

Karimah Ashadu  
10 Oct/22 Mar  
Exhibition Guide

# Introduction

*Tendered* is the first institutional solo exhibition in the UK by artist and filmmaker Karimah Ashadu (UK/Nigeria, b. 1985). Ashadu's practice looks at the contemporary manifestations of Nigerian history as they are borne by its people and landscape. Informed by her background in painting, Ashadu's films combine colour, composition, and form with the fugitive and dynamic kinetics of her camera lens. Having grown up between the United Kingdom and Nigeria, her works form a cinematic narrative of bodies and land, proximity and distance - an undulating scenario of urban subcultures, everyday labour, and our relationship to place and nature.

The exhibition includes the premiere of *MUSCLE* (2025), a newly commissioned moving-image work, as well as a series of new sculptures conceived especially for the installation that reference objects and environments within the film. Situated in Room 2, *MUSCLE* is a portrait of body builders in the heart of Lagos' slums, striving to attain a hypermasculine ideal. Shot in extreme close-up, a visceral quality runs through the images, mirrored in the physicality of the soundtrack which amplifies the sense of intimacy, exertion, tension and release.

The exhibition also features two previous moving image works filmed in Nigeria: *King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)* (2015), a window into the inner workings of the Makoko abattoir; and *Cowboy* (2022), a two-channel film that follows a man who has dedicated his life to the care of horses. Configured across Room 1 and Room 3 respectively, the atmosphere and chromatic tones of each film are again

extended into the environments of the viewing spaces.

*Tendered* guides visitors on a journey through the breadth of Ashadu's practice, from the intimate to the expansive, the personal to the universal. Her nuanced and complex portraits - whether of individuals or communities - probe notions of masculinity and patriarchal systems within the cultural context of West Africa. In doing so, she makes clear the inextricable ties these systems have to economic independence and exploitation in the aftermath of British colonial rule.

*Tendered* is the second project launched under Unison, a biennial initiative promoted by Fondazione In Between Art Film to commission and produce moving image-based exhibitions in partnership with international public institutions.

The exhibition is curated by Alessandro Rabottini and Leonardo Bigazzi of Fondazione In Between Art Film in collaboration with Martin Clark and Gina Buenfeld-Murley at Camden Art Centre.

*MUSCLE* is commissioned and produced by Camden Art Centre, Fondazione In Between Art Film, and The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, where the exhibition will be presented in autumn 2026. It is co-produced with Golddust by Ashadu.

A full colour reference monograph published by Mousse is available in our shop at a special exhibition price of £25.

A File Note with a new essay by Yasmina Price is available in our shop for £2.

Supported by The Karimah Ashadu Exhibition Circle, Camden Art Centre Artists' Circle and Sadie Coles HQ, London. *Pure Rugged Water* was produced with additional support from the Alexander Tutsek-Stiftung.

# Gallery Spaces

## Room 1

### *King of Boys* (*Abattoir of Makoko*), 2015

In this film, made when Ashadu was studying at De Ateliers in Amsterdam, she documents an open-air abattoir in Makoko, a district in the slums of Lagos. Men, women, and children all watch or participate in the everyday butchering of bulls and rams. A boy wields a knife nearly the size of his own body to slice cuts of meat, whilst elsewhere a man skins a carcass. If considered apart from the image, the sound of hacking blades and ambient conversation takes on an almost rhythmic quality, as if one were listening to musicians warming up moments before taking the stage. For Ashadu, however, the visual and the auditory are always entangled. The film is punctuated by a red filter – actually a piece of plastic from a discarded beer keg Ashadu found on the street – which periodically appears in front of the lens as it rotates and scans the environment. Given the brutality of the imagery, one might imagine finding relief in the sense of separation and screening that the filter creates. Instead, we enter another world where the hues are unnaturally vibrant, the sound of scraping knives uncannily close, and the movements from one scene to the next increasingly piercing. The baleful score and crescendo of a Nollywood movie playing nearby contribute to the impression of an intense, violent space. Then, when the filter disappears and the music stops, we return to what for many is just another part of daily life.

'I was riding my bicycle in Amsterdam past this plastic red container, and I decided to take it to my studio. I thought it would be interesting to place my camera in it, but not let it be static, because I wanted it to be clearly analogue, bringing a sense of performance into it. In hindsight, it was how I discovered the narrative layer that colour would add to the work. Together with the reflection of the camera as it shifts in and out, it breaks the mysticism around the filmmaking process.' - Karimah Ashadu

## Room 2

### *Pure Rugged Water*, 2025

Objects that feature in *MUSCLE* (screened in the adjacent room) materialise within this gallery as a new group of sculptures. *Pure Rugged Water* is a series of glass simulacra that reference the ubiquitous water pouches consumed by male subjects in the film. Loosely regulated by the Nigerian authorities, anyone can start a 'pure water' company and often, the water isn't free of impurities at all. Branded with the artist's own pure water logo, these works allude more broadly to the commodification and extractivist economies relating to natural resources in Nigeria, both during, and after, its colonial occupation. The rising cost of this source of water reflects the challenging economic circumstances in the country. As the artist explains 'I wanted to highlight how even water is embedded in capitalist structures and becomes a symbol of democratised access to economic independence.'

