



By Gazelle Mba



Karimah Ashadu, *Plateau*, 2021–22, HD video, color, sound, 30 minutes.

LAGOS FEEDS ON ITSELF. It is Cronus, the devouring Titan. Inhabitants of this great city—the city of the lakes—accept this fact. They learn to bear the consumption of their time by endless go-slows (traffic jams), the hustle required to make ends meet with little to no support from the government, the rains that turn roads into swimming pools. But there is a thrill to submission. Not everyone can master this art.

No moving-image maker better understands the cruelties and delights of this city than Karimah Ashadu opened her first solo institutional show, “Tendered,” at the Camden Art Centre in London last month, the Nigerian

metropolis is more than just a backdrop. It is a frustrating collaborator or, more frequently, a demanding boss. Through a close study of the city's frenetic, wayward rhythms, her works portray the country's wider socioeconomic condition: the most populous nation in Africa, with some of its poorest people, where survival requires a willingness to bend the rules. As one of her subjects teases, "You know the hard life in Lagos, in Nigeria? . . . We are chased and arrested, but we pay bribes to survive."



Karimah Ashadu, *Plateau*, 2021–22, HD video, color, sound, 30 minutes.

Ashadu documents the relationship between laborers and landscape, often inventively positioning her camera and manipulating it through the construction of machines—such as one that revolves, or one that blocks peripheral vision—to mirror the work that these laborers do. In her films, there are two types of mechanization at play: the mechanization of the camera, and the mechanization of the worker's body under capitalism. She frequently homes in on a few particular types of labor: that of the sand merchants who dig up sand from the Lagos Lagoon to sell to construction companies; of the pullers, rollers, and carriers of Makoko, an informal settlement on the coast of mainland Lagos, who process wood; of butchers chopping up cattle to prepare meat for sale; of palm oil farmers in Ekiti State. (Before independence, Nigeria was one of the world's top exporters of palm oil, an ingredient found in everything from peanut butter to soap.)

What characterizes the people she depicts is that they live on the edge of society—not drifters, which would be too romantic, but marginalized workers who eke out a living, exploited by remote social forces and operating outside the official economy.



Karimah Ashadu, *Lagos Island*, 2012, HD video, color, sound, 4 minutes 44 seconds.

In *Plateau*, 2021–22, one of her longest works, Ashadu profiles a group of undocumented tin miners in Nigeria’s Jos Plateau region, and examines the socioeconomic implications of their work. Before independence, the region was central to the extraction of tin and columbite. The British colonizers enabled foreign companies to exploit these deposits. But after independence, by the late 1970s and ’80s, many of those companies had ceased operations, as Nigeria shifted its economy toward oil. The oil boom enriched the country for a time, but at the expense of industries such as mining, leaving workers unemployed and communities fractured. The federal government has tried, largely unsuccessfully, to rejuvenate the industry; mining continues today, but amid precarious, rudimentary conditions, without adequate machinery. *Plateau* shows us the miners, dressed in jeans, tracksuit bottoms, and T-shirts, digging and trudging through red-brown waters without gloves, shoes, or protective gear. They are proud and resilient. One compares himself to a cactus: sturdy, resistant to the harsh climate. They view their labor as a tradition, with knowledge passed down from generation to generation; yet an awareness of the devastating effects of mining on the surrounding landscape adds a note of ambivalence to their words.

Ashadu renders this history and its attending contradictions with a poetic, critical eye. A man stares out over a red, rocky landscape of ground dug up and polluted. Miners' voices emerge: "I come from a family where those before us mined too," or, "I started this work when I was little"—a casual statement that quietly reveals the persistence of child labor. Long shots of brown water or of hands scraping and shoveling (a recurring motif in Ashadu's films) are accompanied by stoic statements: "Everyone faces difficulties, no matter what. But we don't give up."



Karimah Ashadu, *Lagos Island*, 2012, HD video, color, sound, 4 minutes 44 seconds.

Plateau also captures fleeting moments of leisure. Shots of cacti recall desert postcards. A man swims in a pool of water, wearing a blue-and-white jersey, his braids glistening in the sun as fellow miners look on. One says, "It's all about luck: Some dig endlessly and find nothing; others uncover deposits quickly and profit. The disjunction between effort and reward, and between wealth and land, is rationalized as necessity. 'Sometimes you have to mar something to make another,'" says one miner. In *Plateau*, dignity lies not in labor as capital sees it, but in the workers' own voices and subjectivity. Ashadu's subjects analyze and historicize their lives and experiences; their statements insist on their agency within their constraints.

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enigmatic studies of Nigerian
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system.**



Karimah Ashadu, *Lagos Sand Merchants*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes 21 seconds.

But what is most eloquent in Ashadu's works is their sense of constraint. *Lagos Island* 12, is a nearly five-minute film that looks at the temporary dwellings of some migrants by an urban waterfront. Very soon the Lagos government will demolish their homes in a bid to clean up the city. We don't see their shelter directly; it is revealed through partial glimpses caught by the roving camera. At first, it lingers on the beach and offers fragmentary views of its flora and fauna, before people gradually come into view. The dwellings appear as the camera, rotating on a wheel, rests horizontally: Women bend to pick up clothes; Ankara fabrics dance in the wind. The image is vaguely blurry, smudged; nothing feels sharp or clear, but rather fuzzy and dreamlike. As the film progresses, the camera keeps beginning to move faster and faster, gathering pace before abruptly stopping—we are bound to its rhythms and agitations. The contrast between the camera's jerky motion and the languid, slow movements of the film's subjects is striking. The work offers a different portrait of the city, not the Lagos of cinematic clichés—the dramatic sweep of Third Mainland Bridge or the twinkling lights of mansions on the island—but something gentler and more uncorrupted: everyday life on the city's margins.



