

Ibrahim Mahama



Introduction

Born 1987 in Tamale, Ghana

Artwork Title: *No Friend but the Mountains*, 2012-2020

Artwork Location: Turbine Hall, Cockatoo Island

Ibrahim Mahama uses the transformation of materials to explore themes of commodity, migration, globalisation and economic exchange. Often made in collaboration with others, his large-scale installations employ materials gathered from urban environments, such as remnants of wood, or jute sacks which are stitched together and draped over architectural structures.

Mahama's interest in material, process and audience first led him to focus on jute sacks that are synonymous with the trade markets of Ghana where he lives and works. Fabricated in South East Asia, the sacks are imported by the Ghana Cocoa Boards to transport cocoa beans and eventually end up as multi-functional objects, used for the transportation of food, charcoal and other commodities.

For the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, Mahama presents a large-scale immersive installation, dressing the entirety of the interior Turbine Hall at Cockatoo Island with jute sacks. A crowded patchwork of rich, brown colour and rough and smooth planes, the jute sacks reflect the gritty architecture of Cockatoo Island and remind us to think about the histories of colonisation, labour and incarceration that play an important role in the story of Cockatoo Island. This work continues Mahama's investigation into labour, history and production. The artist sees the surfaces of the sacks as holding and bearing the physical markers, smells and traces of the networks and industries they previously moved through.

This installation differs from other projects in which the artist blankets the exterior architecture of public buildings. In covering the interior of the Turbine Hall, Mahama creates a space for us to walk inside, and to consider our own relationship to the layered histories on display. Once inside, we are consumed with the smell, texture, and sensation of the jute, inviting new ways of seeing and occupying this site, caked as it is in layers of divergent and complex histories.

Ibrahim Mahama, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 2012-20, charcoal jute sacks, sacks, metal tags and scrap metal tarpaulin, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 22nd Biennale of Sydney at Cockatoo Island. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous support from Anonymous, and assistance from White Cube. Courtesy the artist; Apalazzo Gallery, Brescia and White Cube, London / Hong Kong. Photograph: Zan Wimberley

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Inquiry questions

- Jute sacks are used to transport goods around the world. What do you think the jute sacks carry?
- The jute sacks have different marks and labels on them. What do you think these marks and labels signify?
- Think of an artwork you have seen in an art gallery such as a painting or sculpture, how is Mahama's artwork different or similar?
- Looking at *No Friend but the Mountains*, how do you think this artwork was hung in this space?
- What effect does the artist create by draping the room with these jute sacks?
- Imagine you're standing in the space, how do you think this artwork might make you feel?

Creative learning activity

Ibrahim Mahama has said that 'You find different points of aesthetics within the surface of the sacks' fabric'.

Mahama talks about how these jute sacks have been repurposed over time and that the sacks reveal a story about where they have been and what they have experienced. The jute sacks were fabricated in South East Asia, imported by the Ghana Cocoa Boards to transport cocoa beans and eventually end up as multi-functional objects, used for the transportation of food, charcoal and other commodities.

Activity Process:

1. Research where jute sacks are made and what they are used for.
2. Using both observation and imagination, develop a story about the history of a jute sack, think about where the jute sack was made, what it has carried and where it has been.
3. Share the story with your class or your family.

Extension

- Ibrahim Mahama is interested in the trace that materials leave on each other after touching. Can you see any evidence of this on a particular sack?
- Some jute sacks are used multiple times and contain diverse histories. Do you own anything that has multiple layers of history?

Reflection

- Think of a structure that you would like to cover. What structure would it be and why? What material would you use?
- Reflect on the story you made about a jute sack. How was it different or similar to the stories your classmates or family made up?