## *Cotch I & II, 2025*

These two sculptures are based on the stackable monobloc chair – the world’s most popular piece of garden furniture, ubiquitous in the slums of Lagos where *MUSCLE* is set. From weddings to funerals, street celebrations to moments of languor, they denote universality and act as a measure of value – as much in the economies of mass production, as how they operate as a signifier of a certain social class. Elevated here in mixed-media and cast with resin, the chairs are covered in fabric sleeves made from a patchwork of recycled sports clothes with branded logos.

## *MUSCLE, 2025*

With no single protagonist or linear narrative, *MUSCLE*, which has been commissioned especially for this exhibition, immerses us in a spectacle of strength, staged through an intimate, amplified portrait of bodybuilders in the slums of Lagos. Images of inflated muscles, bulging veins, and luminous skin glistening with sweat fill the screen. The metallic clang of barbells, from what we discern as a makeshift outdoor gym, punctuate the guttural sounds of exertion and the noises of the nearby street. Breath and muscle move in a syncopated sonic choreography, and the men’s commitment to the ritual of maintaining the body is evident. At intervals, they drink sachets of ‘pure water’, a product of dubious provenance, produced and sold on the streets and framed like ‘product-placement’ within the film. In patriarchal societies like Nigeria,

the construction of masculine identity – and its accompanying constraints – can be seen as a performance, one that requires the validation of an external gaze, but that performance is not without its vulnerabilities. As the men work to refine and sculpt their bodies we are witness to their motivations, ambitions and insecurities, as well as the desires and forces that shape and drive them.

‘*MUSCLE* reveals the tension in how the men carry themselves, the weight of expectation, the way that their particular performance of masculinity requires an audience to activate it, otherwise it’s flaccid. There’s a vulnerability beneath the toughness, a precarity beneath the image of masculinity as something fixed, and I’m interested in that slippage. Society hasn’t really allowed men to be soft, or ‘weak’, so I’m interested in what that does, and how that repression is embodied.’ - Karimah Ashadu

## Room 3 *Cowboy, 2022*

Across a two-channel video installation, voice, image, and sound combine to produce a meditative exploration into the story of a man named Cowboy. His background is marked by migration and shaped by his love for the equestrian, as he recounts a lifetime spent in service to horses. On the right channel we see the leaves of a palm tree rustling against a blue sky, alternated with images of the ocean. On the left, we follow the protagonist as he tends to and rides his horse. The

strength and autonomy of the animal finds a compliment in the rider - a mutual responsibility develops and each grows to intuit movements of the other. As *Cowboy* reaches the sea, the two screens sonically coalesce. The cargo ships in the far distance are a reminder of the global economic trade central to Nigeria's past and its future - as well as darker histories of exploitation, undocumented migration, and the shadow of forced displacement amid the transatlantic slave trade.

'There is always a lot of symbolism in my work, but in *Cowboy* much more so because it comes from a soft place. For example, the motif of the palm trees gently fluttering in the wind. If we go back in West African history, palm fronds signified peace during times of strife, but also resilience, since they were used to camouflage buildings during times of war. Or, the cowboy is shot a lot from the back, and that image, particularly with a Black man, is historically charged. But then if we think of the image of the cowboy in mainstream culture, there isn't really any such thing as an African cowboy, especially a gentle one. I wanted to subvert that.' - Karimah Ashadu

# List of works

- 01 *King of Boys*  
(*Abattoir of Makoko*), 2015  
HD digital film, colour with  
stereo sound  
05:00 mins

Director and editor:  
Karimah Ashadu  
Produced by:  
Karimah Ashadu  
Camera:  
Karimah Ashadu  
© Karimah Ashadu, 2015  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Sadie Coles HQ, London

- 02 *Pure Rugged Water*, 2025  
Glass  
12 x 15 x 7cm  
Series of 12

Courtesy the artist and  
Sadie Coles HQ, London  
Produced with additional  
support of the Alexander  
Tutsek-Stiftung

- 03 *Cotch I*, 2025  
Mixed media  
89 x 46 x 46 cm

Courtesy the artist and  
Sadie Coles HQ, London

- 04 *Cotch II*, 2025  
Mixed media  
89 x 46 x 46 cm

Courtesy the artist and  
Sadie Coles HQ, London

- 05 *MUSCLE*, 2025  
HD digital film, colour  
with stereo sound  
22:20 mins

Director and Editor:  
Karimah Ashadu  
Camera and Production Coordinator:  
Aigberadion Israel Ikhazuangbe  
Sound Recordists:  
Onu Rosemaryjoy Chiwendu  
& Joseph Eyo Edem  
Audio Post-production:  
Jochen Jezussek  
Colour Grading and Graphic  
Designer:  
wave-line GmbH  
Production Assistants:  
Ibrahim Babatunde Adebayo  
& David Olamide Lawson  
Creative Producers:  
Leonardo Bigazzi &  
Alessandro Rabottini

Commissioned and produced  
by Camden Art Centre, London  
Fondazione In Between Art Film,  
and The Renaissance Society at the  
University of Chicago. Co-produced  
with Golddust by Ashadu.

