

Who is Karimah Ashadu, the artist and filmmaker who is dismantling the patriarchy?

Until March 22, 2025, the Camden Arts Centre presents, in collaboration with the Fondazione In Between Art Film, the exhibition "Tendered" by Karimah Ashadu, winner of the Silver Lion for best young artist at the Venice Biennale in 2024.

A meeting with the artist and director, accompanied by the curator and producer Leonardo Bigazzi, co-curator of the event and loyal collaborator of the Nigerian visual artist born in Great Britain.

Interview by **Delphine Roche**.



Karimah Ashadu, **Pure Rugged Water** and **Cotch I & II** (2025) in the exhibition "Tendered" at Camden Art Centre, 2025. © Courtesy the Artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Photo: Rob Harris.

Karimah Ashadu unveils her new project video at the Camden Art Centre in London

In her films and video installations, the UK-born Nigerian artist explores the economic and social context of Nigeria, focusing on the bodies and everyday gendered performances of groups of men, whom she often follows as they go about their work. Transposing her training as a painter into her film practice, Karimah Ashadu dissolves the authority of the documentary narrative perspective into a poetics of fleetingness, proximity, and attentiveness, to observe the daily struggles and tell the stories of a group of unlicensed motorcycle taxi drivers, cowboys, or the Maloko slaughterhouse in Lagos.

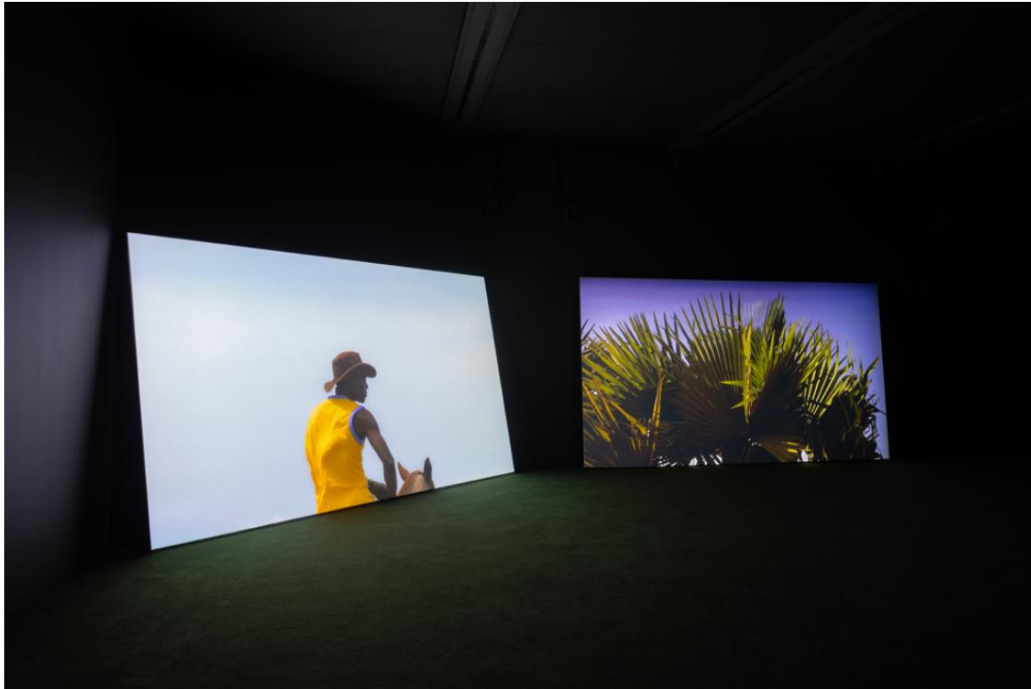
His latest work, **MUSCLE**, focuses on a group of bodybuilders. combines a video installation and a series of sculptures to examine the entanglements of West African patriarchy with the issues of the post-independence context of Nigeria, a former British colony.

Question : When did you decide to turn to moving images, after studying painting?
Do you see a continuity between these two mediums?

Karimah Ashadu: I turned to moving images because I am very impatient. My **painting** It was photorealistic, or hyperrealistic, and the process was very long. On the other hand, I was painting people who resembled me, and I had no role models around me with whom to identify, nor anyone to confirm that my approach had value. I therefore doubted myself, and I turned to moving images because I obtained an instantaneous result.

