Art in America

Karimah Ashadu's Films Honor the Everyday Labor of African Workers

By Zoé Samudzi
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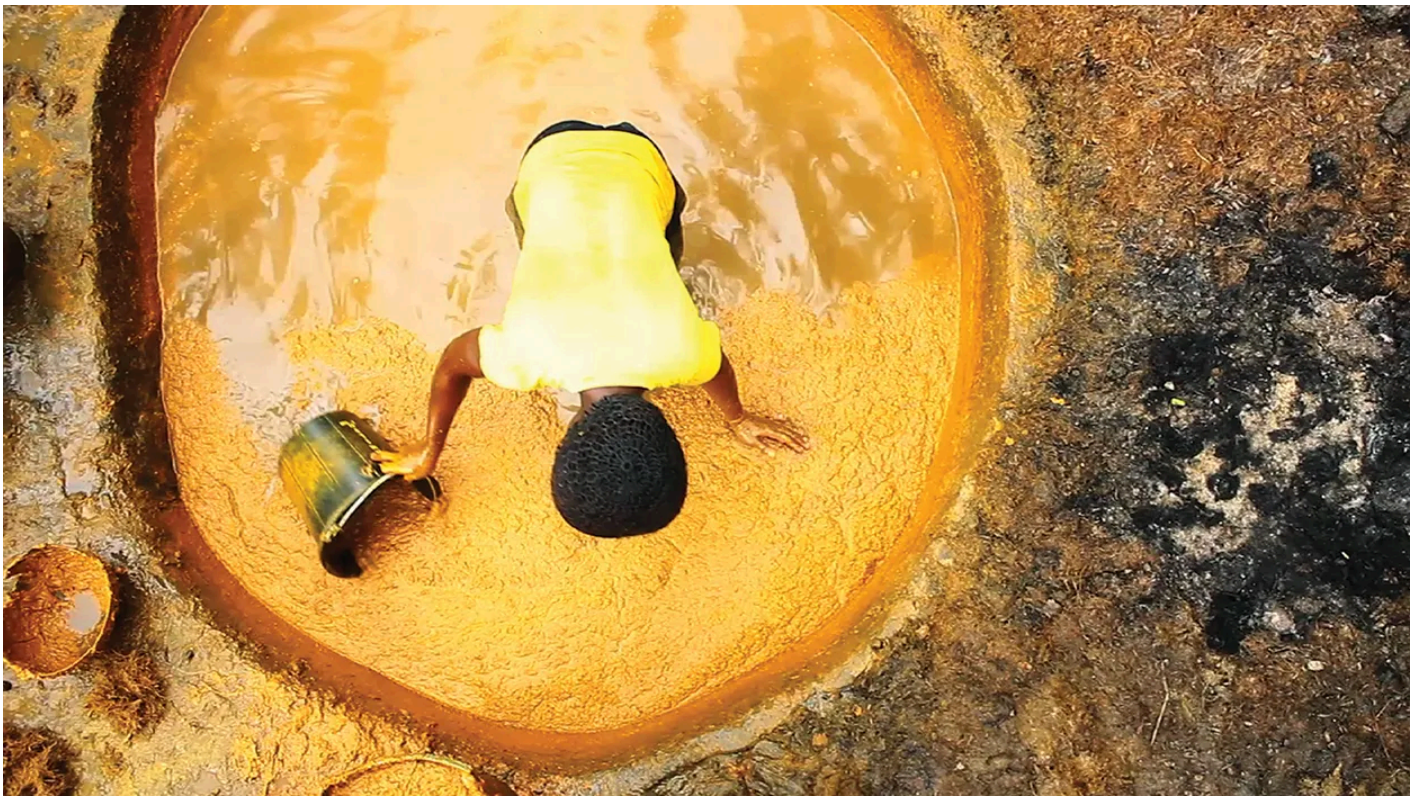


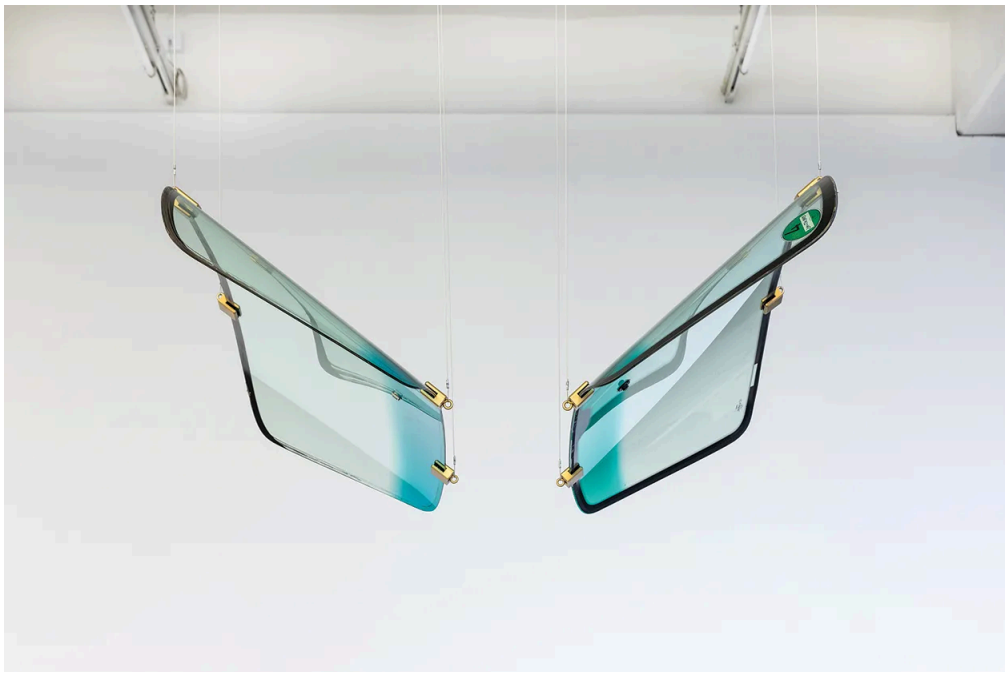
Karimah Ashadu: *Red Gold*, 2016, video, 18 minutes.
Courtesy The Artist.

