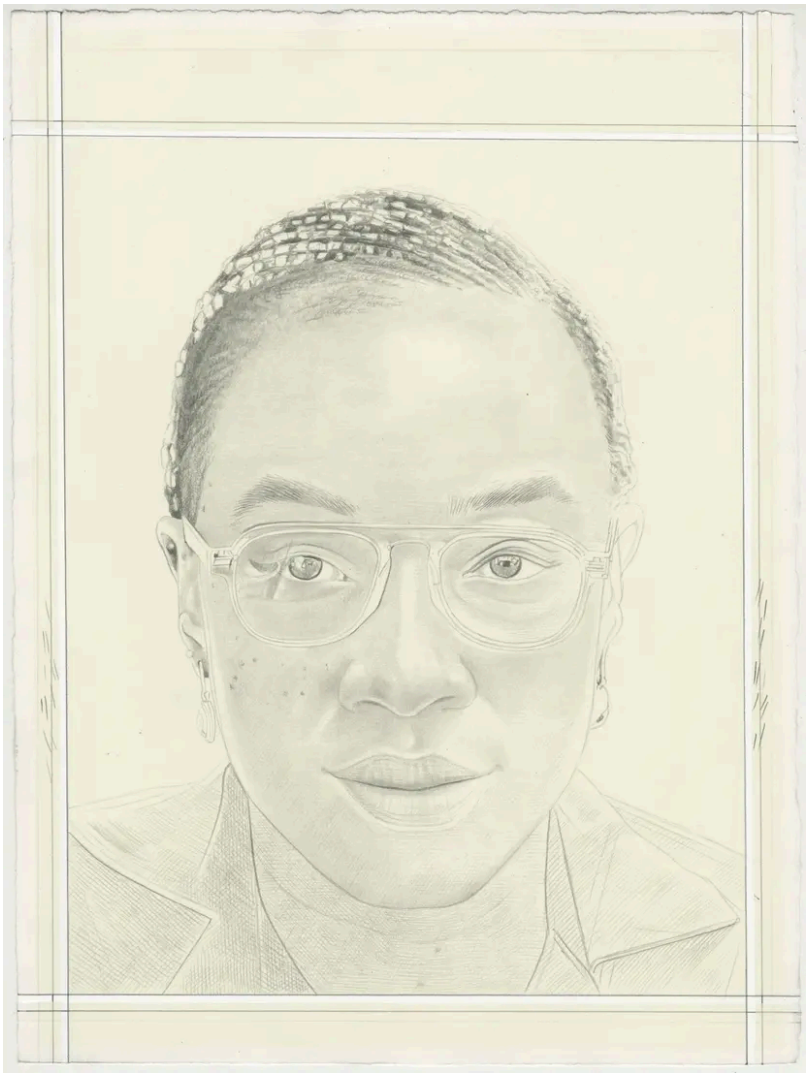
THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art | In Conversation

Karimah Ashadu with Toby Kamps



Portrait of Karimah Ashadu, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

60th Venice Biennale
Machine Boys
April 20–November 24, 2024
Venice

British-Nigerian artist Karimah Ashadu (born London, 1985), who lives and works in Hamburg and Lagos, is one of the breakout stars of the 60th Venice Biennale. She received the Silver Lion award given to a promising young participant for her single-channel video *Machine Boys* (2024), which looks at the lives of *okada*, or motorcycle taxi drivers in Lagos. Although their profession has been outlawed and they are harassed and shaken down by the police and gangs, they still ride. Combining kinetic imagery and affecting testimonies, the work immerses the viewer in the dreams and frustrations of young men striving for independence in the face of precarity.

Following her interests and on-the-fly networking and research, Ashadu discovers extraordinary subjects and settings. In Nigeria, she has studied the lives of horse tenders, tin miners, palm oil makers, and workers in an outdoor slaughterhouse. In Hamburg, she has followed a Nigerian refugee who ships salvaged goods to Africa to support himself despite his humanitarian visa's work prohibition. Her work examines themes of labor, patriarchy and independence in Africa and Europe in an age of globalization and mass migration, especially in the economic and cultural context of Nigeria and its diaspora.

Karimah Ashadu, *Machine Boys* (still), 2024. Courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film.

Toby Kamps (Rail): Congratulations on winning the Silver Lion prize at the 2024 Venice Biennale for your video *Machine Boys*.

Karimah Ashadu: Thank you. It was a big surprise.

Rail: The work, which really is an installation, features a group of motorcycle cab drivers in Lagos, Nigeria. Their profession has been outlawed, and even though they are harassed every day by police and gangs, they are still riding because it's the only way they can make a living. How did you meet these guys?

