Machine Boys, 2024, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere* installation view at the 60th Venice Biennale, 2024. Courtesy: the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Photo: Lorenzo Palmieri

Karimah Ashadu

Cannot Resist Seeing

In the two-channel film *Red Gold* (2016), British Nigerian artist and filmmaker Karimah Ashadu drops us into a disorienting aerial view of a circular sludge pit brimming with a thinned-down, yellow-red substance. A searing sun—mirroring the pit's spherical shape—makes itself known, an omnipresent force casting long shadows and amplifying the golden hues reflecting off the watery surface. The unsettling sloshing sounds reveal themselves as adulterated palm oil. A solitary figure, a woman, wades knee-deep in this liquid mass, vigorously scooping the effluent mixture of palm oil, water, fibrous material, and other non-oil dregs. For those unfamiliar with what's playing out, Ashadu is granting us access to the raw, backbreaking ritual of extracting palm oil from the mire.

The next scene on the same channel abruptly cuts to the dim outline of a whirring machine—likely a palm nutcracker outfitted with a kernel separator. Its mechanical rhythm purrs, a hypnotic and unsettling cadence. Soon, the shadowy outline of a man comes into view. His red headlamp pierces the darkness, casting an artificial glow as he operates the machine. This mechanized labor is paired with the worker sorting split kernels scattered across the forest floor. Ashadu then directs our attention to the slow encroachment of moss and fungi on a tree trunk. Gradually, almost tenderly, the camera ascends, revealing several blurred, iridescent green fronds of a palm oil tree. This upward motion mimics the eyes of a worker lifting their gaze, only to be met with the sheer presence of the tree.

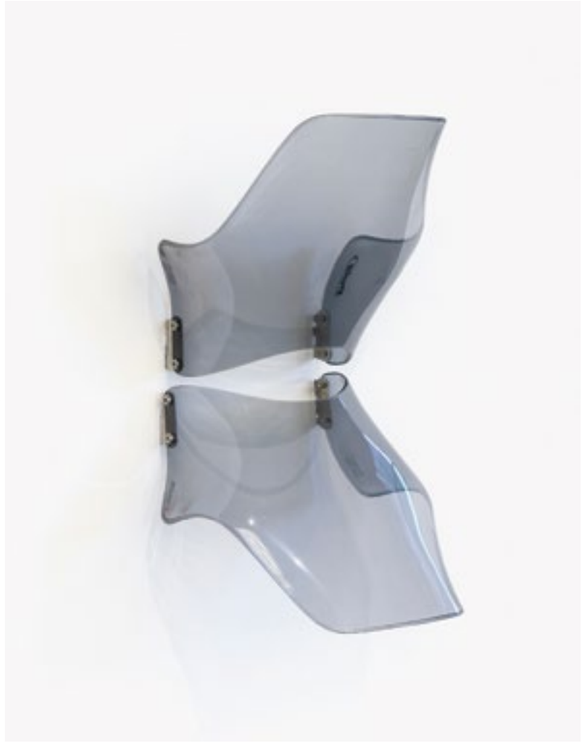
by Ikechúkwú Onyewuenyi

Machine Boys (still), 2024. Courtesy: the artist

I've detailed a lot of sightlines above. This is par for the course for Ashadu, who started out as a painter before switching gears—choosing a medium that felt more "rough-and-ready, that spoke a little bit more quickly."[1] Her early experiments in video had her turning the camera on herself, recording her own movements, but it didn't quite take. So, Ashadu went further in *Pace – part 5* (2011), strapping multiple cameras to her body as she moved about the arches of a defunct viaduct in London. That's when the floodgates really burst, with Ashadu remarking that *Pace – part 5* "marked the beginning of creating devices for filming, which really opened up considerations of perspective and ideas of the camera in flux." Moving forward, the camera was not just a tool for capturing images, but something that could destabilize and reframe the entire process of seeing.