Anything can serve as a support for Karimah Ashadu's camera. The artist and filmmaker attaches her device to bodies and machines, granting viewers unconventional perspectives. Most of her shorts depict African laborers. The nine-minute *Lagos Sand Merchants* (2013) is shot from the strictly limited vantage point of machinery that advances in a Ferris-wheel-like motion. We're disoriented as we watch the otherwise rhythmic and monotonous labor of the workers unearthing sand from the Lagos State Lagoon—sand that will be sold and made into bricks.

Born in London, Ashadu was raised in Lagos and is now based in Hamburg. When we spoke via Zoom, she was in Paris, where she's a fellow at the Columbia Institute for Ideas and Imagination. Ashadu moves between cities and artistic mediums with equal fluidity. Initially trained as a painter, she became interested in performance and video. More recently, she's taken up sculpture. While a graduate student at the Chelsea College of Arts in London, she discovered that film is an "intuitive" medium for her recurring motifs: corporeality, work, and colonialism.

Karimah Ashadu: *King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)*, 2015, video, 5 minutes.

One might be tempted to label her videos "documentaries," since she shoots mostly unstaged scenes. But her interdisciplinary background encourages her to take liberties with the medium's conventions, and her use of color and appreciation of form is deft and painterly. To create K*ing of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)*, 2015, one of four Ashadu films recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she placed her camera in a translucent red beer keg, creating an analog filter. The mundane butchery scenes—the hacking at bone, the cleaning of offal and boiling of skins, the strewn-aside heads and horns—are engulfed in blood red.



DEU, Hamburg, 2020, ARS VIVA Preis: Ausstellung im Kunstverein Hamburg, Copyright photo: Fred Dott

Fred Dott, Hamburg

Only some works contain spoken language, though a resonant narrative imbues them all. Describing a piece she recently filmed in Nigeria, Ashadu noted how her use of tight shots accentuated the beauty of laboring bodies in motion. She used the same technique in her nonnarrative two-channel video *Power Man* (2018), along with sparse lighting that strikingly illuminates two men's dark-skinned musculature and fast-paced movements on a split screen. The repetitive sounds of an axe chopping wood accompanies the action on one screen, and the sharp exhalations of a glistening shadow boxer the other: the two channels contrast and complement the physical dexterity of their subjects.

Though Ashadu's work is often seen in European contexts as a statement on big issues like race and labor, she thinks of it, first and foremost, as simply "elevating the everyday." One channel in *Red Gold* (2016) shows palm oil farmers in western Nigeria, and the other shows Mr. Sesan, the prince from whom they lease their land. The film, which will be on view as part of her solo show at the Secession in Vienna this summer, is a story of abandonment and self-sufficiency: the farmers pride themselves on making a living without state support even as they lament governmental neglect.

Ashadu refuses to be an interlocutor, instead affording the different African workers the opportunity for first-person storytelling. *Brown Goods* (2020), her [illegible]ilm shot in Europe, centers on the narrator, Emeka, an Igbo Nigerian [illegible]rant who works in the secondhand electronics trade on Hamburg's

Billstrasse. Emeka, who arrived in Germany from Libya by way of the notoriously dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost island, describes his experience in the flow of migrant labor from Africa to Europe. His gaze piercing the fourth wall, he voices his displeasure with his work: exporting German rubbish back home. Because he is on a humanitarian visa, he is formally unable to work in Germany; he expresses frustration with colonialism for stunting both African industry and his own self-sufficiency. Sculptures made from luxury car windshields that the artist embellished with brass accompany the film. In a junkyard, these items are often treated as scrap for potential resale and reuse. But in a museum, they are transmuted back into luxury objects, and point to how context determines the value of objects and people alike.

Last year, the artist created her own production company—Golddust by Ashadu—which allows her greater control over her work. Forthcoming projects include films about a Senegalese salt miner who wants to move to Hamburg, illegal tin mining on the Jos Plateau in Nigeria, and commercial moped riders in Lagos. The company supports Black artists' films on Black culture and African themes. Rejecting singular, simple narratives is central to Ashadu's practice, so it follows that she would also cultivate the careers of fellow storytellers.

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