

She Sees Beauty in Black Men at Work. She Won't Apologize for That.

Some viewers see the subjects of Karimah Ashadu's films as victims of capitalism. She says it's more complicated, and interesting, than that.



Listen to this article • 7:03 min [Learn more](#)

By Thomas Rogers

Reporting from Hamburg, Germany

Oct. 6, 2025

The Nigerian British artist Karimah Ashadu was walking around the streets of Lagos, Nigeria, a few years ago when something caught her eye. The city was full of men, she noticed, riding motorcycles in surprisingly flashy outfits. The riders, illegal motorcycle-taxi operators known as “okada,” plied their trade while dressed in knockoffs of brands like Gucci, which they combined with odd accessories like blocky sunglasses.

“They were iconic,” Ashadu, 40, said recently. For her, the men were symbols of a quest for self-sufficiency that she sees as central to Nigerian identity. “These guys were so resourceful,” she said, even though they “don’t seem to have much.”

After paying off some local gang members, Ashadu — who had previously made films about workers in sawmills, abattoirs and open-air mines — persuaded the riders to perform stunts and show off their outfits for her camera. The resulting nine-minute video, “Machine Boys,” premiered at the Venice Biennale last year. It was a breakthrough moment for the artist.

The non-narrative film, which also features the motorcycle riders telling personal stories in lyrical voice-over, earned Ashadu the coveted Silver Lion for a Promising Young Artist at the prestigious event. On Friday, she will open her first institutional solo show with new work since she won the prize, at Camden Art Center in London. The exhibition looks set to cement her reputation as a major international artist and an incisive observer of contemporary Africa.



A still from "Cowboy." Karimah Ashadu; via Sadies Coles HQ

Ashadu, who splits her time between Hamburg, Germany, and Lagos, said in her bright, cluttered Hamburg studio that she aimed to offer a “neutral” perspective on labor in Nigeria, freed from the post-colonial baggage that is often imposed on depictions of Black workers.

“Labor is a desire for autonomy,” she said. “When you watch somebody doing something that their body has been doing for so long, there is a fluency and fluidity that is attractive to me.”

Her videos blend documentary and abstract filmmaking techniques and often combine painterly visuals with voice-overs conveying the inner life of her subjects, who are mostly male. The men she has observed at work include trawlers extracting sand for the construction industry in “Lagos Sand Merchant” (2013), lumber workers in “Makoko Sawmill” (2015) and palm-oil farmers in “Red Gold” (2016).

Ashadu said that her depictions of Nigerians doing physical labor had offended some European viewers, because audience members associated it with the colonial exploitation that occurred before 1960, when Britain ruled the region. Some saw her subjects — unfairly, she said — as victims of capitalism, or believed she was being reductive by showing only their menial work. “People are like: ‘How dare you show it like that?’” she said.



Ashadu's films focus on male subjects in a context shaped by European colonialism, but she sees their labor as a pathway toward independence that mirrors Nigeria's own trajectory. Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

She explained that, although her films' subjects exist in a context shaped by European colonialism, she sees their labor as a pathway toward independence that mirrors Nigeria's own trajectory.

"A lot of what is projected onto my work is guilt and shame from the West for the part they played in the exploitation," she said. "I'm not steeped in that shame."

At times, Ashadu has been surprised by audience pushback. She recalled the 2018 Flaherty Film Seminar, a New York event focused on nonfiction filmmaking, where "there was a lot of anger" about what some viewers saw as "Black people suffering" in her films. American audience members, she said, were "triggered" by images reminiscent of slavery.

Ashadu's work has been shown in New York more recently: RubaRuba Katrib, the chief curator at MOMA PS1 in New York, said she had included Ashadu's film "Brown Goods," in the museum's recent exhibition, "The Gatherers," because it showed a surprising perspective on global trade.

The 12-minute film is an ambivalent portrait of a Nigerian resident of Hamburg who exports used goods to Africa. “The way she navigates inequities is done with a lot of savvy,” Katrib said. “She’s not giving you any more than you need to pull it together — and that is provocative.”

Born to a banker father and a mother who worked for an airline, Ashadu had what she described as a “very middle-class upbringing” in Lagos before her family moved to London when she was 10. Although she eventually adapted to British culture, she said, she had a “deep longing for Nigeria” as a teenager.



Ashadu's studio in Hamburg, Germany. Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

After studying painting and spatial design in Britain — and brief stints working for branding and interior design companies, where she said she learned that she was “not very good at being told what to do” — she began returning regularly to Lagos in 2009 as a wave of building projects were underway in the Nigerian capital.

“It was a very ripe moment,” she said. She recalled walking around the city, impressed by the many construction sites filled with laboring bodies. She began filming workers, in a way that drew attention to her role as an observer.

The approach, she said, reflected the “distance I felt to my country and the landscape” given that she had spent much of her life abroad. “I felt like I had to relearn what Nigerianness even is,” she said.

She said she had also grown increasingly fascinated by the patriarchal nature of society in the country, where, she said, “the man is always at the forefront and everything revolves around him” and “the woman is, in a sense, expected to bow to that.”

“I realized it was men performing masculinity, and I thought that was quite ridiculous,” she said. “I wanted to understand these social constructs and how they rule our lives.”

Questions of masculinity are at the forefront of the Camden Art Center show, which is organized in collaboration with the Fondazione In Between Art Film and runs through March 22. Called “Tendered,” it features a new video, “Muscle,” about bodybuilders in an outdoor gym in Lagos, filmed largely in sensual close-up.



Ashadu's "Muscle" focuses on bodybuilders in an outdoor gym in Lagos. Karimah Ashadu; via Camden Art Centre, Fondazione In Between Art Film, Sadie Coles HQ and The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago



It was filmed largely in sensual close-up. Karimah Ashadu; via Camden Art Centre, Fondazione In Between Art Film, Sadie Coles HQ and The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago

“I was drawn to the dedication to getting and maintaining that muscle,” she said, while wanting to expose the “softness” that existed below the surface. “Because masculinity, especially in this context of Nigeria, is entirely constructed, there is some vulnerability to that.”

Martin Clark, the director of Camden Art Center, said the new work was a bold progression of Ashadu’s earlier work and expanded on her longtime fascination with male communities. “It is also about these broader questions about Nigerian, African and global histories and geographies,” he said.

“She makes films about men that are extremely complex, un-clichéd and thoughtful,” he said, adding that she “deconstructs these hypermasculine spaces and finds a tenderness.”

Ashadu said that she wanted her new work to be “ambiguous” in presenting the bodybuilders as objects of desire. “People’s minds are obviously going to go to that,” she said, “but I want to play with that in an interesting way.”

These days, she is “more comfortable relinquishing control of how people read the work,” she said, then added: “But one thing I am never going to do is apologize.”