Ashadu's arc is reminiscent of artists like Steve McQueen or Paul McCarthy—painters who found the canvas insufficient, eventually decamping toward video as a way to express something more volatile. McCarthy was drawn to possibilities of the camera, intrigued by how it could evoke spatial dislocation and compel a reconsideration of vision itself.[2] He noted, "The camera lens, the act of looking through a small hole that defines your vision. I was interested in the lens, the hole. It controls how much you can see."[3] Conversely, in a move both radical and revealing, McQueen yearned "to be in the canvas as opposed to just painting it," and in this yearning, the questionable fallibility of the lens became an object of intrigue.[4] *Catch* (1997) exemplifies this curiosity, with McQueen and his sister tossing a video camera back and forth. Between their throws, the two aim the lens at each other, and the representational function delivers as expected—face shots.

Attuned to the legacies preceding her, Ashadu took these threads and ran with them, creating *Hindsight – a horse's tale* (2012). Here, she doesn't frame her shots; she embeds the camera in a polo mallet, attaches it to a horse, and lets the animal take us where it will. It's a jittery, trotting, almost chaotic ride, but it's also a revelation—a peek into the world as the horse sees it, or maybe as the horse feels it. And then there's McCarthy again, with *The Fly Film* (1975)—or the idea of it. He sought to simulate the flight path of a fly in a room, so he sketched out the movement of two cameras that spin, dip, and retreat from two windows looking out into the world.[5] The work never materialized, but it's in this conceptual space where McCarthy and Ashadu meet—in that shared desire to stretch the boundaries of sight, to take the aperture and make it something else—a site of revelation, a space where even the most unassuming characters, human or otherwise, might come into view.



Since her early experiments, Ashadu has embraced the idea of the camera as a living, breathing mechanism. Her custom-built, mobile apparatuses do not just capture footage—they're extensions of her body, her thinking, her animist-like philosophy. They are also sentient, listening, observing, getting alongside a moment and altering our expected vantage point in the process. Take the tire-wheel mechanism in the roughly five-minute video *Lagos Island* (2012). The contraption squeaks along as it rolls, pausing indiscriminately as it documents—no, observes—an encampment of Togolese migrants.[6] Ashadu relays how the tire, a found object held by a makeshift wooden cart, nods to the hawkers who push their wares on carts. Encasing a camera in the tire is a gesture that anchors *Lagos Island* in the rhythms of everyday life while also distorting our line of sight. Maybe it's just me, but there's something about *Lagos Island* that takes me right back to McQueen's *Drumroll* (1998)—that dizzying, three-channel experiment where he rolls a barrel through midtown Manhattan for twenty-two minutes. The oil drum itself is never seen because McQueen transformed it into a tool, cutting holes at either end and one on the side to turn it into a rolling camera mount. McQueen makes brief appearances, pushing the barrel and apologizing to pedestrians for performing what seems like an absurd, Sisyphean task. In *Lagos Island,* by contrast, Ashadu stays out of view, leaving us with the sandy terrain, the clothesline, the people, the dried, spindly weeds, and that creaking sound. This is all consistent with Ashadu's refusal to center herself in her own videos, as if to say, "This isn't about me."

(Top) *Okada*, 2020, *ars viva* installation view at Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2020. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Fred Dott
(Bottom) *Black Wings*, 2020, *ars viva* installation view at Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2020. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Fred Dott

Considering all this, I wonder what perspectives were at work in *Red Gold*. While Ashadu doesn't explicitly name a camera mechanism, those opening aerial shots feel like more than just a bird's-eye view. Perhaps the palm tree itself—way up there in the canopy—is observing the extraction play out below. Almost conscious, it seems to gaze down on its fruits now undergoing further transformation. It's an orientation that turns the labor inside out, where the tree is both witness and part of the ordeal, complicating the line between what's doing the seeing and what's being seen.