Ashadu: If I have an idea or an inkling about something, I'll just go out and start talking to people to explore. I'm that kind of person. I met somebody in Lagos and told them that I was interested in making a work about *okada*, which is the colloquial term for motorcycle taxis. I told them I was an artist and asked if they could introduce me to some riders. It kind of just snowballed from there.

You know, I'm really curious. If I have an idea, I can't shake it off. I have to do it. I just went out and started talking to people and then got introduced to more people.

Rail: How did you shape the work, and how did you get the riders to start talking about their lives?

Ashadu: The idea itself I've had for a really long time. It's stuck with me. I had images in my head alongside a narrative, a sense of what I wanted to communicate. Whenever you meet people that you want to work with, you have to build a relationship with them. They have to trust you. They're inviting you into their lives. You've got to respect that. So I spent a while building those relationships. When it felt like the right time to begin making the work, we talked about it and hashed out all the details. Actually the work was shot over a few years. So I would go back and reconnect with the guys.

Rail: Where did you convene the *okada*? Much of *Machine Boys* seems to be shot under a freeway overpass.

Ashadu: We shot actually in lots of different places. Maybe six or seven different sites. There was an underpass, which is what I think you saw. And then there are lots of other places. There's the Marina on Lagos Island, which has a long history and a lot of nostalgia for me. When I was growing up in Lagos, my mum actually worked not too far from there. This location was very poignant for me personally. You're also near the water and you have all the ships that are going around the world with their goods.

Rail: The camera in *Machine Boys* does amazing things. It looked like whoever was filming was on a bike for a lot of it.

Karimah Ashadu, *Machine Boys* (still), 2024. Courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film.

Ashadu: Yeah we used lots of different techniques and tricks. I have a camera person—Aigberadion Israel Ikhazuangbe, that I've worked with for quite a long time now. And I direct very heavily. I'm very specific about what I want. He and I work really well together. We've developed a shared language that allows for an intimate way of working. He just gets it. We will shoot the same scene, sometimes for hours until it's right. He has the patience that I need. I'm a painter by training. I came to filmmaking through performance. I would attach the camera to my body, and then I began making mechanisms to move the camera. So it always came from a dynamic place. The camera for me is its own entity. It wants to say what it wants to say. That's really how I approach things, in this offbeat way.

Rail: Your painterly side comes through in *Machine Boys* and in your other works. Let's talk about the way you meld images and stories in *Cowboy*, which you made in 2022. In this work there is a

single protagonist who cares for horses. It's beautiful to see how much he loves them and how much they like him. When he's on a horse he experiences a kind of freedom that's not there in *Machine Boys*, even though there's a visual rhyme with that film. When Cowboy rides his horse into the surf you see a row of ships beyond him just like those outside the Lagos Marina. He's hemmed in not only by the physical barrier of the sea, but also perhaps by intangible forces like globalization.

Ashadu: Exactly.

Rail: Again, you've got freedom and an inescapable system. Sorry, I'm talking too much. You're the artist!

Karimah Ashadu, *Cowboy* (still), 2022. Courtesy the artist.

Ashadu: You're picking up on a lot of things. *Cowboy* for me is such a beautiful work. My films really reflect where I am at a particular moment in my life. I think every artist's work probably does that.

It's slow and it's pensive and it's symbolic. What seems like a simple story of a man and his horses is actually so much more. It has breadth and depth with the sea and the palm fronds which are shown intermittently on one of the work's two screens. Historically, palm fronds denote victory, peace, and independence, so it's a rather apt symbol. To move to it from a very different work like *Machine Boys* seems like a huge jump. But I'm not really so concerned about my films looking and feeling the same—it's more a question of how I sink my teeth into a subject. The work emerges from what I am interested in, and where I am in that moment. So they're different, but they're actually speaking about similar things: freedom, industry, migration. These are all things that my work is very interested in, especially because I'm a British-Nigerian living in Hamburg. Even in this German city, I'm always looking for that connection to Nigeria. I'm always very curious about what brings people here. How do they live? Seeking a Nigerian connection to Hamburg, I made the work *Brown Goods* (2020) about a Nigerian migrant making a living in Hamburg.

Rail: The work is set in a scrap yard in Billstraße, an industrial street here. It features a refugee who has a humanitarian visa, which means he isn't allowed to work. He's making a living by selling "Brown Goods," things like used refrigerators that Germans would consider junk but that have value in Nigeria.