Previously, I was more interested in artists like Carolee Scheemann who painted performatively. Early in my work with moving images, I tried performing for the camera myself, but I didn't enjoy it. Later, I pursued a master's degree in London specializing in spatial studies. I decided to explore space by attaching cameras to my body. I began developing mechanisms to harness the camera and perform, and my practice then evolved towards the moving image itself. Twenty years later, I returned to painting, primarily canvases inspired by my films.

So really, the two mediums complement each other today for me.



Installation view of **Cowboy** (2022) by Karimah Ashadu within the exhibition "Tendered" at the Camden Art Centre, 2025.

© Courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Photo: Rob Harris.

From painting to moving image

Can we consider the moving image to be a medium in its own right that is neither video art, nor experimental cinema, nor traditional narrative cinema?

Leonardo Bigazzi: We can absolutely consider the moving image as a medium in its own right, because the expressions it encompasses are infinitely more complex and varied than those of video art from the 70s and 80s. I started the Visio program at the Lo schermo dell'arte festival in 2012, and in the space of thirteen years, phenomenal changes have taken place. Today, forms of moving images are created using simple mobile phones,

particularly in the Global South, where access to professional production resources is sometimes difficult. Meanwhile, some artists still opt for 16mm or even 35mm film, while others use only images created by CGI, or, nowadays, by artificial intelligence.

The evolution of technologies has been dizzying, and I find that very exciting – even though I was born in Florence where the artistic tradition is of course absolutely admirable.

This makes the moving image, in my view, the quintessential contemporary medium. Over time, I also realized that, as a curator, it was the space between the worlds of cinema and art that interested me. And it is precisely this notion of the in-between that emerged with the creation of the Fondazione In Between Art Film. Beatrice Bulgari was a regular at the Lo schermo dell'arte festival in Florence, which I curate. That's how our dialogue began: she decided to create a foundation dedicated to the moving image, and she invited me and Alessandro Rabottini to join her.



Installation view of **King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)** (2015) by Karimah Ashadu in the exhibition "Tendered" at the Camden Art Centre, 2025. © Courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Photo: Rob Harris.

"I turned to moving images because I am very impatient." – Karimah Ashadu.

Karimah, you are also presenting sculptures at the Camden Arts Centre, how do they relate to the video installation **MUSCLE** ?

KA: I'm always looking for ways to develop my work starting with films, to offer a holistic experience. I find that this way of proceeding through successive layers, of creating a dialogue between several mediums, involves the viewer more deeply in the work.

I understand that you are currently working on your first feature-length narrative film, in a "traditional" style. What made you want to explore this specific language?

KA: Developing a narrative film within the **cinema** circuit is always a very long process, but I've had an idea for ten years, which I've continued to develop in

parallel to my works shown in the art circuit. It's also the first time I've written a screenplay! I would very much like to see this project come to fruition within the next two or three years.

The circulation of forms between the museum and cinema

In the contemporary art world, the moving image is a very specific medium, no longer truly corresponding to video art, nor to what was once called experimental cinema, and certainly not traditional narrative cinema. Is it, for you, the freest, most personal form of expression?

KA: I do think that the moving image is situated within a very malleable space. For me, it's a sculptural space, and it's also the most direct way to express what I want to say.

It's a medium that resonates deeply with my sensibilities, even though I also strongly believe in the interplay between two elements. When people see my sculptures before watching the film **MUSCLE**, I think they don't necessarily grasp what it's about. It's interesting to revisit it after seeing the video installation: it's like a kind of reset, making you re-evaluate what you've just seen.



Karimah Ashadu, **Machine Boys** (still), 2024. © Courtesy of the artist, Fondazione In Between Art Film and Sadie Coles HQ, London.

The circulation of forms between the white cubes of galleries and museums, and the darkened rooms of cinema, seems perfectly natural today.

LB: Absolutely, because it's no longer necessary to produce a multi-screen installation to say you're making art. You can very well find a single-channel work in a gallery that might be based on **found footage**, or conversely, result from a high-quality cinematic production.

A dive into the patriarchal culture of Nigeria

All these strategies possess the same dignity. This freedom, which also characterizes the way art is financed, if we compare it with funding in the film industry, explains why, over the last ten or twenty years, many filmmakers who would have defined their work as experimental cinema and presented it at festivals have instead ventured into the field of visual arts. And in traditional cinema, the path is often very formulaic: you have to make a few short films first, before moving on to a feature film, and then, once you've achieved that, it's logical not to return to short films.