In the artist's latest films—for instance *Machine Boys* (2024) or *Cowboy* (2022)—camera mechanisms take a back seat to thematic explorations of freedom, industry, and migration.[7] On our call, Ashadu brought in also "notions of postcolonial independence, as it manifests collectively and individually." It's no surprise, then, that *Machine Boys* feels so apropos at the 60th Venice Biennale, nor that Ashadu received the Silver Lion for promising young artist in *Foreigners Everywhere*. For curator Adriano Pedrosa, themes of "migration and decolonization" are at the heart of the exhibition, rendering the work's focus on the outlawed *okada* (motorcycle taxi) drivers in Lagos particularly striking. Add to this the narrative from the Lagos State Commissioner of Police about foreign *okada* riders from Benin, Togo, and Chad allegedly engaging in criminal activities, and *Machine Boys* emerges as a timely, complex, and deeply relevant piece.[8] But this migration isn't just about people infiltrating so-called borders of national sovereignty; one of the voice-overs Ashadu weaves into *Machine Boys* tells the story a driver who made his way down to Lagos from northern Nigeria, drawn by the lure of opportunity. Even as the locals hurled insults at him in a language he couldn't grasp, he kept riding, persevering—industry moving through indignation. Another driver shares how the earnings from *okada* help put him through school. Yet another expresses a desire to quit the *okada* hustle once he's saved enough to start his own business.

What do we glean from these narratives, not just in what they say, but in what they live? Ashadu began *Machine Boys* curious about the consequences of the "indefinite and total ban" issued by the governor of Lagos on *okada*.[9] The sundry stories in *Machine Boys* illustrate that a ban aimed at curtailing crime linked to commercial motorcycles misses something crucial—what Dayo Olopade identifies in the "*okada* driver" as "the new face of development practice—working from the inside out."[10] *Machine Boys* underscores how this miscalculation overlooks the lived realities and resourcefulness of those who've transformed the *okada* from a mere livelihood into a model of urban adaptation and self-invention—a vehicle for an exodus from Eurocentric cartographies that never truly see people as people.[11] Indeed, *Machine Boys* crystallizes Olopade's argument that the entrepreneurship behind *okada* culture "elevates rule bending to fine art."[12] And Ashadu captures this artistry in every frame. *Machine Boys* aligns with Ben Davis's observation that the artwork in *Foreigners Everywhere* angles, whether successful or not, toward a "dissent from 'Westernization' in terms of historic associations with industry, design, and the machine."[13]

Thematic resonances aside, what can't be ignored is the way *Machine Boys* disorients through its visual mechanics. Take the lurching sideshow scene—it feels like Ashadu strapped a camera to an *okada*, capturing the relentless churn of the bikes as they whip into doughnuts, throwing up a thick veil of dust that shrouds the screen. Then, just when you think you've found your bearings, the frame drops to the ground and the bikers are tilted at a jarring right angle. Ashadu keeps mum on how this was achieved during our Zoom. But I'm glad she didn't humor my question. If she had, chances are I wouldn't have noticed the other mechanisms percolating on the screen, like that breaking-the-fourth-wall dramaturgy. Multiple riders glare at the camera, only to ride off, as if their gaze was done addressing me.

What are we to make of the evolution from *Pace – part 5* to *Machine Boys*? Filmmaker and film scholar Beti Ellerson suggests that African women film documentarians often transition from intimate, personal narratives to politically charged stories that might otherwise remain untold—a trajectory that resonates for African women in the diaspora

Wreath, 2024, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere* installation views at the 60th Venice Biennale, 2024. Courtesy: the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Photo: Lorenzo Palmieri

Machine Boys (stills), 2024. Courtesy: the artist

as well.[14] Now, Ashadu herself admits she doesn't see her work as part of the documentary tradition, and I'd be inclined to agree. But when you look at the deep, grounding intimacy of *Pace – part 5* alongside the childhood memories embedded in *Apapa Amusement Park* (2013), an autobiographical thread begins to surface in her early works, suggesting that Ellerson's framework might indeed be generative. By this reading, the thematic focus in more recent works like *Machine Boys* becomes more than a narrative choice shedding light on a thorny, informal political economy. Instead, Ellerson might view Ashadu's later projects as acts of "self-inscription"—a process that seems to have deepened as Ashadu began "traveling, sojourning, and relocating across the globe . . . expanding the identity of [her] cinema" along the way.[15]

