

the Whitworth

Podcast transcript

April 2020

A WALK IN THE PARK

A Walk in the Park is a podcast series from the Whitworth. A university gallery, set in parkland in central Manchester. Hosted by the Cultural Park Keeper Francine Hayfron, each episode takes a look at what is happening inside and out at the Whitworth.

EPISODE 1

We take a look at the work from Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama called *Parliament of Ghosts*, as part of Manchester International Festival 2019 and here about the Whitworth's outdoor health and wellbeing programme.

All of the episodes are available to listen to at:

<https://www.mixcloud.com/TheWhitworth/playlists/a-walk-in-the-park-podcast/>

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A WALK IN THE PARK

EPISODE 1 – SPEAKERS

Francine Hayfron (FH) – Cultural Park Keeper at the Whitworth, The University of Manchester.

Ibrahim Mahama (IM) – Artist

Dominque Heyse-Moore (DHM) – Senior Curator, Textiles and Wallpaper at the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

Alistair Hudson (AH) – Director of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester, and Manchester Art Gallery

Tahmina Rahman (TR) – Visitor Team Coordinator at the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

A WALK IN THE PARK

EPISODE 1

<Music plays in background: Bonobo– Second Sun >

FH: Hello and welcome! You're listening to A Walk in the Park, a brand new podcast series from The Whitworth art Gallery. If you're not familiar with the Whitworth; we are a university gallery set in parkland right in the beating heart of Manchester.

I'm **Francine Hayfron**, Cultural Park Keeper at the Whitworth, and in this series we will check what's happening at the Whitworth, indoors and outdoors.

In this episode, we take a look at the forthcoming exhibition 'Parliament of Ghosts', featuring work from the Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama.

IM: *"The idea is to create a platform, almost like a literal parliament with all kinds of objects; archives and all that, which people could actually access. This parliament is actually made up from the residues of objects from Ghana's railways."*

FH: And we'll catch up with our Visitor Team supervisor to find out what is a typical day for her at the gallery!

TR: *"I just absolutely adore what I do, I just love my job– welcoming new visitors to the gallery, because it just gives me a chance to sort of create a visit for them, really, that they'll get the most out of."*

PARLIAMENT OF GHOSTS

FH: As part of this year's Manchester International Festival, the Whitworth will showcase the world premiere of Ibrahim Mahama's latest work 'Parliament of Ghosts'. This major installation reflects on the half-forgotten history of his home country Ghana, whose journey from British colony to independent nation was completed barely sixty years ago.

Curated by Dominique Heyse-Moore, Senior Curator of Textiles and Wallpaper at the Whitworth, the heart of 'Parliament of Ghosts' is a haunting assemblage of lost objects; rescued and repurposed to form a vast parliamentary chamber in the heart of the Whitworth. With abandoned train seats and faded railway sleepers, scrapped school furniture and documents from government archives, Ibrahim lends powerful new context to this residue from a nation in transition.

DHM: Hi, I'm Dominique Heyse-Moore. I'm Senior Curator of Textiles and Wallpaper at the Whitworth. I'm curator of 'Parliament of Ghosts'; an exhibition of new work by Ibrahim Mahama, commissioned by Manchester International Festival and the Whitworth.

< Music plays in background: Koo Nimo – Nation Building – Adampa Medley >

FH: Earlier this year, myself and Dominique travelled to West Africa to visit Ibrahim at home in Ghana as he was preparing for the show.

IM: My name is Ibrahim Mahama. I'm from Tamale, Ghana and I am producing this work 'Parliament of Ghosts' for the Whitworth in 2019 and the work is looking at the histories and the visual trace of the objects and other things coming from the Ghana railways. So, the 'Parliament' of Ghosts is actually made up of a series of objects coming from things like parts of old trains, from things like old seats from the coaches that were used on the Ghana railways in the mid-twentieth century. And the idea is to create a platform, almost like a literal parliament with all kinds of objects; archives and all that, which people could actually access.