You mainly filmed men in Nigeria, your country of origin. It's quite rare to see women filming men; what motivates this choice?

KA: I think one of the reasons for this choice is that I primarily film in Nigeria and West Africa, where the culture is overwhelmingly patriarchal. But when I started digging into this issue, I realized that this image of dominant masculinity is a socially constructed construct. It has been decreed that this, and nothing else, is what it means to be a man. I realized that masculinity is performed.

I wanted to understand what it meant, so I started to dedicate myself to it. Another motivation for my choice might also be the fact that, as a woman living in a patriarchal society, I also face certain expectations regarding my behavior. Filming men is therefore a way of turning that on its head and reclaiming power.



Karimah Ashadu, **MUSCLE (still)**, 2025. © Courtesy of the artist, Camden Art Centre, Fondazione In Between Art Film, Sadie Coles HQ and The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

A hypermasculine image

You have filmed many men at work, but **MUSCLE** focuses on men who work on their bodies, their appearance, to achieve a hypermasculine, virile, socially valued image.

KA: I think all my works are about this performance, some more obviously than others. With **MUSCLE**, I really wanted to explore something that's almost an obvious symbol of masculinity, namely the creation of muscle, bodybuilding. I wanted to approach it with a form

of softness and sensuality, and to see what would appear if I got very close. Through the culture of pure water [plastic water sachets consumed in Nigeria and West Africa, introduced to provide easy access to drinking water, on which a multimillion dollar industry is now based, editor's note], aspects of the structures of consumer capitalism also come to light .

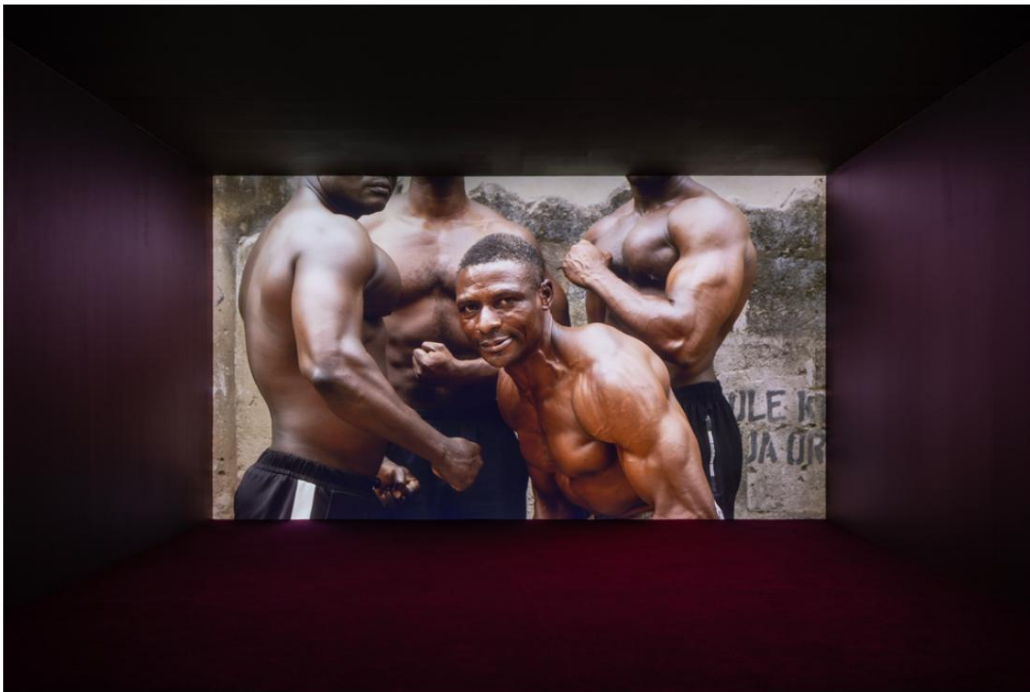
It was also the idea of a community of men that interested me, with its codes of appearance and behavior. I wanted to see what filtered through when you film a community of Black men together, how that was perceived. I intentionally wanted to adopt a very subtle, very ambiguous stance, one that would make the viewer almost uncomfortable, unsure of what they were seeing, yet still wanting to stay and watch the work. **MUSCLE** was truly a space for me that allowed me to explore extremely personal aspects of my practice.

“I wanted to see what filtered through when you film a community of black men together, how that is perceived. — Karimah Ashadu.

