



Featured in
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Three Institutions Redefining Art in Tamale

Founded by Ibrahim Mahama, Red Clay, Savannah Centre For Contemporary Art and Nkrumah Volini offer space for interrogation and artistic change by repurposing Ghana's history

BY GAMELI HAMELO IN OPINION | 22 AUG 23



In early April, artist Ibrahim Mahama drove for more than an hour from Tamale, in the north of Ghana, to the town of Kumbungu to present a lecture to pupils of the Zugu Dabogni AME Zion Primary School in the Northern Region. In tow – alongside some of Mahama's colleagues and myself – was the classically trained singer Kokui Selormey, who was due to lead an interactive music workshop for the pupils. It was the first time Mahama had delivered his lecture, titled 'The Quagrey Effect and the Precarious Gift', in Dagbani, a language spoken by people in the country's Northern Region. The talk covered topics including his beginnings, inspirations, challenges, how he sourced materials for his artworks and collaborative working practices. The school's headmaster thanked Mahama for bringing the world closer to them. 'They are part of the world, but we have to learn to bridge the gap,' the artist responded. That statement speaks to a key element of Mahama's ethos: making art accessible to everyone, regardless of age or background, and introducing children and young people to a world of art and creativity, no matter where they live.



Aerial view of Red Clay Studio, undated. Courtesy: SCCA Tamale; photograph: Ernest Sackitey

Outreach is a vital part of the programming of the cultural institutions that Mahama has founded over the last four years: Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), Red Clay Studio and, most recently, Nkrumah Volini, which opened in April 2021. Mahama has been engaging with local audiences since 2008, when he was a third-year student at the art school of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. When he decided to open these institutions, he realized he would have to incorporate his idea of community engagement into their strands of public programming. 'I am not just interested in the idea of building an institution and people coming to see it. I also like the idea that work can go to them,' he explained.

Mahama, who won the prestigious Principal Prince Claus Award in 2020, is perhaps best known for works such as *Out of Bounds* (2015), large-scale installations of jute sacks, stitched together and draped over buildings, which explore the themes of commodity, migration, globalization and economic exchange through the transformation of materials. That thinking is embedded into the programming of the institutional spaces he has founded, providing a platform for artists to be as unconventional as they want to be and to produce work that challenges the status quo in both a Ghanaian and a global context. Comprising more than 200 acres of land across three locations in Tamale, the artist-run institutions serve as project spaces, research hubs and cultural repositories as well as venues for exhibitions, artists' residencies, workshops and film screenings. 'It opens up the essential question of what art can be,' says Mahama of the role played by the institutions he founded in the Ghanaian artistic landscape. 'Most artists are trained to produce art. They are not really trained to interrogate art and I think that is what these institutions provide.' This line of thought is rooted in the grounding that he and his colleagues, such as SCCA's artistic director Selom Kudjie, have in a 'system where there was a radical idea that art is not what there is but art is what is yet to come'. That, he adds, creates a need to try to understand – or even challenge – an artist's position and constantly to push the boundaries of what art is supposed to be. As a non-profit, the focus on the work created isn't about its commercial value. Instead, Mahama tells me that he and his team are interested in the intrinsic, or theoretical, value of the art on display and what it means to the world, thereby encouraging artists to expand their practices.



'Existing Otherwise', 2022, exhibition view. Courtesy: SCCA Tamale; photograph Ernest Sackitey

Mahama feels 'more courage and ambition' whenever he is at Red Clay – the vast space which serves as his personal studio that is also open to the public – because it enables him to push his idea of art beyond what he himself has created. The largest of the three institutions, comprising buildings the size of warehouses, Red Clay takes its name from the locally sourced bricks from which it is constructed. The site also houses some British colonial-era trains, acquired through Ghana's Ministry of Railway Development and from scrap dealers, and six Soviet-era planes bought from private owners. These have been repurposed as education spaces and libraries for children and artists alike. 'My idea for Red Clay, SCCA and Nkrumah Volini is that they should allow for constant shifts in artistic form,' Mahama says. 'It's about possibility – that's what these institutions provide.'

This article first appeared in frieze issue 236 as part of a dossier with the headline 'Ghana: Four Galleries to Watch', alongside Nuku Studio, Nubuke Foundation and Gallery 1957

Main image: Akutia: Blindfolding The Sun and The Poetics Peace', 2020, exhibition view. Courtesy: SCCA Tamale; photograph: Elolo Bosoka

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