This parliament is actually made up of the residues of, let's say, wooden cabinets and objects from the Ghana railways and there will be seats where people will just literally sit and read all these old parliamentary debates and go through different archives and all that. And other aspects of the exhibition would have like, literally, archives from the Ghana railways and there people could access some of those drawings and there is another part which actually has a film of the construction of the 'Parliament' of Ghosts at a workshop, examining the labour of the workers there in relation to the collaborators that I work with and also other individual people.

And then the last room has these two paintings which are mostly made of textiles, waxed prints, and also cabinets and other things with these textiles

which are deconstructed. And the final part has these photographs of markings and tattoos on the hands of the collaborators I work with, which is somehow juxtaposed with some of the cabinets and also machine parts from the railways, in relation to the names of the companies that produce those machines and all that and also in relation to some of the drawings and all that.

So it's mostly just superimposing and juxtaposing like objects and also bodies and all that.

< *Music plays in background: Chief Stephen Osita Osadebe – Osondi Owendendi* >

FH: Senior Curator Dominique gives an insight into what the show will look like in Manchester.

DHM: We have shipped two container loads of archive materials from Ghana. They're not archive materials in the typical sense, although there are things on paper; photographs, blueprints, all sorts of other things in book form which are coming over. But there are also traces of the history of Ghana collected from a variety of industrial sites, including; the railway workshop in Sekondi, salvage markets– which Mahama visits as part of his work.

A lot of the material we are using for this exhibition comes from the railway.

IM: The railway industry was very instrumental towards the struggle of independence, so you can see a lot of that memory and residue within some of the political statements or things that are written on objects. So that's where the 'Parliament of Ghosts' actually came from. The idea that we could use these kinds of objects, which have these remnants, and then use them to create this parliament with memories of these old things, like some of the machine parts or even the seats where people could actually sit on these things physically and then read, maybe, the parliamentary debates; that came out from the early parliament in Ghana.

DHM: The objects that Ibrahim has been gathering are covered in posters and there's chalk and writing all over them about the Trade Union and different elections. So those are absolutely everywhere at this site.

< *Music plays in background: E T Mensah – Ghana Freedom* >

FH: Encompassing painting, sculpture, photography and film, 'Parliament of Ghosts' beautifully evokes histories and memories of a country and its people asserting their independence.

DHM: On our first day in Ghana, Ibrahim collected us and drove us from Accra to Tema, which is an industrial district to the east of Accra. Tema was built as part of the modernisation of Ghana after independence in 1957 by Kwame

Nkrumah, the first President of the newly independent country. Ibrahim wanted us to see it because there was a large complex of grain silos intended to store cocoa. But they were never used and Ibrahim sees them as a symbol of the potential of country and they're a trace and archive of this period of growth and hope.

IM: *Those there are the two largest structures in the country. And this is the oil refinery, that's the first oil refinery.*

DHM: We visited the cocoa silos in Tema, an enormous structure; one of the largest in the country, other than the oil refinery. And this was really interesting in relation to the exhibition because we're going to be building a silo where there will be a film projection on seven screens. Visitors will be able to stand inside the silo and see a film of people working at the railway workshop in Sekondi in Ghana.

IM: So everything you see here was built by Ghana as a result of the modernisation and the nationalisation of the country.

< *Music plays in background: E T Mensah – Ghana Freedom* >

FH: Born in 1909, Kwame Nkrumah became the first Prime Minister and later President of Ghana, having led the country, formerly known as the Gold Coast, to independence from Britain in 1957. Under his administration, the rail and port systems were modernised and expanded. And the education system overhauled. He believed strongly that Africans could successfully conduct their own affairs and was a fierce advocate of Pan-Africanism.

IM: Actually Nkrumah did all the work like, of course, even when Nkrumah was put in jail he was a big success. Nkrumah realised that after that struggle, the fight for freedom, once that was attained, what was going to happen to it? Like what would we do with it, literally? Because he realised that if the independence or freedom was not dealt with properly, it would end up in the hands of a few elite who were only going to use that to force their own ideas and agenda in a way.