Karimah Ashadu, *Lagos Sand Merchants*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes 21 seconds.

In *Lagos Sand Merchants*, 2013, Ashadu intensifies her mechanical experiment. To make it, she encased her camera between two wooden boards, like horse blinders, blocking out its peripheral vision. Fixed to a mechanism that rocks up and down like a wheel, the camera moves across a sandy road. Sleek, taut bodies come into the frame: men carrying heavy bags of sand balanced on their heads. A dirty pool of water appears; a man throws a basket into it, retrieving the sand that will later be sold for cement and other goods. This is the informal Nigerian economy in motion—the fragile, unacknowledged system through which millions survive. The camera occasionally shifts to frame a bridge at the edge of the screen, wheeling beneath a canopy of leaves. A man runs with a basket; a truck reverses and belches smoke, while workers sing, shout, and speak to one another. Their work is relentless: shoveling, packing, lifting, moving. Through different angles, Ashadu captures the workers' day in fragments: trudging through thick, slimy water; shoveling sand; loading it into trucks. The camera enforces our disorientation; it appears lost in the maelstrom of laborers. Its graceless movements are aligned with those of the laborers, plunging like a knife deliberately paring the brown earth; but whether the camera is an ally or intruder remains unresolved. The effect, however, is compelling: an exploration of work and perception as a kind of mechanized performance.



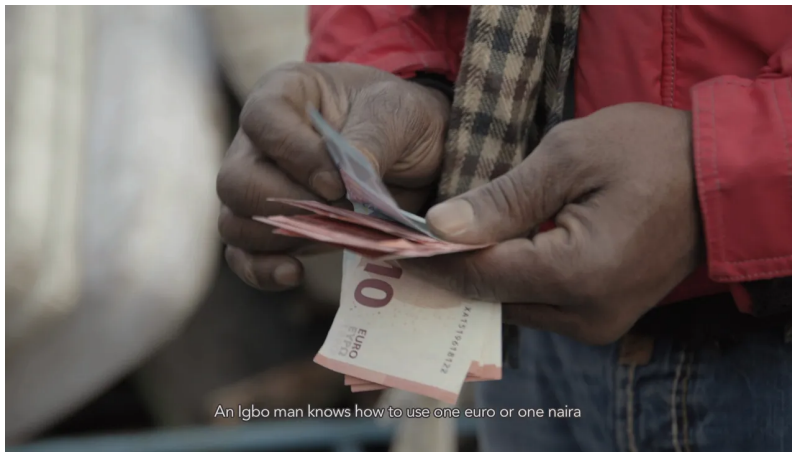
Karimah Ashadu, *Machine Boys*, 2024, HD video, color, sound, 8 minutes 50 seconds.

If Ashadu's subjects work tirelessly, they do so in a society that is ephemeral, with fragile structures not built to bear the full weight of their existence. Temporary dwellings, the demolished amusement parks of Apapa, the *okada* (motorcycle taxi) drivers and area boys (thugs) who taunt policemen by giving rides to passengers—all testify to the precarity at the heart of Nigeria's urban existence. As British Nigerian author Noo Saro-Wiwa wrote, this is a country where nothing seems to last.



Karimah Ashadu, *Machine Boys*, 2024, HD video, color, sound, 8 minutes 50 seconds.

Ashadu makes images out of this impermanence, the shifting nature of Nigerian society. *Machine Boys*, 2024, transforms okada drivers into something like the Hells Angels, portraying them as a fearless, stylish biker gang who roam the streets of Lagos. Okadas, as anyone who has lived in Nigeria will know, are a key form of transportation. With virtually no public transport available, motorbikes take passengers around quickly, zipping through traffic like snakes. But they are dangerous: Many lives have been lost on them, both bikers and riders. In recent years okada drivers have fallen on hard times; three years ago the government banned them, and a significant number of the drivers lost their livelihoods. In the year Ashadu's film was completed, amid rising inflation and costs of living that further impoverished the populace, one okada driver committed suicide by jumping into the lagoon beneath Third Mainland Bridge while his fellow drivers tried to stop him, according to a story I was told by a friend in Lagos. The camaraderie of the drivers is a central subject in *Machine Boys*; Ashadu captures them in a whimsical tone—think of the 1973 Senegalese film *Touki Bouki*, or of the work of French filmmaker Claire Denis. Lithe, graceful movements, performative and witty, attest to the bikers' courage in continuing to drive despite police, area boys, and the government. But life is always subject to larger forces: the state, the economy, or a wrong turn that leads to an accident. Paradoxically, this is what makes the drivers so vivid and lively. It also makes them stoic. One says: "I have witnessed how a man was hit and died. . . . You die at your appointed time."



An Igbo man knows how to use one euro or one naira

Karimah Ashadu, *Brown Goods*, 2020, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.

This matter-of-factness is echoed in other films: *Brown Goods*, 2020, documents a Nigerian migrant's life in Hamburg, where he exports used European goods back to Africa. "It all depends on your mentality and how fast you are," he notes. The laconic gazes and straightforward remarks of Ashadu's subjects reveal a steely determination, a refusal to capitulate to circumstances. Perhaps, then, I might revise my earlier statement: The city, or the state, may feed on its inhabitants, but they bite back. Ashadu's films reveal the fragility of labor and landscape, but also insist on their strength and durability. They are neither declarative nor ideological works about the violence of capitalism and colonialism, but fragmented, enigmatic studies of Nigerian laborers and the ways they interpret their own work within a grinding system. In Ashadu's reflections on the ephemerality of life in Lagos, Plateau, or Hamburg's Billstraße, the political bullhorn lets up as subtler, more forceful ideas take shape: the workers' grit and endurance, their will to survive against the odds.

Gazelle Mba is a regular contributor to the London Review of Books.