

Ibrahim Mahama *Lazarus*

15 September – 7 November 2021

White Cube Bermondsey

White Cube Bermondsey is pleased to present 'Lazarus', an exhibition of new works by Ibrahim Mahama, including large-scale installation, sculpture, collage and film. The artist's third show with the gallery, the works come together to address the passage of time, the notion of obsolescence and the potential for regeneration.

Mahama's point of departure for the exhibition is 'Nkrumah Voli-ni', an abandoned building located in the northern city of Tamale in Ghana where the artist lives and works. Kwame Nkrumah is the name of the first president of Ghana, while Voli-ni, which literally translates as 'inside the hole', invokes excavation, teleportation and transformation. In bringing together these two words, the site is not only indebted to history but, at the same time, carries mythical associations. One of many concrete, Brutalist-style silos built to store grain and other food during the post-independence era, it was abandoned in 1966 and became obsolete, flooded and host to an ecosystem of fish, reptiles, birds and a large colony of bats. Driven by an interest in the way time is encapsulated in these architectural structures, Mahama has been photographing and researching silos since 2015, and finally acquired this building with the intention of converting it into a cultural institution. During the exhumation and restoration process, he made the decision to protect its dominant life forms and to keep the bats as co-habitants of the space. In so doing, Mahama is opening up an ecological dimension to the project's impetus and activity.

The artist's new groups of collages, which vary in size from the monumental to the domestic, are mostly named after recent popular music titles, all of which address the climate crisis, reflecting the urgent global paradigm shift. Made up from archival notes, drawings, and photographs, the collages combine repeated images of silos and bats with colonial-era maps, bank notebooks, orders and ledgers from the 1960s and 70s; all now defunct paper residue. Echoing the formations of bats, which hang in rhythmic rows from the ceiling of the silos, the collages are informed by a lyrical, topographical patterning. When considered in relation to historical colonial domination – and its effects of blotting out, spoiling and appropriating – the collage technique embodies the many troubled aspects of Ghana's multi-layered past.

The title for the show is taken from the installation *Lazarus* (2021) presented in 9x9x9. Referencing the resurrection of Lazarus, Mahama uses this biblical story to reflect upon the 'mobilisation of life within death'. This work comprises a group of suspended sculptures formed from armatures made of metal rebar and draped with tarpaulin, which together render the adumbration of cloaked figures or large bats. Dark and oil-drenched, the tarpaulin was originally used for covering cargo such as food, cars and engines, as well as for shelter, and was obtained by the artist from Agbogbloshie, a scrapyards that has yielded much of the raw material for previous bodies of work.

A major installation in South Gallery continues Mahama's investigation into circular economies. In *Capital Corpses* (2019–21), blackboards flank the walls, between which one hundred rusted metal sewing machines affixed to colonial-era wooden school desks are sectioned and activated in turn by a timer, creating a syncopated cacophony of noise. Once a ubiquitous tool in Ghana, used by labourers quickly needing to adopt a new trade, the now decommissioned sewing machines were collected by the artist with the intention of 'resurrecting the ghosts that are in the machines'. Mahama likens the role of the desks and blackboards to the jute sacks with which he frequently works. They too behave as palimpsests; upon these objects notes, names and directions are inscribed, which efface their surfaces while creating new layers – a haunting record of time enmeshed with its material history.

The split screen film *Yesterday* (2018–21), presented in the gallery auditorium, further elucidates the main preoccupation of the show: 'the "Lazarus effect", the return of the living dead'. Playing concurrently are three-minute films documenting the excavation of the silo, the silhouetted presence of the bats, and a local repair-man working with the sewing machines. By drawing this imagery together to remark upon the ecological necessity of collaboration and co-existence, Mahama again returns to the 'relationship between the old and the new, the formal and informal, the global and local'.