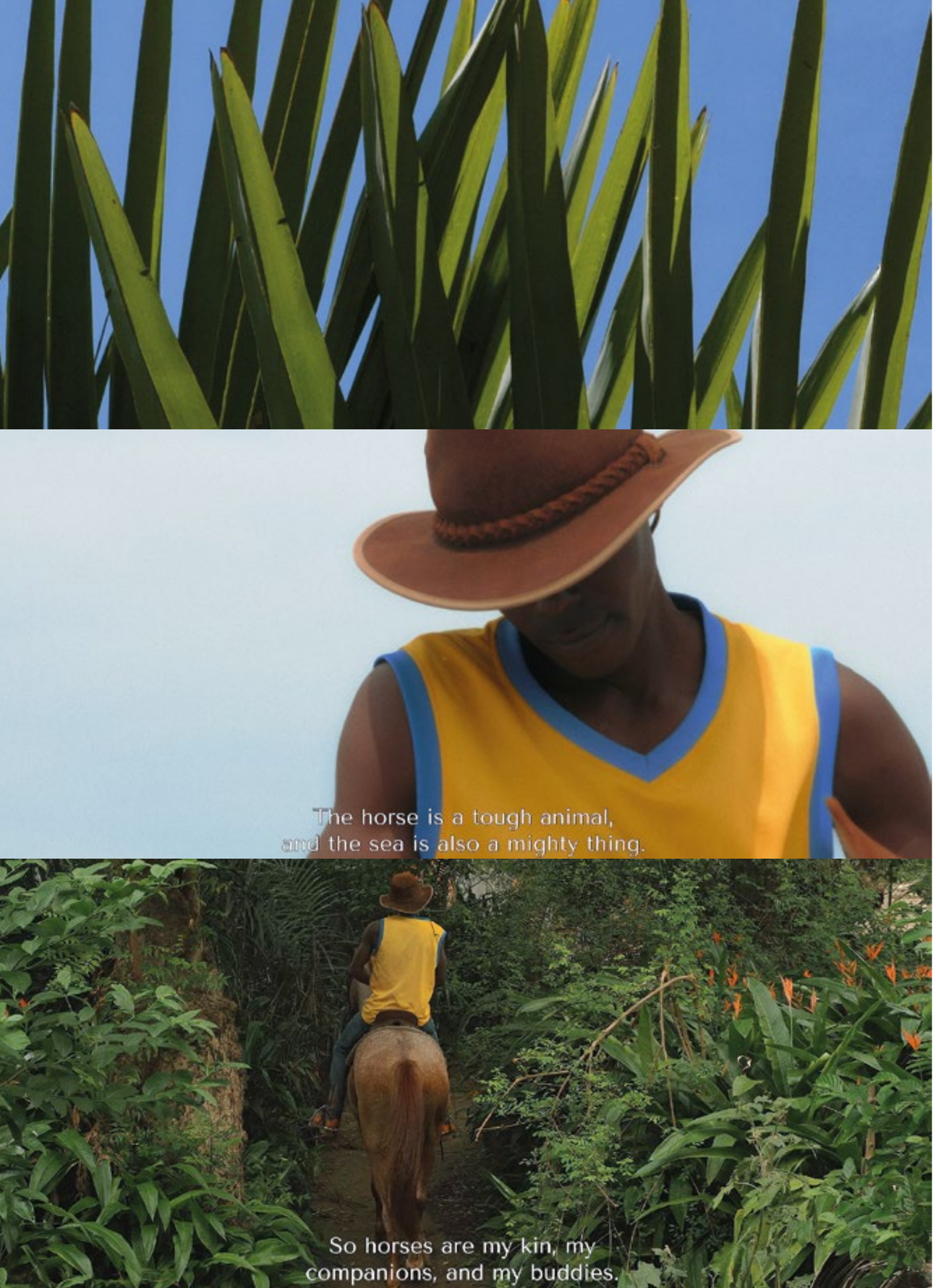
That expansion, these variances, those histories—they all inflect the conversations Ashadu and I have about postcolonial Africa. On Zoom, she poses the question: "What did Britain *do* to Nigeria?" Well, we can start with the very name, Nigeria—a colonial interpellation, conjured by Flora Shaw, a British journalist, in the 1890s. But nomenclature aside, I'd say the British did a lot—perhaps even more than we can truly reckon with. Ashadu doesn't hedge her response; she openly admits that she "may never sink her teeth into all things" the British have done. I feel the enormity of her words, delivered with an equanimity, a kind of considered equilibrium. It's a dance with instability—this inscription of self—that many Nigerians, at home and scattered through the diaspora, are forced to reconcile within themselves.

