



KARIMAH ASHADU’s film *Machine Boys* won the Venice Silver Lion. In a new exhibition in London, she focuses on men and muscle in Lagos

Interview by **Nell Whittaker**
Portrait by **Jenny Schäfer**

NW Your new show is called *Tendered*, which speaks to two strands that recur in your work, intimacy and commerce. How do those interests appear in your new film, *MUSCLE*?
KA *MUSCLE* reflects a pivot from my other films. I wanted to focus on masculinity and hypermasculinity, what it means to present as a man and to embody masculine energy under the umbrella of patriarchy in Nigeria.

NW Are you invited into this patriarchal world, or are you a witness to it?
KA I had this idea for a work on body-building in Lagos. I have a crew that helps me do groundwork and talk to people, then I meet them, and then take it from there. The guys were very receptive once I explained what I was doing and why I wanted to do it. My gender doesn’t really come into play for me, because I don’t think about myself being a woman, I just want to make a film. The guys were very respectful and very sweet. It was fairly straightforward, even though this film walks a fine line: I wanted to explore hypermasculinity, while also taking the work to a place that felt ambiguous, uncomfortable and a little bit sexual. The soundscape is very visceral.

NW How much do you think the men and their performance are shaped by the presence of the camera?
KA The men in *MUSCLE* require an audience to acknowledge their inflated muscles for the work to take effect. When you have a camera pointed at you, you’re going to be aware of that too. The way I make films is somewhere between observation and directing. I enjoy having an intention and wanting to capture something specific, but I also like letting the camera roll to capture the unexpected. I also like the camera to feel alive, to feel quite physical, to have a corporeal element to it. The way it moves in *MUSCLE* is more tempered; it’s not as active or as present as with *Machine Boys*. *MUSCLE* has a lot going on; it’s quite a sensual, tender work. The camera needed to be as soft as breath.

NW Half of Nigeria’s population is under 25, and *Machine Boys* struck me as

a film about youth. How old are the subjects in *MUSCLE*?
KA In *MUSCLE*, they are in their early-to-mid thirties; in *Machine Boys*, they are in their mid-to-late twenties. It’s a specific window into the zeitgeist of Lagos. In Nigeria, we have an oral tradition of telling stories or remembering history, and less of a visual tradition, but maybe that’s changing. The *okada* [motorbike taxis] doesn’t exist the way it used to because of the ban in Lagos. I like to think of my films as capturing moments in time. Every time I come back, something has changed, and for this very specific moment, I had my finger on this pulse.

NW How do you think about storytelling and plot in your work?
KA I like my work to be non-linear: you can watch it for five minutes or the whole thing. I like to think of my films as a stream of consciousness, of recollecting things. For me, time is non-linear: different time-lines are happening simultaneously. Then there’s the editing timeline, which feels entirely sculptural, where I can build, add momentum, slow things down and focus. It gets your brain working in a specific way. I’m not concerned with subjects speaking. I prefer having it be visual with a narrative overlaid. It’s a window into my world, and I’m inviting people into the way I think.

NW You described the soundtrack of *MUSCLE* as “visceral” – what do you mean by that?
KA I love the ability of sound to hold your emotions, and to add another layer to the moving image. *MUSCLE* is shot in a very intimate way with lots of tight close-ups, so the camera stays close to the skin and sweat. It feels quite contained. These guys who spend hours in the gym all day, every day – think about that discipline, the intensity of that practice and what it takes to have that sort of focus. The soundtrack adds this layer of physicality, closeness and nearness.

NW The bodybuilder world can sometimes feel typically feminine: it’s about grooming, it’s about oiling, it’s about display.
KA Yes, but these are non-competitive bodybuilders. It’s more to do with respect on the streets: the slums are about survival,

and so bodies are like armour. One of them said it’s like having an AK-47. Part of the reason why I look at this social construct of masculinity is that it is a performed masculinity, and it’s also very vulnerable. There were these moments when the guys were aware of being watched, and you saw a flicker of insecurity, or they wanted to push their bodies really far, but there’s only so much that they can take. As men, they have to carry around a social weight; they’re not able to express softness. You have moments of rest and quietness in the film where you’re able to pause from the intensity.

NW It becomes a representation of exhaustion as much as strength.
KA After lots of reps, you’d have a guy sitting there, maybe having some water, and his face would tell a different story. In the film, I also wanted to bring in a symbol of the socio-economic temperament and temperature of Nigeria. I decided to do this through something called “pure water”, which are sachets of drinking water ubiquitous here in Nigeria, but only drunk by a certain demographic. Typically, people in the slums use it for everything. The guys at the gym drink pure water, and I wanted to present this in the work, almost like product placement. For me, pure water holds a lot socially and culturally. It speaks of commerce and capitalism but almost on a democratic level – anyone can start their own pure water company. When the economy fluctuates, the price of pure water does too. It’s a symbol of industry or lack thereof, a symbol of class. Nigeria is a very class-based society. I wanted to bring that in and also extend it in a series of sculptures, which are related to the film.

NW Tell me about the sculptures.
KA I made a series of pure water sculptures from hand-blown glass, engraved with my own pure water brand. There are also chairs taken from the typical white plastic garden chairs that, in Nigeria, are used for celebrations, weddings, funerals and in the gym. I decided to cover them in sportswear logos, and they’re presented in the exhibition space like an invitation.®

Tendered is curated by the Fondazione In Between Art Film and runs at Camden Arts Centre from 10 Oct 2025 to 22 Mar 2026.