Machine Boys, on the other hand, focuses on working men, unlicensed motorcycle taxi drivers in Lagos. Commentaries on this work have often portrayed these men as victims of capitalism, and you have expressed your disagreement, explaining that in your view they were practicing a form of empowerment.

KA: Absolutely, I see work as a path to self-reliance. Nigeria is a relatively young country that suddenly has to compete on a global scale with capitalist powers, and being labeled a “Third World country” is limiting. We Nigerians have to navigate several issues, including the challenges posed by the institutional system, and we're not the type to feel sorry for ourselves or wait for a windfall from the sky.

We have resources, we find solutions, and we develop ideas and businesses with the aim of thriving. So the question **Machine Boys** essentially poses is: what does it mean to be self-reliant, both individually and collectively? What might that look like? Even if it's an idea developed on a small scale, it's still something that, in my eyes, is very respectable. It can be something to be proud of. This question is really important to me.



Installation view of **MUSCLE** (2025) by Karimah Ashadu within the exhibition "Tendered" at the Camden Art Centre, 2025. ©
Courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Photo: Rob Harris.

“Women are powerful. I think men are afraid of us, and that’s why they created the patriarchy.” – Karimah Ashadu.

How are you accepted, as a woman, when you film groups of men in a society heavily marked by patriarchy?

KA: I'm often asked this question, but in truth, I don't think of myself as a female subject when I'm filming. But perhaps that has an influence, perhaps it brings a softness.

When you film these men in a performance of power and masculinity, do you also see, or even primarily see, a vulnerability of which they may not be aware?

KA: Women are powerful. I think men are afraid of us, and that's why they created the patriarchy. We live in a world that wasn't made for us. This is especially true, of course, when you're a Black woman. So, we have to fight every day, and we do it, most of the time, in complete silence.

Men, on the other hand, externalize and overplay their so-called power in an extremely pompous way. I don't think they realize it, but we women see right through their act; we know perfectly well that it's a performance. I find it very interesting to look at this closely. Moreover, it's interesting to note that women don't perform their gender for other women; they do it more for men. Conversely, men perform for other men.



Installation view of **King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)** (2015) by Karimah Ashadu in the exhibition "Tendered" at the Camden Art Centre, 2025. © Courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film. Andrea Rossetti.

Leonardo Bigazzi, long-time supporter of Karimah Ashadu

Leonardo, you have supported Karimah Ashadu's work over a long period of time.

LB: Karimah participated in the Visio program in 2016, and I have continued to support her ever since. It is important for me, as a curator, to develop a relationship of trust with artists. Alessandro Rabottini and I therefore invited her to.

She participated in the 2022 "Penumbra" exhibition, which we organized with the Fondazione In Between Art Film in Venice. She then returned to us when she was invited to participate in the 2024 Venice Biennale: we produced **Machine Boys**, her work which won the Silver Lion for Best Young Artist. And today, we are collaborating again on her solo exhibition "Tendered" and her video installation **MUSCLE**.

In the field of moving images, the role of the curator is increasingly merging with that of the producer. As I explain in the introduction to the book **Visio – Moving Images in Europe since the 2010s**, this is due in particular to the very nature of this medium, which circulates between the spaces of art and cinema: the image is becoming increasingly sophisticated, the level of technical quality increasingly high, and the artists increasingly professionalized.

From the Visio program to the Silver Lion 2024

Is such support still part of your method? This requires new skills from the curator in logistics, financing, distribution... It is about supporting a work from the birth of its idea, and finding the means for it to exist.

I am required to communicate with professionals in image, sound, and editing.

It is necessary to develop a network, and skills, within the field of visual arts and within that of cinema.

Karimah, what are your upcoming projects?

KA: I'm currently working on a film project that engages with a series of paintings and drawings. And I'm preparing my exhibition at the Renaissance Society in September 2026 – which helped produce **MUSCLE**. I'm absolutely thrilled with my exhibition at the Camden Art Centre. It was a project very close to my heart, with several layers: the films, the sculptures, and the catalogue, which I'm also very proud of. I'm grateful to have been able to bring this project to fruition, and also for the reception it received.

“Tendered. Karimah Ashadu”, exhibition until March 22, 2026 at the Camden Art Centre, London. Curated by Alessandro Rabottini and Leonardo Bigazzi for the Fondazione In Between Art Film.

First monograph dedicated to the artist, ed. Mousse, edited by Bianca Stoppani of the Fondazione In Between Art Film, with contributions from Alessandro Rabottini and Leonardo Bigazzi.