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# The Body As Labor: An Interview with Karimah Ashadu

by Adela Lovric // Feb. 11, 2026

Karimah Ashadu's 'Tendered' at Camden Art Centre marks the British-born, Nigerian artist's first institutional solo exhibition in the UK, presented in collaboration with Fondazione In Between Art Film. Centered on 'MUSCLE' (2025), Ashadu's most recent moving-image work, 'Tendered' offers a focused view into Ashadu's practice that probes constructions of Nigerian masculinity, foregrounding its entanglements with labor, class, patriarchy and colonial afterlives.

In 'MUSCLE,' which will have its Berlin premiere on February 15th at the 76th Berlinale, Ashadu turns her lens toward a community of bodybuilders training in the slums of Lagos. Through lingering close-ups of straining torsos and meticulously maintained physiques, the artist reframes the body as a repository of labor, discipline and aspiration. The camera's attentive gaze doubles as a mirror, reflecting back the viewer's own projections and biases constructed around Black male bodies.



Karimah Ashadu: 'Cowboy,' 2022, installation view in 'Tendered' at Camden Art Centre, 2025 // Photo by Rob Harris, courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film

**Adela Lovric:** In your films shown at Camden Art Centre, we see Nigerian men at work in different situations: at an abattoir ('King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko),' 2015), at a horse ranch ('Cowboy,' 2022), at a bodybuilding gym ('MUSCLE,' 2025). What keeps you coming back to this particular topic?

**Karimah Ashadu:** I've been fascinated by Nigeria as my subject for a while. The notion of independence and what it means to be independent—as a country, as an individual, as a collective. I'm thinking about independence in a very specific way, obviously linked to the colonial history; when it's something that another country declares onto you and therefore you are. It talks about autonomy, and I look at labor very closely linked to that; what it takes as a country to rebuild itself after it has been extracted from. Within this sits this very specific patriarchal culture, which Nigeria has; what it means to present as a man. I think these themes are very closely intertwined, and my films delve into that.

**AL: What are the other thematic threads—besides masculinity and labor—that connect these three works in ‘Tendered?’**

**KA:** My works are always talking about the same things. I see them in a way as self-portraits. They speak for me. In ‘MUSCLE,’ it’s a lot more obvious—it’s patriarchy, it’s the physical body, the masculine body, the Black male body. And the vulnerability of the social construction of masculinity. ‘King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)’ talks about labor, but it’s also kind of playful. I created this film at a time when I was experimenting with mechanisms. I would put my camera into these mechanisms and use them to operate. I would investigate, for instance, what color would do to — narrative. But at the heart of it I was still dealing with these really difficult themes. In a work like ‘Cowboy,’ where there is a singular protagonist, it’s interwoven a lot with symbolism, and deals with so much—for instance, man’s relationship with nature and the animal world. It also speaks on Black history. He’s approaching the sea, he’s charging towards it, but he never really ventures in because of what the ocean represents throughout Black history and for Black people.



Karimah Ashadu: 'MUSCLE' 2025, installation view in 'Tendered' at Camden Art Centre, 2025 // Photo by Rob Harris, courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film

