

The Telegraph

Meet the man who is going to wrap the Barbican in urine-stained robes

One of the ambitious Ghanaian artist's spectacular installations will soon enrobe the Barbican. He reveals his work's political intentions



Ibrahim Mahama: 'A lot of artists become complacent, their work becomes institutionalised' | CREDIT: Rii Schroer

On a recent, damp morning in London, [Ibrahim Mahama](#) sat in a cafe, scrolling through photographs on his laptop of an athletics stadium in Tamale, Ghana. They show dozens of people at work in the arena, laying out enormous, magenta-coloured pieces of cloth under the blazing sun – as if designing an outfit for a giant.

Soon, the artist explains, they will be draped over London's Barbican. The 2,000 square metres of purple-pink cotton will be stitched together by hand, before the whole is flown more than 7,000 kilometres to the UK, then wrapped around the arts centre's Brutalist facade, overlooking its lakeside terrace. Think of it as a tailored jacket for the vast concrete edifice.

How will the cloth cope with the British rain? Mahama shrugs: "It will get wet; it will dry – but the impact will be huge. Magenta is not part of London's palette." Purple Hibiscus has been commissioned for the Barbican's Unravel: the Power and Politics of Textiles in Art exhibition, which explores how needle and thread have often been taken up by the most subversive of artists.

It is typical of Mahama's art: painstaking, laborious, and ambitious. The 36-year-old is an orchestrator of spectacular installations which smuggle in sharp-edged critiques of the dreams of nations.

In 2019, he built a debating chamber in Manchester's Whitworth Gallery, constructed from salvaged junkyard scrap: recycled train tracks and carriage seats; remnants of Ghana's railway system, built when it was a British colony, and badly neglected after independence in 1957. Mahama called it Parliament of Ghosts – the ghosts, he said, were the opportunities lost over the past six decades, as Ghana succumbed to a series of military coups. He wanted to create something new, out of the detritus of the past.



Covered in a patchwork of jute sacks: Mahama dressed the National Theatre of Ghana, Accra, in 2016 | CREDIT: © Ibrahim Mahama

Mahama is best known for dressing up entire buildings in a patchwork blanket of jute sacks – covering Accra's National Theatre in 2016, and, at the 2015 Venice Biennale, the walls of the Arsenale. These sacks, first used to carry cocoa out of Ghana (and only used once for this purpose, as the beans are classed as a luxury export), before being used to transport coal around Ghana, become symbols of the inequities of global trade.

The Barbican wrap represents a similar logistical feat – Mahama's biggest to date in terms of sheer labour hours. "What struck me about the Barbican is the tactile quality of the texture of the concrete," he says, referring to the building's signature mottled walls, hammered by hand with pick-axes. "So I wanted to make a work that considers the labour behind textiles. I thought, why not commission people in this rural part of Ghana?"

It took him and his team six months to complete. He hired the stadium as a temporary workshop for more than a thousand people: textile workers who were paid a "fair local wage". Then there was the Barbican facade to measure. Special planning permission was needed (the complex is Grade II-listed) and Mahama had practical problems to overcome, not least the addition of a huge layer of mesh beneath the material to provide stability against the wind.



'Magenta is not part of London's palette': a thousand workers came to a stadium in Ghana to hand-stitch pieces of purple cotton to enrobe the Barbican

In the meantime, Ghanaian workers have been hand-appliquing the magenta fabric with 130 batakaris – decorative Ghanaian robes, which are often handed down in families from one generation to the next. They are loose fitting, usually highly colourful and worn to work on the first Friday of every month. Mahama and his team collected the garments from people around the country through a lengthy process of exchange and barter.

Mahama is well-known back home, but still I wonder, did the artist simply knock on strangers' doors and ask if he could take their heirlooms away to wrap around a big building in London?

"Sometimes I did. Cousins, friends and colleagues helped," he says. Others were superstitious: "They believe I could use [their batakari] to harm the soul of a generation. So before they give it to me they have to separate from it. They may pee on it or perform a ritual [hoping] to somehow deconsecrate the material. There might be a yellow stain; maybe sweat. They are rarely washed. But for me as an artist, that doesn't scare me. I'm used to collecting strange things." As a result, he says, when you open up the batakaris "they have all these scars and stains. They look like flowers."



As if designing an outfit for a giant: 1000 local workers in Ghana laid out pieces of cloth beneath the blazing sun

Mahama relishes the absurd side of his works – particularly the prospect of cladding a London landmark in urine-stained robes. But he is also emphatic about the importance of making art available to all, which he channels through the cultural institutions he's built back in Ghana. His Red Clay Studio and Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art in Tamale, houses six Soviet-era aeroplanes, now transformed into classrooms for local schoolchildren. He is serious about his political intentions.