So when Nkrumah became president, there were some times when he was seen as a dictator because he held on to power for quite some time but a lot of things were incremented within that time that, until now, were unprecedented. So there is a question of democracy and what it actually means when it comes into being because, after Nkrumah, there were regimes that came into being but none of them have achieved what he did in that period. You can't compare what they did to even the work that Nkrumah did in his first four years as president. That whole idea of what it really means to have freedom is something that we keep questioning.

FH: During our visit, Ibrahim showed us another of his latest projects. This is no artwork, though, for here in the region of Tamale, where he was born and

raised, Ibrahim was embarking on a colossal project; building an art institute for future generations of Ghanaian artists.

IM: So you see how I set off working on these institution projects in Tamale five years ago. And five years ago is actually when I started my practice. So you see how, even in my age now, I'm not thinking about the idea of the institutions separate from the practice; the capital from all the work that I was earning around that time, like I'd travel for exhibitions and the for exhibition they'd give you a stipend fee- those monies were the things I was saving to build the institution because I realised that the capital was very important in a way that would transform the whole ideological basis and the formal aspects of art itself.

DHM: So the plan to build the institution has been there from the beginning?

IM: It has been there from the beginning, it's not like an afterthought. So that is the thing that we were trying to somehow let our generation understand and also the older generation. It's based on the fact that all along, there has always been this kind of separation between the artists' work and the so called institutions there that somehow comes back to give the artist kind of a meaning. But we are arguing now that all of those things have always been one thing in itself; you know that the artists' practice in a way that is cultivated can somehow have an effect even on the idea of what an institution can be.

FH: The idea of the institute is also one close to the heart of the Whitworth's new vision; Director Alistair Hudson explains.

AH: *"What Ibrahim's work is doing, which I think is something I really wanted to talk about with this show, was to say that it's not just about him making sculptures and objects. This is him working as an artist, as an agent, in Ghana, and working internationally in order to get things done in Ghana that need to be done. And what he's using, he's using his position as an artist on the art world circuit, showing his work, selling his work internationally, having shows and exhibitions and rechannelling those resources back into where he thinks it can be best, most used in this particular area of Ghana.*

He's not just talking about making artist studios, because that's also what happens; that as an artist they build a studio at the centre of their empire. This is not that. This is him working on the infrastructure of this neighbourhood as well; schools and the resources. And when we talk about, you know, being a civic institution or being a civic art gallery; for me that's what it really means. For me, it's how can we make the Whitworth something that contributes to the city and actually joins in with what the city is already doing, rather than asking people to come and join in art?

You can see the difference and, in a way, that's kind of how I see Ibrahim's work in this context. He's not asking people just to come and join in making his art, he's asking people to collectivise around a project which will deliver infrastructure back into Africa and it's sort of throwing itself into the complexities of the world economy. It's not just saying, you know, here's a sculpture. It's saying that these are things that you can enjoy as sculpture in a gallery but there's an undertone here which is about that very process of having exhibitions,

of making work, of this work operating in a global economy which is then also almost kind of subducting all of this energy; making it re-materialise to positive good in Africa."

IM: As I kept traveling, doing residency programmes and also working, doing different things, I became more self-aware about the potential of an artist making work which goes beyond a symbolic value because I was concentrating on pouring a lot of research into collective objects. And I realised that there was actually a lot of potential, also for infrastructure. Originally, we didn't have institutions to begin with and ones that we developed early on were part of domestic spaces but with, let's say, the silos and railway workshops, I realised that old structures, early modernist structures and even the colonial structures—where, because of the design, that the contradiction of it is that they were done with exploitation but actually, when you are looking at it artistically with regard to producing work it has far more potential for inspiring contemporary art around certain issues.

So I decided to borrow the idea of just the physicality of those spaces and also how the architecture was organised, so that was how I came up with the architecture here. It's very simple; it has a veranda and it can be used for activities and you can have gatherings, and then having the extensions for the studios. So this one here will have five studios. The plan is that students come in from university, students who are artists and also architects and other people. Each studio can contain two people at a time. They will be able to live here for up to a year.

