

Karimah Ashadu's *Tendered* Intimate portraits of masculinity

Karimah Ashadu, a former resident at De Ateliers, made a name for herself at the recent Venice Biennale with a film about motorcycle taxi drivers in Lagos. In her new work, she demonstrates how the cultivation of masculinity needn't be a personally motivated choice, but can be linked to the pursuit of a better socio-economic position.

By Francesca Rechere



Karimah Ashadu, *MUSCLE*, installatiefoto, *Tendered*, Camden Art Centre, 2025, courtesy de kunstenaar, Fondazione In Between Art Film, Sadie Coles HQ, Londen en Camden Art Centre, foto Andrea Rossetti



Karimah Ashadu, *MUSCLE*, still, *Tendered*, Camden Art Centre, 2025, courtesy de kunstenaar, Fondazione In Between Art Film, Sadie Coles HQ, Londen en Camden Art Centre, foto Andrea Rossetti

The video "King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)" (2015) opens Karimah Ashadu's exhibition "Tendered" at the Camden Art Centre in London. Horns that once belonged to bulls and rams lie scattered across the floor of an open-air slaughterhouse in Makoko, a neighborhood in the slums of Lagos. The red carpets laid out for the occasion invite me to lie down, but the shocking images deter me. They are raw images, literally, with chunks of meat, heads, and carcasses scattered everywhere. It is a massacre. But the men in the picture, these "postcolonial" figures, are hard at work, preoccupied with the mundane as they chop the meat into pieces.

The impressive architecture of the Camden Arts Centre frames the meter-high projections suggestively. It makes the films tactile, as a recent review noted: "You feel these films before you think about them."

Kings of Boys reveals that Ashadu trained as a painter. She holds a red plastic container in front of the lens, casting a red light across the space. This homemade device, like the red carpet in the room, reinforces the narrative of bloodshed. The rhythmic images of butchers expertly wielding their large knives while the chopping sounds echo through the room are palpable. Young boys and women loiter and watch. They are neither surprised nor moved by the brutal scenes around them; these are images they are clearly accustomed to.

The exhibition *Tendered* takes visitors on a journey through a spectrum of interconnected issues arising from patriarchal systems in the cultural context of Nigeria.

The vibrant scenes immerse visitors in visual explorations of everyday work, socio-economic hardship, and hyper-masculinity. Ashadu examines the quest of young Nigerian men for self-determination and emancipation within the informal economies and precarious socio-economic conditions of this postcolonial nation. By showcasing their strength and insecurity, we see how they strive to conform to a constructed image or idea of the ideal man. It reveals who they aspire to be. Yet, the bold design and high-quality filmmaking techniques give these somewhat detachedly observational films a dramatic, even theatrical, feel.

"When I think about labor in Nigerian history, I think of colonial and postcolonial industrial landscapes, but also of the concept of independence; what it means to be autonomous and how labor makes that possible," Ashadu tells me when I speak with her at the opening. "Labor offers a path to autonomy."

Ashadu is also deeply interested in the physical language of labor, how the body moves once it has learned to perform a task fluidly. "The gestures reveal resilience, pride, and an inner logic of a form of survival that is deeply human." As the camera shifts between red and its natural representation of reality, he also creates a counterpoint, one that goes beyond a conventional documentary that aims to document the reality and circumstances surrounding this slaughterhouse community. It becomes something that feels like a fantastical state or alternative reality.



Karimah Ashadu, *Machine Boys*, still, *Tendered*, Camden Art Centre, 2025, courtesy de kunstenaar, Fondazione In Between Art Film, Sadie Coles HQ, Londen en Camden Art Centre

De openhartige verhalen maakt dat ze ondanks hun borstkas en borstspieren die uitpuilen terwijl ze trots poseren, toch ook kwetsbaar overkomen

Ashadu: "I want my work to exist somewhere between directed and observed, so you're unsure what has been shaped and what has simply unfolded. The film exists at the intersection of vulnerability and agency, showing that masculinity isn't a fixed identity, but something constantly being shaped, pressured, and negotiated within the socio-economic realities of Nigeria."

In another room, the new film *MUSCLE* (2025) is being screened. Close-ups of the faces and bodies of Black men—bodybuilders from the slums of Lagos—fill the entire space, from floor to ceiling. Tightly stretched skin lies smoothly over muscles, muscular biceps flex and relax, characteristic grooves and dimples are exposed and visualized, beads of sweat gather into rivulets. Bags of water are ripped open and thrown over the bodies, after which they are drunk furiously. Deep breaths and grunts form the film's soundtrack. The camera follows long, static, and slow shots, while body parts move in their own rhythm. Every exercise, every repetition, every beat. It's hard not to fall into a trance instead of listening to their words.

Like the okada drivers in Ashadu's film *Ma-chine Boys*, who recounted the financial independence their dangerous work as motorcycle taxi drivers brought them, the men in *MUSCLE* aren't training for competitions. *MUSCLE* similarly shows how these men, by adopting hypermasculine codes, accumulate social capital within the patriarchal Nigerian context and, in their attempts to survive, conform to inherited postcolonial and economic ideas.

The films offer an intimate glimpse into this, while also revealing the ambitions, insecurities, and sensitivities of the protagonists.

Ashadu explains how important it is to her that the people she portrays are portrayed honestly. Breaking the fourth wall, for her, means reversing the power dynamics between watching and being watched. She also claims to tell Black and African stories that have historically been misrepresented. "At that moment of direct address, projection becomes difficult. You're looking each other straight in the eye."

In the London exhibition, *Cowboy* (2022), the third film to be screened, tells a different story. The film presents a different form of masculinity, one you might not immediately expect after seeing the other films. A man travels to the sea, which may be a beautiful, moving, and romantic idea, but like all her films, *Cowboy* also shows the desires, dreams, and possibilities for a different life—in this case, somewhere else on the other side of the ocean.

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This text has been translated from English by the editors

Karimah Ashadu, *Tendered*
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Karimah Ashadu, *MUSCLE*, still, *Tendered*, Camden Art Centre, 2025, courtesy de kunstenaar, Fondazione In Between Art Film, Sadie Coles HQ, Londen en Camden Art Centre, foto Andrea Rossetti

Manosphere - Masculinity Today Melanie Bühler begins her announcement of the Manosphere exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum with a quote from American culture critic Andrea Long Chu, who claims that "everyone is feminine." A provocation, especially for the types who populate the online manosphere, with their misogynistic boosterism. Men feel threatened by the rise of women in society. Their online resistance can be seen as a reaction. But what is masculinity?

really?, Bühler asks. She positions her exhibition as "a crystal ball," a sphere onto which manifestations of masculinity are projected. Unlike the exhibition *Am I Masculine?* in Den Bosch, which includes many figurative works, Bühler explores highly varied ideas of masculinity, also in the abstract, in images of intimidation and violence, but also of care and love. "What are the cultural imaginations and realities that have shaped contemporary masculinity, and

What kind of space do they take up?' Also on display are works from the collections of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and her former employer, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen (various works from the exhibition at the Stedelijk are depicted on pages 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, 49).

Manosphere - Masculinity Today
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
18.4 t/m 2.8.2026