So how does Mahama feel about the Unravel show, well, unravelling, as several artists have withdrawn their works in recent weeks to protest the Barbican's cancellation of a talk about the war in Gaza. Mahama says he has no plans to withdraw. "I understand the decision of other artists," he says. But "by showing Purple Hibiscus I want to reaffirm my alliance with marginalised communities." ^(R)

Mahama was born into a middle-class family in 1987 and is one of 10 children. His parents' marriage was polygamous. "I had a comfortable childhood," he recalls, over croissants and coffee. "My father was an engineer and quite wealthy but he had many wives. My mother was the second. We ended up in Accra and we were sent to boarding schools." Drawing, he says, "kept him at peace". His parents encouraged his talent, and he went on to study art at university.

Shortly after graduating, he sold an early piece to Charles Saatchi, and he started exhibiting with the London-based mega gallery White Cube in 2015. He is among a cohort of Ghanaian artists propelled to stardom by a boom in global interest in contemporary African art, including his 80-year-old friend El Anatsui, whose enormous, shimmering curtain Behind the Red Moon is currently on display at the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern.

Mahama's international idols also include Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the late artists who famously wrapped the German Reichstag in silver fabric in 1995: provocatively blotting out – for two weeks – an institution of power. Christo "had a very big impact on me, but it wasn't so much the aesthetics as the courage he brought to art," says Mahama. Another (unlikely) hero is the infamous pickler of Brit-art, Damien Hirst. "There was a certain audacity that he had in his early work. It was so good."



Ibrahim Mahama: 'What struck me about the Barbican is the tactile quality of the texture of the concrete' | CREDIT: Rii Schroer, photographed at the Barbican

But if Hirst has come to symbolise the blatant commercialism of the art market in the decades since, it's a fate Mahama seeks to avoid. "Before my generation, the curriculum was very conservative: flat paintings to hang on walls, free-standing sculpture. But for us, it was all about trying to change art from a commodity to a gift to society."

Mahama says that the money he makes from his art allows him to fund educational projects at home. "A lot of artists become complacent, their work becomes institutionalised and they become authorities or gods. I really don't care about that." For Mahama, his social work is a form of redress – a correcting of his own international success. "It's not philanthropy."

Mahama's thoughts often return to the Ghana of the late 1950s and 1960s, and its dream of independence. This was a period of protests led by politician Kwame Nkrumah to secure an end to colonial rule. But the dream was short-lived: as president, Nkrumah turned authoritarian and repressive. He was overthrown in 1966.

Mahama has set about acquiring some of the era's wreckage, including a giant concrete silo in Tamale: a vast, windowless Brutalist tower, standing alone in the scrubby landscape. The silo was one of many built in the 1960s to process cocoa, a commodity which until Ghanaian independence had mostly been exported. In Nkrumah's Ghana, new silos were more than just facilities: they embodied the future. "They said, we don't send our raw cocoa any more. We keep it and we process it. They were functional but also political," says Mahama.



Creating new from the detritus of the past: Mahama's Parliament of Ghosts, 2019 | CREDIT: White Cube Art Gallery/ George Darrell

After Nkrumah was overthrown, the silos were abandoned. "So for nearly 60 years they were not touched," says Mahama. They were, he says, reminders of failure. Then, as memories faded, they were simply puzzling shapes in the landscape. "Huge concrete blocks in the middle of nowhere. They were relics, abominations in a way," he says.

"You see those buildings, decayed, falling apart, but at the time they were made there was an element of promise. And through art and artists we can somehow resurrect that spirit." Mahama is currently transforming his silo into a community exhibition space and school, which he plans to open in 2026. "We don't see failure as an end. We see failure as an opening and as potential for renewed thinking, new trajectories."

He shows me pictures of the arts centres he's built back home, in which crowds of children – most of whom, he notes, will never get the chance to visit London – gather to watch him talk about his art, and explore his studio library. It interests him far more than the glitz of the international art world.

"Our country hasn't invested in a serious cultural strategy," he says. "But if you want any society to flourish, you have to bring strong cultural institutions, ones that a generation feel like they belong to. It's part of the soul, it nurtures them and allows them to think differently."

After his Barbican jacket Purple Hibiscus comes down in August, it will be shipped back to Ghana. "We will use it differently," he says. He has his eye on a mosque that might be interesting to wrap up. Could that prove another logistical nightmare? "I usually find a way."
