

Karimah Ashadu's "Tendered"

Cici Peng



Karimah Ashadu, *MUSCLE*, 2025. Still from video (color, sound), 22:00 minutes. Courtesy of the artist; Camden Art Centre, London; Fondazione In Between Art Film; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

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The title of Karimah Ashadu's first UK solo exhibition draws on the tensions at the heart of her work: care and exchange, intimacy and capital. Curated by Leonardo Bigazzi and Alessandro Rabottini, the show brings together three moving-image works, including the newly commissioned *MUSCLE* (2025) and its accompanying sculptures. Although they deal with work, these are anything but traditional labor films in the vein of Wang Bing and Frederick Wiseman's slow, observational styles or Harun Farocki's incisive archival interventions. Ashadu's experiential pieces, by contrast, are tactile in their engagement with materiality, capturing the often perilous nature of working conditions alongside their sensuous textures. You feel these films before you think about them.

Ashadu's practice considers the drive towards self-determination and emancipation among young Nigerian men within the context of the postcolonial country's informal economies and precarious socio-economic landscape. Having formally trained as a painter, her early work in the first room, *King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)* (2015), transposes a formal interest in color, material, and composition to the outdoor abattoir in Makoko. The artist places a translucent red plastic beer keg in front of her camera lens as a scarlet—almost blood-stained—filter which paradoxically creates an oneiric distance from the affronting, spectacular images of decapitated cow heads and their discarded horns, set against the uneven grinding sounds of metal hewing bone. However, as the camera pans 360 degrees (the film is fittingly displayed on a concave screen) the filter briefly disappears. Ashadu reveals the scene in all its shocking vibrancy: the browns of the earth; the green of a butcher's hoodie; the silver of a machete's blade.

Strikingly, the work here ventures into performative terrain, using the camera as an extension of the artist's body. While the long panoramic takes bind the subjects both to one another and their environments, the red filter reveals Ashadu's position as an outsider who plays with revelation, enclosure, and withdrawal. Despite recording the everyday labor of the abattoir, Ashadu foregrounds the film's formal construction around her body, distancing it from the style of ethnographic documentaries that have historically recorded African communities from a place of supposed objectivity.

Where *King of Boys* plays with distance, *MUSCLE* frames a group of bodybuilders almost entirely in close-up, training at a makeshift outdoor gym in the slums of Lagos. Bodies are fragmented into the individual parts—the bulge of a pectoral muscle, spasming biceps, grimacing lips—and repeated gestures edited against the sound of grunts and the clank of barbells. Ashadu's close observation of these monotonous acts elevates bodybuilding into a form of sculpture-making—a relationship evoked in her “pure water” replica sculptures. The mesmerizing quality of Ashadu's cumulative images are clearly erotic, not least when the men rip apart “pure water” plastic bags to drench their bodies. More surprisingly, these images evoke a hydraulic form of repetition, as if the men's bodies are engines in perpetual motion. Even leisure time is subsumed by the labor of crafting one's own image.

Just as the *okada* drivers in Ashadu's 2024 Silver Lion-winner *Machine Boys* spoke of the financial autonomy offered by their hazardous motorcycle taxi trade, the men in *MUSCLE* are not bulking for a competition, as they explain from the elliptical Yoruba voiceovers, but to reshape their socioeconomic standing. They can earn “respect” from their appearance, which becomes both a status symbol and a safety shield from the area boys, as they liken their physiques to barrels of AK-47s. *MUSCLE* reveals how these men subscribe to codes of hypermasculinity to gain social capital within the Nigerian patriarchal order, even while these structures, and their intersecting postcolonial and economic histories, continue to exploit and exclude them. In *MUSCLE*, although these fleeting voiceovers too readily impose a particular documentarian logic on the work, the device formally anchors the work's interest in the potential of self-representation.

While Ashadu's works are often interpreted in the context of documentary, they attain their force through performance. In one sequence in *MUSCLE*, four men pose for the camera, one crouches and flexes his biceps as the vein in his neck bulges, the others pose behind him, their heads cut off from the frame. Their exalted self-representation of masculinity is dependent on spectators: without the camera, their tensed, Diadoumenos-like perfection would fall slack. Fragile yet vigorous, their self-determination pushes against the structural forces that seek to exhaust it.

The double-screen installation of *Cowboy* (2022) is an expansive counterpoint to both *MUSCLE* and *King of Boys*, gently exploring the mutual care between an African cowboy and his steeds. Labor here is not an act of pure exertion; it is almost devotional. A voiceover describes how the cowboy's love for horses has shaped his migration. An individual rather than a collective portrait, *Cowboy* follows a single man and his horse from land to sea in Tarkwa Bay, just outside of Lagos. The second screen anticipates this journey with images of waves and palm fronds, both symbols of peace and resistance in West Africa. As elsewhere in this exhibition, Ashadu's focus on beauty gradually evokes something menacing. Standing at the foaming edge of the waves, the Cowboy looks out to the ocean where cargo ships linger in the distance—past and present specters haunting the possibility of departure.

Category
Labor & Work, Gender

Cici Peng is a writer and film curator based in London.

Subject
Africa, Experimental Film