Born in London, Ashadu returned to Nigeria and made Lagos home, but by the age of ten found herself back in London. And when she fully embraced art as her livelihood, she began another peripatetic existence—residencies in Amsterdam, Johannesburg and Aix-en-Provence (amongst others). Her movements, no doubt, inform her identity. Consider cultural theorist Stuart Hall on the matter: "I don't think that identity is what you get up in the morning and feel like being. I'm talking about something that is in between making it up and being just one thing unfolding. . . . Instead of asking what are people's roots, we ought to think about what are their *routes*, the different points by which they have come to be now; they are, in a sense, the sum of those differences. . . . These routes hold us in places, but what they don't do is hold us in the same place."[16] When I sit with Hall's words, I realize this post-colonial reconciling for Ashadu or even myself, a fellow diasporic Nigerian, is ongoing. It's this necessary work of staying sane, of holding it together in the midst of what can't quite be held. It's the work of replacing roots with routes in the shaping of cultural identity—a struggle familiar to second-generation Black British artists of the 1980s.[17] For Ashadu, as for many in the diaspora, this work is never not at play, this peripatetic hold of the present, of history, which ultimately gets embodied in what Hall describes as "the consequential inscription of the particular positionalities that have been taken up."[18] Ashadu, in her work, holds these inscriptions for us, holds them in a way that challenges our seeing such that we "cannot resist seeing" the "living ghostliness" of colonialism still haunting Nigeria.[19]

These inscriptions—spectral sentience, seeing as an imperative—owe much to poet, essayist, and documentarian Dionne Brand. I'm thinking of Brand as Ashadu discusses her process: going out, talking with people, building relationships.[20] This is how *Machine Boys* materialized—Ashadu seeing people as they are. Similarly, Brand muses on walking through a city "to see how others live," those others who live "on the edges," edges that are too often "easily ignored."[21] For Ashadu, cities like Ogotun-Ekiti, Jos, and Lagos are part of her ambulatory embrace. Each film born from these outings bears a necropolitical bent: she sees how British sovereignty can "manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death, and doing so under conditions in which death itself increasingly tends to become spectral."[22] Take the forgotten palm oil farmers in *Red Gold*, or the criminalized livelihood of *okada* drivers in *Machine Boys*: their precarious conditions are a testament to this haunting reality that just keeps on expanding.

Plateau, 2021, *Penumbra* installation view at Complesso dell'Ospedaletto Venice, Fondazione In Between Art Film, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Photo: Andrea Rossetti
Plateau installation views at Secession, Vienna, 2021. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Pascal Petignat

Plateau (stills), 2021. Courtesy: the artist



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KARIMAH ASHADU
(b. 1985, London) is a British-born Nigerian artist and film director living and working between Hamburg and Lagos. Her work has been exhibited and screened at institutions internationally, including the 60th Venice Biennale (2024), where she was awarded the Silver Lion for a promising young participant in the international exhibition. She has shown at Kunsthalle Bremen; Tate Modern, London; Vienna Secession; Kunstverein in Hamburg; South London Gallery; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève. Ashadu is the recipient of the Kunstpreis der Böttcherstraße in Bremen (2022) and the ars viva Prize (2020). Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the City of Geneva Contemporary Art Collection; and the Federal Collection of Contemporary Art, Germany. She was named Abigail R. Cohen 2021 Fellow at Columbia University's Institute for Ideas and Imagination, Paris. In 2020, Ashadu established her film production company, Golddust by Ashadu, specializing in artists' films on Black culture and African discourses. Her upcoming solo show at Camden Art Centre (Fall 2025) will be part of Fondazione In Between Art Film's "Unison" series.