Normally you have to do a national service for a year and that's the period when a lot of people lose motivation to become artists; when you go and work in a bank or somewhere and you just get comfortable. So the idea is that if we have more of these spaces and more people creatively can just do one year, and we can have museums and so on where people can do the national service. And then, after that, a lot of them who are artists might realise that maybe in the end, they don't want to become artists to produce their own works but they want to maybe work with other artists to produce other things.

< *Music plays in background: Ebu Taylor – Victory (Instrumental)* >

FH: Not far from the institute, Ibrahim was also preparing to open an artist-run project and exhibition space called The Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art.

IM: I thought for a while that maybe I should just concentrate on creating a space that actually gives a new voice and a new context to works and practices that have somehow influenced or indirectly shaped my own practice or my own being as an artist now. And then maybe our generations or the generations to come may think that, actually, that the idea of the politics we are talking about isn't just something that you do; you have to embody it with the choices that you make, with regard to the selections that you make. It's more than just a political statement.

FH: In March this year, it opened its doors for the first time the exhibition 'In Pursuit of Something Beautiful Perhaps'; a retrospective of the Ghanaian modernist Galle Winston Kofi Dawson.

IM: Mr Wilson was an interesting man and character, I will say. He was a public servant for most of his life and he used to design posters and other things. Mostly his practice over the years, decades, was mostly based on experimentation– which you wouldn't see a lot in the people that came after him because, with a lot of them, their practice became very commercial. But with Mr Dawson? He did different things.

He would experiment with plantain on newspaper. It's very uncommon to find something like that and I think that his practice, and a lot of the things he did, somehow embodies the contemporary institute but most of what he did was just within that modern art period. And a lot of architects and people that did things like that embodied that spirit.

So I thought that, in creating the space, that later when I realised the importance of having a studio and to have exhibition spaces and all that, I decided that we would dedicate that space purely to modern art. And also it's important, at least for our generation, to recognise a lot of the work that was done by the older generation because our state institutions like museums haven't kept a really good record of the history of it. And also in a way, whilst organising that exhibition and really giving it context, I thought that all of the experience of doing things in the art world, of doing Venice and Documenta and all that, it's somehow possible to replicate that also into other artists' works.

So I wanted to start from the older because, three and a half years ago, I was already discussing with him the ideas about some of the spaces and how he could be someone to work with.

DHM: Do you feel like Ibrahim is creating that community of artists?

Mr Kofi Dawson: He's very concerned about the opportunities for the whole nation. In Ghana, nobody will understand what you are doing in an advanced country where you are not? supporting funding. They are still adamant that you need to help the community. So, I used to look at this and say "Hey, these people are really trying." The black man is an artwork himself, it's like he is a living bronze sculpture. Trying to bring art and make people understand art, is a tall order, but Ibrahim is trying.

< *Music plays in background: Ebu Taylor – Victory (Instrumental)* >

FH: And what does Ibrahim see as the future for contemporary art in Ghana?

IM: I think that it's possible to somehow have a community of self-sustaining ideas and also just, with the benefit of hindsight, we have seen how the western communities have developed over the years with regard to artists, practices and all that. I think also, here, there is some kind of real potential with the crisis and

the things we embody. So that has always been for me the main medium to use as a means to produce something differently. So once artists begin to realise that they can somehow take their destiny into their own hands and they can actually determine how the forms around them are made, then we would be able to actually create some kind of self-sustaining future.

I imagine we have museums but, first of all, I imagine we have studios for artists to be able to firstly be able to at least think. But, for me, I am in a position where I can think about those two simultaneously. That's why I thought it was important to do it at this age where I am young, to make that contribution because it somehow goes a long way to inspire the artists to come, who might realise that if you're an artist there is a lot more that is demanded of you than just being an artist who thinks that he's going to sit down in an armchair and comfortably think of making a painting or a sculpture. But artists are becoming more engaged, more politically motivated, that's the way we can change the status quo with regard to the way the state itself is organised.

I think the future of contemporary art in Ghana will have to reach a point where it actually affects the organisation of things within the state.