Ashadu: The video follows a Nigerian protagonist, Emeka, who tells his story about how he ended up trading second-hand goods. Sadly, there is a demand for these beat-up "Brown Goods" because of the lack of industry in West-African countries like Nigeria. And actually there's a tier system of what goes where. Nigerians will not accept certain things like used tires or used mattresses, but they might want them in Guinea. It's astonishing to me but then at the same

time I look at the colonial history of countries like Nigeria and the fact that we've only been independent since 1960. That's not very long ago. People forget that we only started self-governing again after colonization. So a lot of things are still finding their feet. We import things that we probably shouldn't import because we have the capacity to make them. We focused for too long on oil as our main source of income. This ties into other work like *Red Gold* (2016) which is about the process of making palm oil. At one point, Nigeria was one of the world's biggest producers and exporters of palm oil, but that fell by the wayside when crude oil was discovered. That's another industry that should have been nurtured and protected but wasn't. I'm just very interested in all of these aspects and how they shape Nigeria today. And with no judgment, just a very eager curiosity.

Rail: I'm grateful for this curiosity because you've revealed some amazing social and environmental landscapes. *Plateau* of 2021, for instance, is about tin mining, about people taking over abandoned mines and trying to find that metal and columbite, which is used in aerospace and medical industries. These are absolutely blasted landscapes.

Ashadu: Yes, it's set in the Jos Plateau region in Nigeria. It's hard work, but that's a given, right? My work takes an empowered stance and explores what it means to be self-sustaining by any means necessary. I'm intrigued by what it means to be independent as a community, as an individual, to provide for yourself and your family when the economy is not great. To do this, you have to create the industries and jobs that you seek. And back to the painterly connection, my sister said something really beautiful when we were in Venice recently. She said, "you move your camera like a paintbrush." I hadn't thought about it like that before. So, beyond

the colors of the work, like the orange and red of the earth and water in *Plateau,* the camera also moves deftly.

Rail: I see that too with the overhead shots that recur in your work that present bits of terrain as geometric compositions. But the landscape you show in *Plateau* is otherworldly, like something made by giant termites. And the images of people working in the mines' sluices seems like something out of a phantasmagorical painting by Bosch. You find the same kind of crazy landscape in *Red Gold*. People are standing in pits full of yellowish liquid, sifting through them by hand. Talk about labor! In *Red Gold* and *Plateau*, the protagonists talk with great pride about how their children are in school, they have roofs over their heads, they have a glass of palm wine in the evenings—they're making a living. But to me the end of *Plateau* was surprising. In the final scene you see little flecks of metal in the miners' sieves and you think, wow, all that work and environmental damage for something that would fit into a thimble? The metal is valuable, certainly, but the process and the system is so destructive.

Ashadu: I think you're right. We mustn't look at it from only that perspective. Mining precious metals, whatever they are, requires a lot of work and also ties into exploitation—environmental or human. But that's not really what I'm focused on. Someone in the West may consider the results of their labor as not worth it. But it's valuable to them. That's what we must remember, wealth is relative. It's extremely valuable to them, and it enables them to live. So I never really looked at it in terms of the exertion and what they got out of it. I have a lot of respect for what they do, and their rationale for doing so. Though their lives might be challenging, they're still optimistic and able to make something out of their circumstances.

Rail: Certainly people in the West or the "Global North" live off the backs of the labor and extractive economies shown in these works.

Ashadu: Absolutely, and I'll just touch very briefly on this: I think that people fail to remember and reconcile history. It's very easy to look at things on the surface, but when you delve deeper, you start to see the social and economic roots of today's situation. Post-colonial mass migration, for instance. If we start looking at it through that lens, we can be so much more compassionate and understanding.

Rail: I'm surprised at how present the dialogue about colonialism is in Hamburg. Germany had colonies in Africa, but this city is trying to come to terms with the way it enabled a worldwide system of exploitation as an international shipping center.

Ashadu: I've been in Germany since 2018 and now have a lived experience of the place. Before I moved here, though, I had the feeling that the country had done a great job reconciling its past and was very open to understanding its mistakes. This is the second largest city in Germany, and, unfortunately, although it looks diverse, there is still a lot of racism. I want to say this carefully, but decolonization must go much deeper. A personal example occurred in 2020, when the Black Lives Matter movement started getting more attention and a lot of people just jumped onboard. It was the flavor of the moment. I remember that no one around me asked me whether I was okay. They were so much more concerned about the outward facing aspect, of being seen doing the thing. That struck a chord with me. We really must decolonize in a lived way.