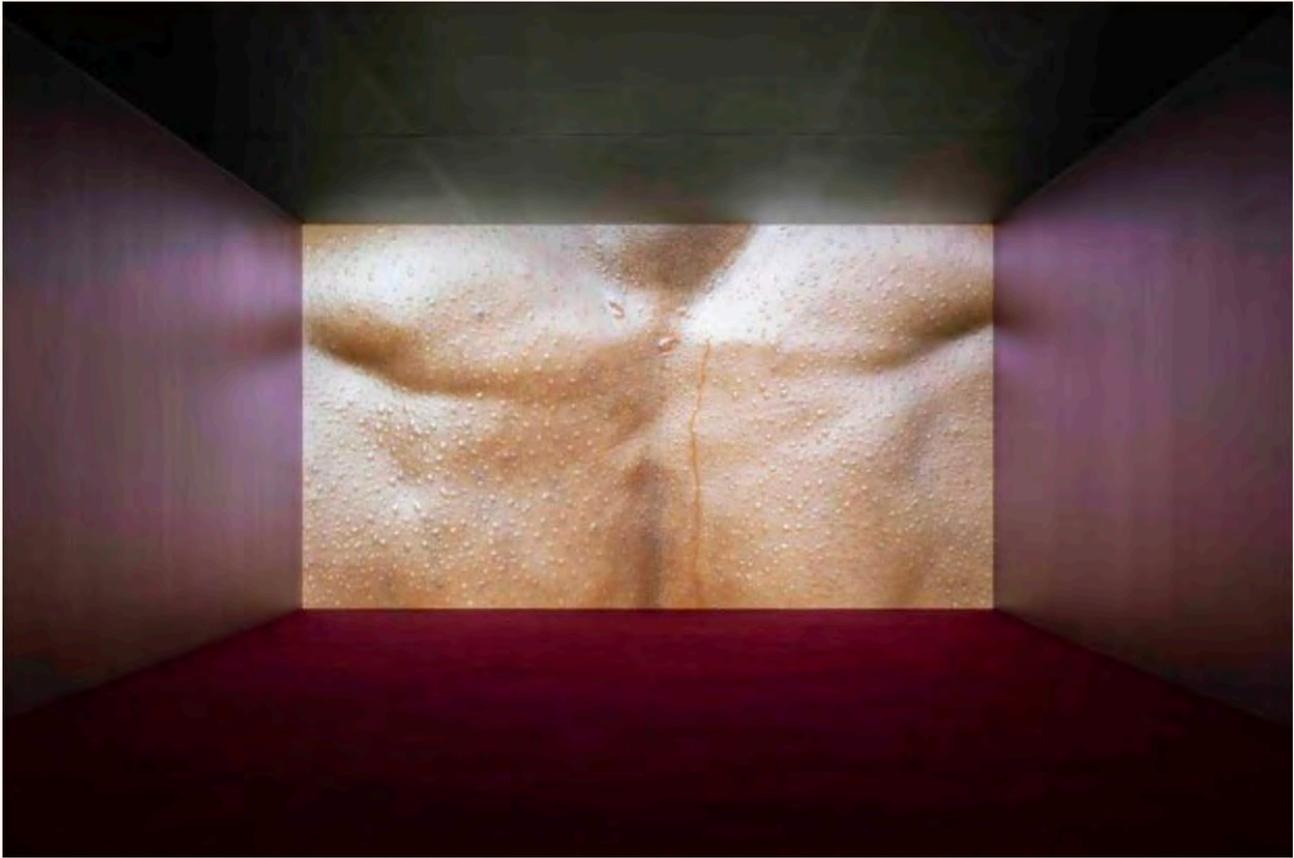
**AL: The exhibition title, ‘Tendered,’ reminds me of tender meat—we see a lot of animal flesh in ‘King of Boys.’ What does it actually refer to?**

**KA:** My films are inspired by the body. They are of the body; the way that I approached filmmaking when I first started, was literally by attaching cameras to my body, and then it progressed from there. 'Tendered,' for instance, relates to 'King of Boys' and flesh, but it also speaks about economy.

It is concerned with the softness of being tender, and this state of always wanting—the discipline of desire that these guys [in 'MUSCLE'] have. When we think about West Africa, there are very particular narratives in the media. But it's only through compassion and tenderness that we can really understand the role of globalization, the role that the Global North has had in the shaping of the Global South. This word is symbolic of all of these things.

