frames. The floor is covered in a field of broken terracotta, from which intact vessels emerge like flowers: grain containers and chicken feeders from northern Ghana, objects ingrained with the memory of daily survival. The vessels come in two forms, each with a distinct purpose. Some are open bowls that stored grain and other goods through the seasons, vessels of human nourishment tied directly to survival and trade. Others are closed and spherical, pierced with small holes through which chickens could peck grain from the ground; these rest in large shallow, open-rimmed bowls that hold them in place – a simple solution to the instability of a round vessel, but also a sign of the precision with which these objects were conceived. Some of these support rings have no base and function purely as a cradle, while others are fully closed and could serve independently as containers. Their forms have been translated into Murano glass: luminous and weightless against the dense, opaque clay, the two materials coexisting, growing from the same ground. Rooted in the traditional songs of northern Ghanaian women, the names of the works – ‘Yel’li’ (for the vessels with spikes), ‘Cheko kuna’ (for the vessels with cubes) and Man Malya (for the chicken feeders) – bring together oral memory, local language and the material culture of labour, particularly the ceramic and terracotta traditions historically tied to women’s work in the region.

The title of the project, ‘A Shea Garden’, anchors them in a specific landscape: the dry savannah of northern Ghana, where the shea tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) has sustained communities for centuries. The nuts are processed by hand into shea butter used for cooking, medicine and trade; the sweet fruit pulp is eaten fresh during the hunger months of the early rainy season, before the annual crops come in. The harvesting and processing of shea has long been women’s work, knowledge passed between generations as much as the vessels that stored it. These pots participated in that cycle. They carry memory of production, of community survival, of the daily rhythms that connected human life to earth and harvest. In their centrality to daily life, they occupied the permeable boundary between the functional and the sacred. Translating the various vessels into

Murano glass transforms the terms on which they speak. Clay is opaque, its surface scarred by use, its history held within. In glass, the vessels hold only absence, the emptiness where agricultural memory once resided. In this passage from clay to glass, from active use to museum object, from living necessity to historical artefact, what has been lost becomes the subject of the work.

The installation connects to an adjacent gallery space presenting drawings and Polaroids, all made specifically for this project. The Polaroids were produced in collaboration with the Polaroid Foundation, an Amsterdam-based foundation whose 20x24 Project centres on one of only five original Polaroid 20x24 cameras in existence – a machine standing almost two metres tall that produces 50x60 cm instant prints of remarkable resolution. Built by Polaroid in 1976 at the direction of Edwin Land, the camera became over the following decades an artists' instrument of rare distinction, used by Andy Warhol, Chuck Close, Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Rauschenberg and many others. After Polaroid's collapse, the camera was restored in 2022 with an entirely new film stock and entrusted to the foundation with a clear mission: to bring it to artists across media, disciplines and cultures, travelling to wherever they choose to work. Mahama first worked with it for an exhibition with Fondazione Berggruen at Palazzo Diedo in Venice in 2024. Like the jute sack, the Murano furnace and the terracotta vessel, the 20x24 camera is itself a technology on the edge of extinction, kept alive only through deliberate care and transmission – another garden that must be tended to survive.

Ibrahim Mahama has spent his career giving voice to silenced African trade routes, to labour systems rendered invisible by colonial and postcolonial economics. In working with Galleria Barovier&Toso, he encounters a trade network facing its own erasure: Murano itself. Jute sacks once travelled colonial routes; Venetian glass travelled the Silk Road and maritime empires. Both traditions are ancient, both have been displaced by industrialisation and changing markets, both face slow extinction through the closing of workshops and the loss of knowledge. The glasswork companies shutting down in Murano echo the abandoned markets and deteriorating infrastructure Mahama documents in Ghana. These glass vessels are acts of witness to both histories and through their very existence as a collaboration, an embodiment of reciprocal voice, of systems in crisis that refuse erasure. The grain vessels and their glass translations are acts of making, two traditions that refuse quiet disappearance – two ancient gardens that survive only through the knowledge and care passed between human hands.

