

Notebook Column

The Very Eye of Night: Karimah Ashadu

The work of the British–Nigerian artist conglomerates the often contradictory foundations of multicultural societies.

Mónica Savirón • 06 JAN 2018

The Very Eye of Night is a series of columns on nonbinary and female avant-garde film and video artists. The title refers to Maya Deren's last completed film.

Presented by the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the program An Affinity for Labor showcases Karimah Ashadu's video King of Boys, on January 7, 2018. The screening is part of the series Affinities, or The Weight of Cinema, co-curated by Kevin Jerome Everson and Greg de Cuir Jr.

TRAILER OF THE FILM THAT WILL NEVER
EXIST: 'PHONY WARS' Directed by JEAN-LUC
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Karimah Ashadu, 2017. Image by Kadara Enyeasi.

*Between the two worlds
I was with you
but as the wind on the Caspian Sea*

*I was with you
in the ancient ruins of time
you rode me hobby-horse
into the age of revolution*

*Throughout the course of my existence
& I have been here always
I saw everlasting death
& the endless
weeping of women*

*I saw you and your father
your mother &
all your sisters
frozen static
in the autumn*

*Afraid for you
I swooped down from my hiding place
kissed your brow
& left a bag of square shouldered courage
at your side*

—*Ritual and Revolution*, Carrie Mae Weems,
Berlin, 1998

Springing from her personal life experiences as a young artist, Karimah Ashadu's works bridge with the far-reaching legacies of experimental film and video-making by black women from the 1970s to the 1990s. Now in preparation of her first feature film, *Salt Mine*, her near 20 short-length videos, made since 2011, have developed the idiosyncratic dualities of her British-Nigerian identity. Self-determined, purposeful, and free despite small budgets, her videos and installations derive from a training in painting, art history, architecture, and spatial design. In her work, Ashadu steps into the everyday and the ordinary while fighting against expectations of trauma, endurance, and spectacle associated to race and gender. In this, her videos speak to the early creations of African-American artists including Ayoka Chenzira and Cheryl Dunye, and American Yvonne Welton, Cauleen Smith, and the *Video Drawings* by Howardena Pindell.

Ashadu explores performance as a way to navigate the world. The camera, strapped to her body, adopts the artist's motion, and the voices inside and around her. She explains: "My movement

the camera, essentially a reflection of my mind's eye." In contrast with many performative productions from the 1970s, Ashadu does not drag, push or otherwise compromise her body. She positions and redirects her movement, in control. Though the female black body is placed on the front line, women are not objects in the scene, but agents who see. Their presence is an empowering reaffirmation against single-sided establishments and their iconographical signifiers. Women stand repositioned towards the unstoppable diaspora of future times.

One minute clip from *Lagos Island* (2012). Courtesy of the artist.

The artist builds mobile structures where she attaches a small digital recording device. Whenever affixed to different parts of her body, the progression of her back, head, arms and legs becomes a motor of action, a viewing mechanism that extends from and within feminine contexts. Her unconventional ways of utilizing the camera, seemingly attaching it to the hind of a horse in the video *Hindsight - a*

between documentation and art, maker and spectator. Harnessing the camera to a moving anatomy incites renewed perspectives, and affords insights of change as the artist makes her way into the world around her, up and down, forward and onward. Other times, she embeds the recorder into a wooden construction of her creation. The rotating machinery, visible and audible to the spectator, allows for constant reframing. This is the case in *Lagos Island* (2012), where Ashadu registers an ever-changing image of immigrants building their homes under a government that constantly forces these constructions down. The tension between this unusual visual approach and the overpowering squeak of the device as it spins and turns relates to an "I" that speaks to an ongoing political resistance and a never-ending of historical struggle.

As the artist points out, "the works are examples of conceptual observations that provoke alternative ways of thinking," for instance embodying an intense pictorial effect. The two-channel, rear-projection installation *Red Gold* (2016) highlights the syntactic meanings of painterly elements in relationship to one another. In one screen, female farmers labor incessantly to produce palm oil in Western Nigeria, while the other screen presents the region's Prince, Mr. Sesan, confrontationally seating down, "acting as caretaker of the land and its inhabitants," Ashadu qualifies.

The ways color affects the meanings of the cinematic language is also at play in the video *King of Boys* (2015). Ashadu remarks: “[It] refers to the name given to men in charge of ‘area boys’ from specific districts in Lagos. I explore color as an instigator of narrative by repurposing a red plastic barrel of round shape on a wooden tripod. The camera turns 360 degrees to register animals being butchered in the area of Makoko. Coloring the scene through this analog filter, at times the image drifts from real to my constructed exploration of fiction and documentary.”



Image from *Apapa Amusement Park* (2013). Courtesy of the artist.

In Germany, where the artist sometimes resides, Ashadu made the video *So Many Things* (2013), for which she records a stranger talking to her. With a steady camera, and knowing that the encounter may most likely never repeat itself, the artist takes on the role of the listener of a confession about romantic relationships. The same year, in Nigeria, Ashadu returned to employ

;

found wood and metal. The result is *Apapa Amusement Park*, where she attaches a magnifying glass between the digital camera and the world, and records its images and sounds one second at a time, attempting to secure the memory of those moments by doubling the lenses and breaking the editing down.

The mystery and depth that emanate from Ashadu's characters, in addition to their marked connection with nature and their cosmopolitan surroundings, are reminiscent of the oil paintings by the British of Ghanaian descent artist, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. The open-ended narratives resonate with Yiadom-Boakye's focus on technique, composition, and color, and the Impressionists' reformulations of scale and gaze. The puzzles of society can only be compiled as depictions of its varied, singular individuals. Recorded in public spaces, Ashadu's videos and installations defy segregation. The many dimensions of capturing images is the subject.

The artist's videos conglomerate the often contradictory, and yet not conflicting, foundations of multicultural societies. No matter if in London or Lagos, Ashadu opens up the many stone-like traditions to include rarely spotlighted, nonconforming subjectivities. Her camera, turning the image upside down in repeated circularity, allows her to create her own way between different worlds and values. The direction of the attention of the viewer is invited to change

were interdependent become dispossessed. Narratives do not provide a beginning or an end; common reasoning does not lead to conclusions; everything is in flux, in urgent transformation.



Image from *Red Gold* (2016); courtesy of the artist.

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Karimah Ashadu, 2014. Image by Chloé Curci.