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bodybuilders and crew; Marie  
Becker and Gianna Furia; Camden  
Art Centre; Fondazione In Between  
Art Film; Sadie Coles HQ, London;  
the Renaissance Society at the  
University of Chicago; and the  
artist's family.

© Karimah Ashadu, 2025  
Courtesy of the artist; Camden Art  
Centre; Fondazione In Between Art  
Film; The Renaissance Society at  
the University of Chicago; and Sadie  
Coles HQ, London.

06 *Cowboy*, 2022

HD digital film, colour with  
stereo sound, two channel  
10:40 mins

Director and editor:

Karimah Ashadu

Camera:

Aigberadion Israel Ikhazuangbe

Sound Recordist:

Anthony Monday

Sound Adjustments:

Jochen Jezussek

Colour Grading:

Abdulmonim Twebti

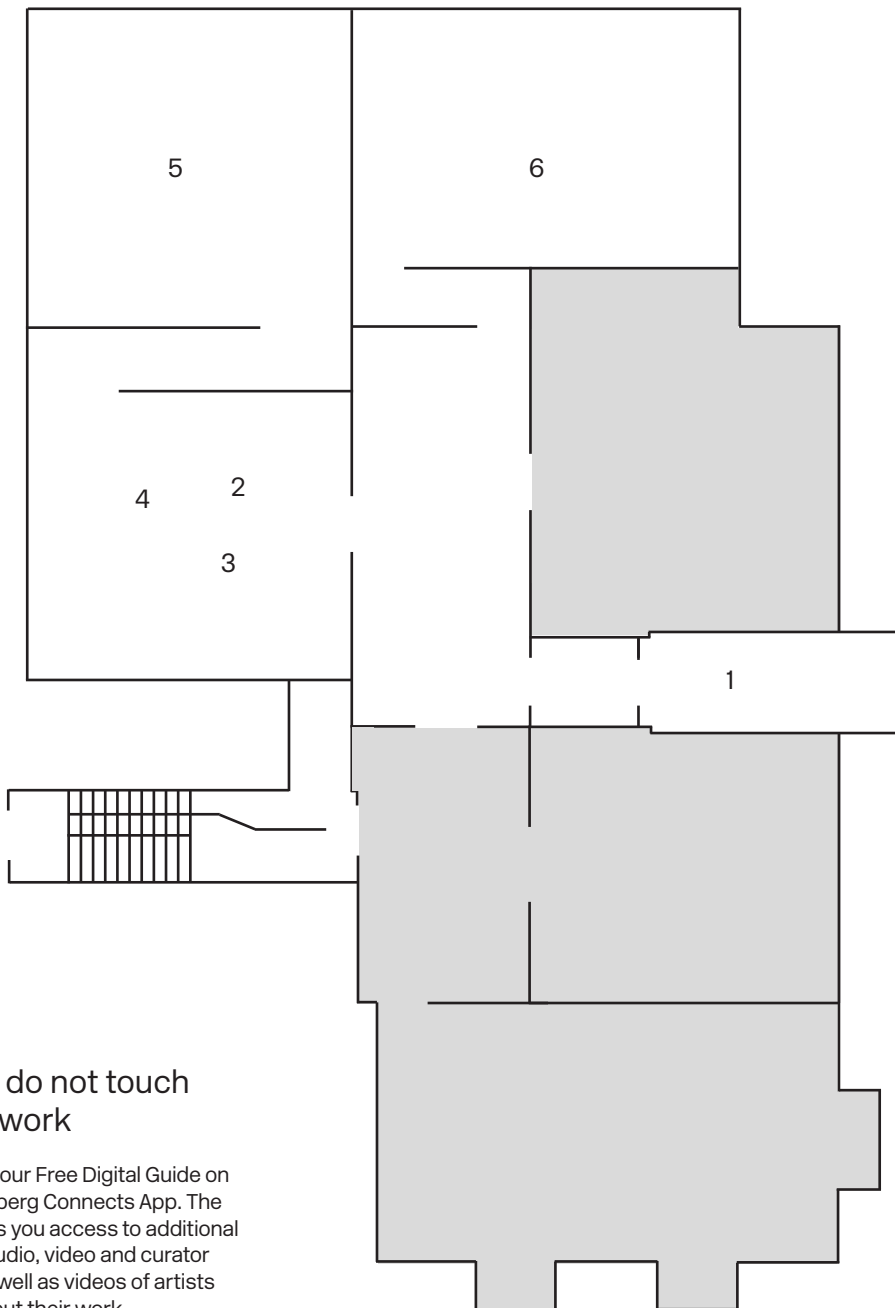
Produced by :

Golddust by Ashadu

With special thanks to Cowboy  
and crew; Bettina Steinbrügge and  
Behörde für Kultur und Medien,  
Hamburg.

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Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles  
HQ, London.



Please do not touch  
the artwork

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content, audio, video and curator  
tours – as well as videos of artists  
talking about their work.

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