

A photograph of a person on a motorcycle, likely in a dusty or desert environment. The person is wearing a light-colored, patterned shirt and dark shorts. The motorcycle is dark-colored with orange turn signals. The background is a hazy, dusty landscape. The overall tone is warm and gritty.

ART

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Naeem Mohaiemen
interviewed by Amna Malik

Uneasy About ESEA
Morgan Quaintance

On Obsolescence
Bob Dickinson

On Magazines
Chris Townsend

Karimah Ashadu
Profile by Kathryn Lloyd



Karimah Ashadu Tendered 10 Oct 2025/22 Mar 2026 Camden Art Centre Arkwright Road London NW3

Organised within the framework of Unison, a biennial initiative created by Fondazione In Between Art Film to commission and produce moving image-based exhibitions together with international institutions.

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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.



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MUSCLE, 2025, video



MUSCLE, 2025, video



Machine Boys, 2024, video



Machine Boys, 2024, video

Profile

Karimah Ashadu

The British-Nigerian, London-based artist and filmmaker uses her lens to focus on issues around patriarchy, labour and economic survival in post-colonial Nigeria through a close observation of the physical and symbolic construction of masculinity.

Although Karimah Ashadu's new film *MUSCLE*, 2025, centres on the black male body, it withholds the figure in its entirety. Instead, across its 22-minute run-time, the artist presents an essayistic sequence of fragments and close-ups – of shoulders, biceps, clenched jaws and sweat-beaded brows – giving the impression of a corporeal scale that cannot be contained in a single frame. The film begins with two torsos shifting in rhythmic succession, the strain of their movements registering in fluctuations of tissue and muscle. The footage is accompanied by a heightened soundtrack of grunts and groans, which are at once carnal, violent and comical. Only gradually, through the systematic reappearance of rusted dumbbells, as they are lifted in and out of shot, does the nature of the activity become clear.

MUSCLE follows a group of bodybuilders as they train in a makeshift outdoor gym in the slums of Lagos. As Ashadu's camera lingers on visceral spasms, contractions and contorted expressions – cheeks puffed with air, bared teeth, a tongue pressed forcefully between lips – intermittent voice-overs in Yoruba detail the men's various relationships with weightlifting. Although their physiques and experiences differ, they are unified by a posture of conscious intimidation and a kind of performative threat: 'If you want to live in Lagos, you need to be rugged [...] They're afraid of the guy with the big body. We don't know what he can do, we don't know what he has in mind.' Another remarks: 'When the bad boys see you and they see you're built, they'll be scared to attack you. So, this body gives us a lot of freedom.' Here, the word 'built' speaks not only to the construction of muscle but also to the forging of a coded hypermasculinity that seems to offer authority and protection within Nigeria's patriarchal social order. Weightlifting, therefore, becomes a disciplined labour that cultivates both physical and symbolic power; it produces a form of bodily capital that exists within what curator Myriam Ben Salah describes as 'an ecology of performance and precarity'.

Ashadu's film is characterised by an extreme proximity to the body, both in terms of the lens and in the physical relationship between the men themselves. Through the artist's framing, the depth of field all but disappears, collapsing limbs into and onto one another. As such, the desire embedded in the men's relentless exercise mingles with a cinematic intimacy. The camera traverses their skin as though it were a landscape, creating topographical regions of flesh that verge on complete abstraction; sweat droplets, pores, veins and hairs dissolve into formal detail. While it conveys individual narratives, *MUSCLE* is less concerned with discrete characters than it is with a multifaceted, self-organised community – the very existence of which speaks to issues of labour, socioeconomic codes and patriarchy within the context of Nigeria. This is underscored by the film's cumulative structure, which emerges through repetition and rhythm: of the men's unrestrained vocalisations and exhalations, the

clanking of weights, the build-up of sweat and the relentless cadence of lifting and lowering. The noises are, at points, unnerving in their ambiguity – torturously strained and edged with eroticism – as well as their amplified volume. As the artists states, the soundtrack ‘immerses you in the work in a way that feels like you are drawn into it but, at the same time, you almost want to get away from it’.