And don't get me wrong: Germany has afforded me all kinds of opportunities. So I feel it's a huge privilege to be able to make work

in Nigeria, and to show it here and to have people learn about something that they might not have been open to. I mean, when I showed *Brown Goods* in Hamburg, people were like, "I didn't know this world existed, and I've been living here for years." So it's a huge privilege as an artist and filmmaker, to be able to open people's eyes to their surroundings and to the wider scheme of things in the world.

Karimah Ashadu, *Brown Goods* (still), 2020. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Yes, down to our obsession with growth and all the ways we keep pressurizing destructive economic systems like some of those you've investigated in your work. I think of Emeka in *Brown Goods*. He has an advanced degree but spends his days packing broken refrigerators into shipping containers because that's the only way he can sustain himself. One institution I admire is the Silent University, which was active in Hamburg. It was a place where anyone, regardless of their immigration status, could keep learning immediately.

Ashadu: Beautiful, yeah.

Rail: Your work is certainly about ways of sharing knowledge and experience, but let's talk about some of the aesthetic forms you use to do this. I really loved your single-channel video of 2016, *Destiny*. The dramatic action centers on a man sharpening saw blades in a dark shed on a sunny day. What's going on in this work?

Ashadu: I talked about mechanisms before and how I started using them. I had progressed in my thinking and started pondering; what else can I use as a mechanism? What can I use to drive and shape narrative? How can I progress to other mechanisms beyond the built ones I'd been using? I then arrived at the notion of light as a mechanism. For *Destiny* I fashioned a very analog handmade mechanical device that made my camera pan past the windows of his hut. And what's special about *Destiny* is that it's always projected on steel plates. That the material is part of the work. When you acquire the work, you also have to purchase steel plates to go along with it. When it's installed, the projected image is absorbed by the material, which is quite gorgeous. The last time it was installed was in the Hamburg Kunstverein.

Rail: The play of light in *Destiny* is amazing. You move between bright outdoor sun and a dark hut made of boards with gaps between them where light leaks through. But the device you used to make *Destiny* was under the camera and not visible. In *King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)*, from 2015, which is set in an amazing outdoor abattoir, your device is in front of the lens.

Ashadu: Yeah. I was at the postgraduate program at De Ateliers in Amsterdam at the time I made it. I was riding my bike around the city and found this very big red plastic beer keg that a pub or a

brewery had chucked out and grabbed it. I love finding things in the street. Even now, I still pick up things and take them to my studio. At the time I was interested in my camera being able to do a 360, but in a very analog manual way. So I was there crouched down in that slaughterhouse in Lagos, in the heat with bits of flesh and things flying past me, turning the camera and putting this red plastic thing in front of it. I really love being in the thick of it. That's a big part of the excitement for me. I'm not really concerned about how things look or smell or whatever, I'm just focused on the work. I just wanted to see what the color would do. It didn't really bother me that the color red, with its blood associations, was obvious. My approach was "let's just see." And it did something that was interesting.

Rail: *King of Boys*, which I understand is titled after the name given to the head of a youth gang, shows a gruesome place where cow heads are butchered. In *Apapa Amusement Park* (2013), the camera also does a 360 degree turn. It's mounted on a gear-driven wooden turntable that you made. The setting is a vacant lot where kids are playing soccer, and the camera does slow, steady turns showing the game and the environment in which it's taking place. There's also a lens which seems to be mounted on the device, which keeps coming into the frame. What were you thinking when you made that device, which seems to take much of the control away from the filmmaker?

Ashadu: There were a lot of things going on in that film, although it's very short, less than three minutes. I wondered what it would be like if I could use a magnifying glass as a kind of manual "zoom lens" and in the spirit of play see what that does. I also wanted to chop up the footage into segments of seconds and to compile it in such a way that would stutter. So that 360 motion was like a

precursor to *King of Boys*. I was also curious about this playground, which when I was a kid used to have rides and is now empty and derelict. So that childhood memory of play was evocative and inspiring for me.

Rail: Tell me about *Makoko Sawmill* of 2015. It's a single-channel video that's observational in spirit. The camera watches a sawmill where logs are floated in before being cut. But there are blue painted boards that appear at the top and bottom of the frame and extend into the scene. Tell us about this device.

Ashadu: I wanted to occupy the space between the viewer and the action, you know, that seemingly empty space. It felt quite spatial to me, and I wanted to investigate and probe it. I made these idiosyncratic blue sticks that I would just kind of move in a way that made sense to me. It's twenty minutes of me moving those sticks and you as the viewer wondering what's going to happen. But it's exactly what you're seeing, and there's nothing really going on. I love that. It's like twenty minutes of expectation. You're wondering whether they're superimposed or something until you see a fly come and sit on one of the sticks and then fly off again. It was really just about physically exploring space with the camera—beyond the camera.