How do you train your camera on such a thing, a spectral thing? The living ghosts Ashadu *cannot resist seeing* trouble the idea of the "post" in "postcolonial," like a scar that never really fades, a wound that festers under the illusion of healing.[23] What was done, and what is still being done—that's what historian Max Siollun charts in *What Britain Did to Nigeria: A Short History of Conquest and Rule* (2021). It's a longue durée of British encumbrance, a history that's as much about what remains as what was. Ashadu is deep into this history, into Siollun's indictment, and on Zoom, she's telling me that I, too, should sit with it, let it disturb me the way it's disturbing her. I let her in on what's disturbing me: *Igbo Culture and the Christian Missions 1857–1957: Conversion in Theory and Practice*, the 2010 book by another historian, Augustine S. O. Okwu. Watching Ashadu's videos or reading Siollun's text feels like an invite into this necessary complicity, like I'm getting my hands dirty in our shared history. But this complicity isn't so much about guilt as it is about awareness—a recognition of the uncomfortable truths and responsibilities that stalk our existence as diasporic Nigerians. To be clear, Ashadu and I have tasted the spoils of the Commonwealth, molded by its touch, albeit a thumb we continually push against. We discuss how this history is a far cry from short, a far cry from a seamless conversion. At the same time, Ashadu reflects on how our oral tradition has contributed to this shortness. So much has been lost to bated breaths.

In Ashadu's words, I hear echoes of that personal-to-political trajectory Ellerson pointed to, a movement that's as much about finding oneself as it is about finding one's place in history. Yet Ashadu's wandering curiosity complicates Ellerson's framework. Her works delineate a mapping of stakes that variably oscillate between the personal and the political, revealing fluid and multifaceted routes of identity and history. Even her reflections on British enterprise and the forced dispersal of the Igbo—sent off "to distant lands like the Sudan"—reveal the impossibility of charting this kind of historical consciousness on any conventional map.[24] How do you even begin to map such displacement? It's a question that reverberates with Brand's own search for her grandfather's story, the ancestral root, the "where are we from?"—a question that, in the end, is never answered. Instead, Brand finds herself confronting an "estrangement," a deep disconnect, never knowing her people in Africa.[25] Therein lies the unspeakable truth of diasporic identity, always in-between, always unresolved.

Despite Ashadu and I knowing the names of where our people came from, there's still no map detailing the abuses our people suffered at the hands of the British. My great-grandfather, known simply as Onyewuenyi, never returned after fighting for the British in World War I. We are Igbo by name, but our family knowing ends there—the pain of his disappearance too hard to bear or broach. I didn't pry into Ashadu's map, or lack thereof. But I can only imagine for her, as an indigene of the Edo people, her process of looking back resembles a walk, alongside Brand through those city streets, taking in the plush velvet theater drapes and the grime of those mines. As our call ends, Ashadu talks up "the elegance with how we [Nigerian artists, writers, thinkers] reconcile history, how it's a dialogue with grace so people can engage." That dialogue, though, begins with sight. In seeing how other men live in *Machine Boys*, *Red Gold*, or *Plateau*, I can almost see Ashadu walking away from those encounters, holding up her "hands stained with garbage and sadness," saying, "I am not a part of this crime."[26] And I believe her. We all should. Because the crime isn't in looking, it's in the refusal—the refusal to see, to stand in the mess we've made, to reach down, and touch what's been left behind. In that touch, Ashadu's hands may be stained, but they are also open, asking us to hold these histories, and to finally, truthfully, see.

Cowboy (stills), 2022. Courtesy: the artist

1 Karimah Ashadu in conversation with the author, August 30, 2024. Unless otherwise noted, artist quotes are from this interview.

2 Aram Moshayedi, "How to Kill a Nightmare," in *Paul McCarthy: Head Space, Drawings 1963–2019*, ed. Aram Moshayedi and Connie Butler (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum; New York: DelMonico Books, 2020), 15.

3 Paul McCarthy, interview by Fereshteh Daftari, *Paul McCarthy: Projects 51* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 3.

4 "Steve McQueen Dialogue with Stuart Comer," November 9, 2013, Walker Art Center, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KM_5z9WvUc.

5 Before McCarthy's fascination with flies, Dan Graham was already onto something else, already thinking of the camera as an extension of the eye, turning it into an index of the retinal image. In *Binocular Zoom* (1969–70), Graham pressed his eyes right up to the viewfinders of two Super8 cameras, each equipped with identical zoom lenses. The object of their shared gaze? The sun—staring directly into it, like the mechanics of the cameras could somehow overcome the limits of human sight.