Commissioned by Fondazione In Between Art Film with Camden Art Centre, London and the Renaissance Society, Chicago, *MUSCLE* forms the central component of ‘Tendered’, Ashadu’s upcoming solo exhibition that will tour both venues. The title aptly sets out the stakes of her wider practice, invoking ideas of care, fragility and nurture alongside forms of commercial exchange. Working with different communities of Nigerian men – from undocumented tin miners in the Jos Plateau to self-sufficient palm oil farmers in Ekiti – Ashadu investigates the interplay of masculinity, industry, self-determination and performance in post-colonial Nigeria. Her childhood, spent first in the UK, then in Nigeria until the age of ten before returning to London, informs her attentiveness to the subjects and contexts that she documents. In *MUSCLE*, the country’s broader sociopolitical and economic structures are signalled not only by the provisional nature of the gym, pieced together outdoors with dangerously rusted equipment, but also by the branded sportswear worn by the bodybuilders – what the artist refers to as ‘logos of global athleticism’ – situating the men within a capitalist structure that they strive ‘to belong to, even as it exploits and excludes them’.

‘Tendered’ places *MUSCLE* in dialogue with two earlier video works, *Cowboy*, 2022, and *King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)*, 2015, both of which explore human-animal relationships in markedly different ways: where *Cowboy* depicts mutual care between species, *King of Boys* offers a raw, frenetic document of slaughter and trade.

In contrast to *MUSCLE*, which emphasises collective embodiment, the two-channel *Cowboy* functions as a more conventional individual portrait. It also displaces the claustrophobia of the later work, pursuing the titular Cowboy across open land and roads to the vast expanse of Tarkwa Bay, near Lagos. Through voice-over, he recounts his 35-year career tending horses, narrating a migratory life shaped by his deep affection for the animals: ‘Horses are my kin [...] horses have taught me everything. I have learnt a lot.’ While one screen shows him at work in the stables, the other drifts over close-up footage of palm fronds, symbols of resistance and peace in West African culture. In a later sequence, as Cowboy lists each horse-related injury he has endured with soft, almost proud detachment, we watch him ride out to the rough tides of the sea, where cargo ships line the horizon. Subverting the film’s apparent denouement, he stops short of entering the water, framing the ocean not as a site of release but as a silent witness to displacement and the violent legacies of the Atlantic slave trade.

Having trained as a painter, Ashadu is particularly interested in how other media intersect with filmic practice, and her installations often extend the logic of the screen into the exhibition space. This is evidenced by *Machine Boys*, 2024, the film that won her the Silver Lion for Promising Young Participant at the 60th Venice Biennale.

In some ways a precursor to *MUSCLE*, *Machine Boys* captures a group of young men who operate informal motorcycle taxis in Lagos, known locally as *okadas*. Officially banned in 2022, *okada* persists as an unregulated and increasingly precarious form of labour. In the film, many of the riders stare directly out at the viewer, their gaze obscured by sunglasses, before veering off abruptly or creating endless burned-out circles that churn up clouds of dust, as though responding to a shared, internal choreography. Ashadu dwells on their scarred knuckles, battered fake Gucci sandals and football shirts as much as on the worn mechanics of the bikes themselves. When shown at Venice, the film was installed in a room painted a dark purple, a colour borrowed from the strange glow of one bike’s headlight. As viewers entered, they encountered *Wreath*, 2024, a large circular brass bas-relief of interwoven tyres: a motif made physical, which both expands and emblematises the nature of the film.

In the last scene of *Machine Boys*, one of the men roars at the camera, mimicking the noise of his bike while his fellow riders rev their engines alongside him. Ostensibly an act of bravado – a performative defiance to deflect the risks of their profession – this growling crescendo gives way to a genuine built-up frustration. A similar scene comes at the end of *MUSCLE*. In the last 30 seconds, the camera pulls back just enough to reveal the torsos of four black men, three of whom remain headless. One stares intently at the viewer – almost posing a challenge – they strike various bodybuilding poses, flexing their muscles with a pronounced theatricality. Here, the roar is replaced with quiet, strained utterances, as the men attempt to contract their muscles to maximum effect.

These performances of hypermasculinity fluctuate between vulnerability and defiance, self-awareness and a tender oblivion, all the while challenging racist archetypes of black male rage. Ashadu’s films – which she has described as self-portraits – are uniquely attentive and intimate, a meditation on self-governance and strategies of survival within systemic pressures and limitations.

Karimah Ashadu’s exhibition ‘Tendered’ is at Camden Art Centre, London, from 10 October to 22 March, it travels to The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago in autumn, 2026.

Kathryn Lloyd is a writer and editor based in London.

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of tides, still I rise**
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Cover

Karimah Ashadu,
Motorcycle Boys, 2024, video

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