

Karimah Ashadu

MUSCLE, 2025

Karimah Ashadu's prevailing socially relevant work is concerned with labor and self-determination practices pertaining to the social, economic and cultural context of West Africa and its diaspora. Ashadu's new film *MUSCLE* (2025) is an intimate portrait of body builders in the heart of Lagos' slums striving to attain a hypermasculine ideal. In the socio-cultural context of Nigeria, where this film is set, patriarchy rules. The men are portrayed with what they have –weathered, self-built and incomplete equipment coupled with the intense Nigerian heat. They train relentlessly every day to embody an archetypal performance of masculinity. Seeking to engage in a dialogue around representation, identity formation and masculinity, *MUSCLE* gives us a small yet visceral window into Nigeria's zeitgeist.

Sound plays a vital role in *MUSCLE*. A cacophony of exhaustion and gain is set against the idiosyncratic ambience of Lagos' ghettos, amplifying the visceral nature of the work. A fast spur of Yoruba –the indigenous language of Lagos –invites the viewer into the mindsets and goals of these 'muscle men' that hope for better economic opportunities through their glaring display of exaggerated bodily masculinity. The mesmerizing ambience of men talking heatedly in Yoruba merges with the faint grunts and groans of exertion, metal clashing against metal before thudding on the sandy ground, the counting of reps coupled with shouts of encouragement.