6 The artist expresses reservations about associating the verb "document" with her work. Her reasons are worth quoting in full: "I want to start by, when you introduced my work you said 'documents'—I always shy away from this word in relation to my work because I feel like what I'm doing isn't documenting. There are moments of observation, for sure, but I feel like it's much more than documenting and I'll go much deeper into it. The way that I consider the camera is with a great deal of respect, and what I mean is that I consider it to have its own kind of almost personality, and when I'm making a work, I think ooh, how would the camera like to capture this? How would the camera like to reflect what's going on? How would it like to embody it?"
I wouldn't say Ashadu is a "documentarian of subjectivity" in the tradition of Stan Brakhage. But a case could be made that her filmic output is better understood as an exercise in some variety of observational cinema or cinéma verité. See "Transcript: In Conversation with Karimah Ashadu," interview by Lara Chosky, *Sarah Parker Remond Centre Podcast*, University College of London, September 2, 2022, available at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/racism-racialisation/transcript-conversation-karimah-ashadu.

7 Ashadu had this to say of these works: "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." "Karimah Ashadu with Toby Kamps," *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2024, https://brooklynrail.org/2024/06/art/Karimah-Ashadu-with-Toby-Kamps.

8 See for instance "Police Cracking Down on Foreign Okada Riders in Lagos – CP," *Gazette Nigeria*, May 20, 2022, https://gazettengr.com/police-cracking-down-on-foreign-okada-riders-in-lagos-cp.

9 Pelumi Salako, "'Totally Damning': Lagos Motorcycle Taxi Ban Leaves Drivers Destitute," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/oct/21/lagos-motorcycle-taxi-okada-ban-leaves-drivers-destitute.

10 Dayo Olopade, *The Bright Continent: Breaking Rules and Making Change in Modern Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 10.

11 Olopade, *The Bright Continent*, 10.

12 Olopade, *The Bright Continent,* 21.

13 Ben Davis, "'Foreigners Everywhere,' Unpacked: What the Venice Biennale's Flipped Art History Really Means." *Artnet News,* May 15, 2024. https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/venice-biennale-foreigners-everywhere-part-1-2485123.

14 Beti Ellerson, "African Women in Cinema Dossier: African Women and the Documentary: Storytelling, Visualizing History, from the Personal to the Political," *Black Camera* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 228.

15 Beti Ellerson. "Onscreen Narratives, Offscreen Lives: African Women Inscribing the Self," *Black Camera* 9, no. 2 (2018): 461, 473.

16 "A Conversation with Stuart Hall," *Journal of the International Institute* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1999): http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0007.107.

17 Stuart Hall and Les Back, "At Home and Not at Home," in *Stuart Hall and 'Race,'* ed. Claire Alexander and Paul Gilroy (New York: Routledge, 2014), chapter 9, ePub.

18 Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, "Interview—Stuart Hall, Culture and Power," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 86 (November/December 1997): 34.

19 Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011), 100.

20 "Karimah Ashadu with Toby Kamps."

21 Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 100–101.

22 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). 37.

23 Here I'm thinking with Stuart Hall's assessment of the limits of postcolonial thought, particularly its failure, as a theory, to engage with the global capitalist structures that continue to shape postcolonial societies. *Machine Boys* contributes to this aporia by thinking through how economic relations are pivotal in understanding the routes and identity positions people take up and move through in African countries following colonialism proper. See Stuart Hall, "When Was 'the Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996).

24 I had shared with Ashadu that my son's name is Laith, a name suggested by a dear friend, a Sudanese professor. Ashadu then explained how the British incursion into present-day Nigeria led many Igbo people from this area to flee to Sudan. Nigerian historian Adiele Afigbo corroborates this migration in the seventeenth century: Adiele Afigbo, *Nigerian History, Politics and Affairs: The Collected Essays of Adiele Afigbo*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), 132.

25 Brand, *A Map to the Door*, 4.

26 Brand, *A Map to the Door,* 99.

Brown Goods (stills), 2020. Courtesy: the artist