FH: You can see 'Parliament of Ghosts' at the Whitworth from the 5th July–29th September. Commissioned and produced by Manchester International Festival and the Whitworth, part of the University of Manchester.

SPOTLIGHT

< *Music plays in background: Bonobo – Second Sun* >

FH: The Whitworth is more than just a place that hangs art on its walls or has sculptures on its grounds; we work with people and with communities. Ever wondered what it's like to work in an art gallery? Each episode, we shine a spotlight on a different role in the gallery. Today, we catch up with the Visitor Team supervisor and see what it's like looking after the front of house.

TR: Hi, my name is Tahmina Rahman and I'm the Visitor Team Coordinator at the Whitworth.

A typical day at the gallery for me varies, really, for example; on Monday I'd get in just before 9am and head to the morning briefing that I do with the Visitor Team, which is around 9:15am. Then, after the briefing, we'll make sure that the gallery is open and ready for visitors for 10am, which on Mondays is when we have family activities. That's when all of the toddlers and babies start arriving and the gallery just suddenly comes to life! And then I think, once the team is all settled in, all of the exhibitions are open and fine and everything is up and running, I'd probably head to the office and try to catch up on admin;

making sure that the team have caught up on any training they might need to catch up on, rotas for the upcoming few days or weeks would need to be checked to make sure they're all updated and we're well staffed. Annual leave would need to be checked, making sure that the team have their annual leave approved. And we'd have regular catch ups to see how both team and individual development is going.

FH: Tell me what you enjoy most about working in the gallery.

TR: The things that I enjoy most about working at the gallery are; being able to see first-hand how much work goes on behind the scenes in order to put an exhibition or event together, the fact that I'm surrounded by gardens and a park- the views just never get old! I feel like I could see the same view a hundred times but it would still feel new. It's like you're seeing the gallery for the first time.

One of the main things I enjoy is welcoming new visitors to the gallery because it gives me a chance to give them an orientation, find out where they have come from, why they're here, what they'd like to see. Most importantly, I just absolutely adore what I do. I just love my job. And that sounds really corny but I'm really, really lucky to be working here and to be surrounded by such an amazing team and being able to work with other departments as well. The experiences and stories that I've come across over the years have been worth it.

FH: Obviously you come across hundreds and hundreds of people every week and must have many, many incidents or memories stored away. Are there any that you can share with us?

TR: I think the most memorable, when the Bedwyr Williams exhibition was on- this was back when I was a Visitor Team Assistant- and the exhibition itself had large foam pieces; there were two or three sorts of towering ones right near a screen. One day some students were in there in the afternoon and they were being a bit rowdy and a couple of them decided to knock one of the foam towers over, so my colleague and I rushed in and managed to catch the foam before it fell. They were quite heavy pieces as well, so my colleague was pushing up from the top and I was pushing up from the bottom and, bearing in mind that I'm only 4 ft 9in, so it was a bit daunting having to keep that thing up!

NATURAL CULTURAL HEALTH SERVICE

< *Music plays in the background: The Cinematic Orchestra – Dawn* >

FH: It's clear that exposure to nature can significantly reduce stress and promote relaxation and there is now a vast amount of evidence that museums and galleries can enhance wellbeing. Imagine a gallery that can do this both inside and out. The Natural and Cultural Health Service is a new programme of

outdoor activities at the Whitworth that promote good physical and mental wellbeing.

From mindfulness in nature, Tai Chi for wellbeing to gardening for good health, at the Whitworth we have something for everyone every week. It's an innovative approach that helps to improve the health and wellbeing of all of us, using the natural environment as a health asset. As part of the Natural and Cultural Health Service offer, working together with other partners, such as City of Trees, the Whitworth has devised a programme of nature based activities to improve the wellbeing of Manchester's residents and its visitors.

To find out more about our Natural and Cultural Health Service, you can visit our website for more details at <https://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/>

A WALK IN THE PARK – EPISODE 1

FH: That's it for the first episode! I hope you enjoyed it and will join us for another *Walk In The Park!*

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