Rail: Your locations are, at least to non-Nigerians, extraordinary. But then you introduce elements that interrupt the seamless consumption of your imagery. Can you talk about why you introduce these elements of artifice in otherwise very real settings?

Ashadu: I am very interested in the viewer being active in the work. I have always loved research. You can see that in *Plateau* and my other early works. They involve field research. But they're also

about more than studying something. They also put the viewer in action. The way *Machine Boys* is presented as an installation in Venice, for instance, involves a sculpture and a purple room. The sculpture, *Wreath,* is a brass cast made from motorcycle tires. It's beautifully lit and invites you into the room where the video is shown. The walls are a purple that is taken from one of the motorcycle headlamps in the video. When you sit there watching the work—it does feel immersive, in a way that you're part of it, especially when you have the subjects turning to look at you.

Karimah Ashadu, *Machine Boys* (still), 2024. Courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film.

Rail: The conclusion of *Machine Boys* is startling. One of the riders bares his teeth and snarls and growls at the camera. Can you talk about that show of aggression?

Ashadu: There's an image we have of Black men. Some regard them as a threat. I wanted to play on that. This guy growling at you is unexpected, there's no lead up to it. It just kind of comes out of nowhere and punches you in the face. And it was very interesting for me to see people's reactions as a fly on the wall, watching people watch the work. Some people really engage with it; others don't and that's also fine.

Rail: Again, I thought of the economic backdrop against which this growling *okada* bike rider lives. The police harass riders and confiscate their bikes. Gangs shake them down. He seems to express this pressure. How long can they take it? What more contortions will they need to make to accommodate an impossible situation? Is revolution a possibility?

Ashadu: Let me say this: I feel like Western society is incredibly repressed. We Nigerian people are not. We say what's on our minds, and we move on. This is what he's doing. He's expressing what a lot of people feel but choose to keep inside. I think we can probably all relate to that if we really look deep within ourselves. It's this moment of saying, yes, I'm incredibly frustrated. Life is challenging. But hey, we can let it out and keep on going, you know?

Rail: From Emeka who's making a living selling brown goods on Billstraße to the "Machine Boys" to Cowboy, you've found people who speak beautifully about their lives and how they're looking for a path forward.

Ashadu: The way that I see it is that everyone has a story to tell. The moment you give people a platform to do so, you learn so much. It's just taking the time to kind of make that connection and to go deep. I'm really interested in what people have to say, what almost

anybody has to say. So it's just really about coming with that mindset. When you're genuinely interested, you will find interesting stories.

Rail: Tell me about your production company, Golddust by Ashadu, and the in-process work that's set in a salt mine.

Ashadu: I created this production company because I wanted to bridge the gap between working in Germany and in Nigeria. I wanted to create a home for my filmmaking process and specifically for Black and African stories. *Saltmine* is my first feature film, and I've been working on it for a number of years and am looking for the right moment to bring it to life. It's a scripted work that straddles fiction and reality. The protagonist works in a salt mine in Dakar. Life throws him some challenges. The film is about him overcoming them and becoming a lot more intimate with his growth. It's set in an active salt mine, so it's partly about labor, as are many of my works. There's a lot of beautiful imagery. It's going to be really exciting when I bring it to life.

Rail: The production stills on your website are astonishing.

Ashadu: Thank you.

Rail: A final question: You've said independence is one of your primary themes. What does it look like for you?

Ashadu: That's a very big question. For me, independence means freedom—to live your life in a way that brings a lot of joy and fulfillment. And when I'm making my work, I'm looking for people who are seeking that same thing. My work is very important to me, it's a huge part of my life, something that I live and breathe. It's in my blood, and I can't get away from it even if I tried. The subjects

that I feature in my work are people who are also seeking an independence through their work. They want to live life on their terms, regardless of the situation in their country, whether it's to do with the economy or a post-colonial landscape of exploitation and oppression. For me it's very important, and I hope it's clear that my work does not come from a place of pity. It's really about discovering places of empowerment and changing the narrative of how people see Africans, how people see Nigerians, and how people also have to understand the role that their ancestors played in shaping those perceptions. I really want to keep on leaning into that—what it means for someone to be independent, as an individual, as a community, and as a country. It's a question I keep on thinking about. Perhaps I haven't found the answer yet. Maybe when I do that's the day I stop making films.

CONTRIBUTORS

Toby Kamps is a curator and writer based in Hamburg, Germany. From 2018 to 2023, he was Director of External Affairs at White Cube, London. Previously, he held curatorial positions at museums of modern and contemporary art in the United States.