**AL: In 'MUSCLE,' your new 20-minute film focusing on Lagosian bodybuilders, the close-up filming of their bodies is particularly interesting—sort of hypnotic, abstract, it brings hyperawareness to details and simultaneously almost makes you forget what you're looking at. Why did you decide to approach your protagonists this way?**

**KA:** I wanted to create a state of repelling; this awkward state of wanting to be close, but then also wanting to have some distance. I think about getting really close to Blackness so that you can attempt to understand it in some way. This thing that society always wants to keep you at arm's length from because it's framed as dangerous, disgusting, dirty, at the bottom of the value system. I wanted to create something that was quite alluring, but mystical in some way. I wanted to create a state of softness. As a filmmaker, I just wanted to understand what being that close would do. I wanted to understand how you would read the image, how it would make the viewer feel in relation to the work.



Karimah Ashadu: 'MUSCLE,' 2025, installation view in 'Tendered' at Camden Art Centre, 2025 // Photo by Andrea Rossetti, courtesy the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film

**AL: The visuals in 'MUSCLE' are overlaid with surprisingly candid interviews with the protagonists that shift between performance and vulnerability. How did you navigate building trust with them and getting past their tough façade to reach that intimacy?**

**KA:** I'm genuinely curious about people and I will hyperfocus if there's something I'm interested in. I will go all in because I want to understand what makes people tick, why they're doing what they're doing in a given context. I'm entering their world and they're allowing me in for a period of time. It's a great privilege for me to be given access to that world. And for them to be able to understand a little bit from my perspective. They allow me to capture them and to present them in a way that does them justice. I think it's an incredible thing as a filmmaker to be given access to do that. These are untrained actors. They've placed a lot of trust in me and I don't underestimate that, but we have agreements and I pay them, of course. So, for them, it's just another job.

**AL: This question was on my mind because of the tension between the bodybuilders' performativity and their vulnerability and honesty. I found that really tender.**

**KA:** It is tender. The state of building their bodies—that in itself is a vulnerable thing. It's a temporary thing and something that they have to constantly maintain. I looked at that through a lens of absolute tenderness because they're always in a state of performance, performing masculinity.



Karimah Ashadu: 'Pure Rugged Water' (2025) & 'Cotch I & II' (2025), installation view in 'Tendered' at Camden Art Centre, 2025 // Photo by Rob Harris, courtesy of the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Fondazione In Between Art Film

**AL: Berlin audiences will have the chance to see 'MUSCLE' at the Berlinale on February 15th and 16th at silent green. However, at the Camden Art Centre, the film works in tandem with sculptures—two chairs covered in a patchwork of sportswear logos and several glass replicas of water bags (used by bodybuilders in the film) strewn across the floor. How do the sculptural works extend or complicate the film's ideas?**

**KA:** I'm interested in film as an expansive medium, in dialogue with other mediums like sculpture, painting, drawing, photography. I'm interested in how that builds out the narrative or creates a framework for you to understand the work better. At Camden, I created these sculptures that are shown together—the water bags as seen in the film and the chairs covered with sportswear logos—which you encounter before you see the film. Once you see the film, you see the sculptures again, imbued with another layer of meaning. I like what that does to the reading of the work: they can be understood independently but also cohesively as one work.

If you go beyond the surface, the sculptures speak about so much: branding, consumer culture and globalization. The culture of drinking water sold in plastic bags in Nigeria, is a societal, cultural and economic measure. It's used by a very specific demographic in the slums for part of their day-to-day living. And these international sportswear brands that these guys wear and want to be part of the culture—most of the time they're knockoffs.

## Exhibition Info

### **Camden Art Centre**

Karimah Ashadu: 'Tendered'

Exhibition: Oct. 10, 2025-Mar. 22, 2026

[camdenartcentre.org](https://camdenartcentre.org)

Arkwright Rd, London, NW3 6DG, UK, [click here for map](#)

## Screening Info

### **Berlinale Forum Expanded**

Karimah Ashadu: 'MUSCLE'

Screening: Sunday, Feb. 15, 8:30pm; Monday, Feb. 16, 6:15pm

[berlinale.de](https://berlinale.de)

silent green, Gerichtstraße 35, 13347 Berlin, [click here for map](#)