

Kunsthalle Wien

Press release

Ibrahim Mahama: Zilijifa

9 July–2 November 2025

Kunsthalle Wien presents a major new exhibition by Ibrahim Mahama (b. 1987, Tamale, Ghana). Installed across the first floor of the Kunsthalle's Museumsquartier building, the exhibition comprises an entirely new body of commissioned work including sculpture, photography and video.

Mahama 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. A project that began with shoemakers' boxes and used jute sacks now extends to locomotives, aircrafts, grain silos and a decommissioned glass factory. This collection of material and the artworks developed from it are distributed across a series of institutions that Mahama has established in Ghana's northern city of Tamale. Part artist studio, part classroom, part exhibition space, they function variously as open-access resources for the local community and sites for ongoing research.

Mahama's exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien develops his research on the history of the Ghanaian railway network, first created under British colonial rule during the 1890s. It sees the fulfillment of a long-term aspiration to deconstruct, transport and exhibit a full-size diesel locomotive (one of several British- and German-built trains that Mahama has acquired since 2022). Initially constructed to connect the south of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) with other British colonies in the region, the railway was significantly diminished in the late 20th and early 21st century. Mahama's work focuses on the material degradation of the railway, deploying remnants of the line and rolling stock to illustrate the burdensome yet precarious nature of the colonial project:

'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...'

Ibrahim Mahama

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. Remnants of the railway, an industrial system for transport and trade, are combined with objects and images that refer to the physical act of bearing weight with the body. The centrepiece to the exhibition is an installation that employs a multitude of enamelled iron 'headpans' to act as a support for a locomotive. The pans are a commonplace vessel used in Ghana to carry goods and materials. Mahama amassed a collection of thousands of used pans, exchanging new for old. Chipped, rusted, dented and torn, the objects evidence heavy use. Stacked underneath the train, they bear a locomotive that can be seen as another kind of vessel. Imported from Germany in the 1960s, the decade following the country's independence, the train was acquired to be used on the lines constructed to carry minerals and crops such as coffee and cocoa to the port for onward transport to Europe. Such infrastructure fundamentally shaped the economics of the

country, opening it up to 'development' while removing its abundant natural resources. In Mahama's sculpture, the train appears hollowed out from the inside, a metal shell holding a void.

An accompanying series of photographic works considers the damage inflicted upon the human body by the daily activity of carrying the headpans. These include over 100 X-ray images of spinal deformation that are framed within a metal scaffold removed from the train. At once a symbol of and a system for colonial and capitalist extraction, Mahama's critique exposes the railway as an infrastructure that was literally built on the backs of Ghanaian people.

The exhibition's title plays upon words and phrases in Dagbani, a Gur language that is widely spoken in Tamale. Mahama associates the word for 'train' (*zili*) 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*).

It is Mahama's first solo exhibition in Austria.

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 the Sharjah Biennial 15 (2023); the 18th Biennale Architettura, Venice (2023); the 35th Bienal de São Paulo (2023); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2021); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2020); the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020); the 58th and 56th Biennale Arte, Venice (2019 and 2015) 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 a new series of artists' editions produced in support of Kunsthalle Wien's programme. *Quiet as it's kept* (2025) refers to the enamelled iron 'headpans' that are a commonplace vessel used in Ghana to carry goods and materials. Mahama amassed a collection of thousands for his exhibition, exchanging new for old and documenting the process with photography and video.

Ibrahim Mahama

Quiet as it's kept, 2025

Edition of 50 + 5 AP

53,3 x 40 cm

Digital print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag® Baryta

Numbered and signed

€ 500 / € 780 framed

Kunsthalle Wien's editions are available from the shops at Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier and Karlsplatz. For further information and to place an order, please contact shop [at] kunsthallewien.at or +43-1-52189-333.

Notes to Editors

Ibrahim Mahama: Zilijifa
9 July–2 November 2025
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Press conference: 8 July 2025, 10 am
Exhibition opening: 8 July 2025, 7 pm

Press images for download and further information:
<https://kunsthallewien.at/en/exhibition/ibrahim-mahama/press>

Artist Talk

Prior to the opening of the exhibition, Ibrahim Mahama will be in conversation with Prof. Baerbel Mueller, Institute of Architecture, University of Applied Arts, Vienna.
8 July 2025, 6 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Public Programme

Guided Tours

Thu, 10.7., 14.8., 11.9., 9.10., 6.30 pm
Material als Träger von Geschichte(n) (DE)

Thu, 24.7., 6.30 pm
The Weight of Things: From Transport to Installation (EN)

Thu, 28.8., 25.9., 23.10., 6.30 pm
Das Gewicht der Dinge: Vom Transport zur Installation (DE)

Thu, 30.8., 2 pm
Curator tour with Hannah Marynissen (EN)

Fri, 5.9., 4.30 pm
Guided tour (ÖGS – Austrian Sign Language and DE)

We offer individually bookable guided tours for groups in the following languages: German, English, BKS [Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian], Italian, Austrian Sign Language and Einfache Sprache [Easy Language].

Sat, 4.10, 6–12 pm
ORF Long Night of the Museums
Tours at 8, 8.30 and 9 pm (Guided tours in DE)
Workshop from 7–9 pm

Children's and family workshops (DE + EN)
Every Saturday from September to October, 11 am–1 pm
Balancing, noting and collecting

About Kunsthalle Wien

Kunsthalle Wien is the City of Vienna's primary institution for contemporary art. At its locations in the Museumsquartier and on Karlsplatz, it presents an annual programme of exhibitions alongside public and educational programming that seeks to engage diverse publics. We provide a platform for artists, commissioning new works and partnering with individuals and institutions, both local and international, to develop exhibitions and publications based on original research. Kunsthalle Wien is committed to providing an inclusive space for exchange and debate and furthering the discourse on contemporary art in all its forms.

Kunsthalle Wien Thanks

Kunsthalle Wien is financed by the Magistratsabteilung Kultur der Stadt Wien (MA 7). The artistic programme is also supported by the members and patrons of the Kunsthalle Wien Club.

Address and Information

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#IbrahimMahama
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Opening Hours

Tuesday–Sunday: 10:00–18:00
Thursday: 10:00–20:00

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