Mara Hofmann





Ibrahim Mahama

So Yel'li, 2026

Murano glass

35.5 × 42 cm (vessel)

10 × 17 cm (foot)

(inv. IM002)



Ibrahim Mahama

So Yel'li, 2026

Murano glass

32 × 36 cm (vessel)

10 × 17 cm (foot)

(inv. IM005)



Ibrahim Mahama

Man Malya, 2026

Murano glass

30 × 33 cm (vessel)

15 × 34.5 cm (bowl)

(IM011)





Ibrahim Mahama

Cheko kuna, 2026

Murano glass

36 × 30 cm (vessel)

15 × 34.5 cm (foot)

(inv. IM015)



Ibrahim Mahama

Cheko kuna, 2026

Murano glass

40 × 35 cm (vessel)

10 × 17 cm (foot)

(IM018)



Ibrahim Mahama (1987 – Ghana)

Ibrahim Mahama is one of the most influential voices in contemporary art and the first African artist to top ArtReview's Power 100. Since the early 2010s, his artistic practice has centred on large-scale installations that transform materials of labour and trade – jute sacks, timber, railway sleepers, and industrial remnants – into monumental works that address global economic systems, colonial histories and the circulation of commodities.

Through site-specific interventions that often envelop entire buildings or public spaces, Mahama examines how objects carry memory and how material culture preserves histories of exchange, migration and transformation. In 2019, Mahama opened the Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in Tamale, a museum space run by a group of artists and curators active in Ghana, followed by the opening of a vast studio complex, Red Clay, in September 2020. Comprising exhibition spaces, research facilities and an artist residency centre, both sites represent Mahama's contribution to developing and expanding the contemporary art scene in his country.

In April 2021, Mahama opened a renovated silo, Nkrumah Volini, in Tamale. In his project with Galleria Barovier&Toso, in collaboration with Apalazzogallery, Mahama expands his practice by working with Murano glass for the first time, creating a dialogue between African clay vessels and glass objects that addresses tradition, memory and the preservation of material culture.

Major Exhibition

Chale Wote Street Art Festival, Accra (2012); Biennale Jogja XII, Indonesia (2013); 'Parliament of Ghosts', Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester (2014); 56th Venice Biennale, 'All the World's Futures' (2015); Documenta 14, Athens and Kassel (2017); 'A Straight Line Through the Carcass of History', Kunsthalle Zürich (2017); 'In Dependence', Apalazzogallery, Brescia (2018); 'Soft Power', San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2019); 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2020); 'As the void, vali and voli', Apalazzogallery, Brescia (2021); 'Afro-Atlantic Histories', Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (2021); 'The Musical Brain', The High Line, New York (2021); Oude Kerk, Amsterdam (2022); 58th Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2022); 'Counterspace', Barbican Centre, London (2022); 59th Venice Biennale, 'The Milk of Dreams' (2022); Artistic Direction of 35th Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts (2023); 35th Bienal de São Paulo (2023); 'Purple Hibiscus', Gropius Bau, Berlin (2023-2024); 'Parliament of Ghosts', Aspen Art Museum (2024); Palazzo Diedo, Venice (2024); 'IF THESE ARE THE THINGS', Apalazzogallery, Brescia (2024); Desert X AIUla (2024); Kunsthalle Bern (2025); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2025); Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), Skopje (2025); Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar (2025); Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India (2025); TPB Biennial, Phuket (2025); 'A Shea Garden', Galleria Barovier&Toso with Apalazzogallery, Venice (2026, coinciding with the 61st Venice Biennale); Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris (2026, forthcoming).

Awards & Recognition

Prince Claus Award (2020); ArtReview Power 100 (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024); inaugural Sam Gilliam Award (2024); Art Basel & UBS Artist of the Year Award (2025); Gold Award in Established Artist category, inaugural Art Basel Awards (2025); ArtReview Power 100, ranked #1 (first African artist, 2025).

Selected Publications

'Ibrahim Mahama: Parliament of Ghosts', Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2014; 'Ibrahim Mahama', Documenta 14 Catalogue, Athens/Kassel, 2017; 'A Straight Line Through the Carcass of History', Kunsthalle Zürich, 2017; 'In Dependence', Apalazzogallery, Brescia, 2018; 'Ibrahim Mahama: Soft Power', San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2019; 'As the void, vali and voli', Apalazzogallery, Brescia, 2021; 'Ibrahim Mahama', 58th Carnegie International Catalogue, Pittsburgh, 2022; 'Counterspace', Barbican Centre, London, 2022; 'Ibrahim Mahama: Purple Hibiscus', Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2023; 'Violi-ni', Lenz Press, Milan, 2023; 'Songs about Roses', Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2024; 'If these are the Things', Apalazzogallery, Brescia, 2024.

Collections

Mahama's works are held in major international collections including Tate Modern (London), Museum of Modern Art (New York), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York), Centre Pompidou (Paris), National Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (Sydney), Pérez Art Museum Miami, Baltimore Museum of Art, Blanton Museum of Art (Austin), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), Astrup Fearnley Museet (Oslo), Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (Tamale) and Fondazione Barovier&Toso Collection (Venice). Mahama is represented by Apalazzogallery and White Cube.



