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Erotic bulbs and the good hair day
Meet Kutlug Ataman, the Pedro Almodóvar of the art world

He is a film-maker-turned-artist, and he shares with the celebrated Spanish director a sympathy for the women, divas and transvestites who populate most of his work. Like Mr Almodóvar, the Anglo-Turkish Kutlug Ataman is openly gay and is drawn to the eccentric extremes of society. His most famous recent work chronicles a year in the life of an obsessive British bulb fancier, a woman so attached to her hippeastra that she takes photos of her favourite flowers with her whenever she must, regretfully, leave her West London home. Although some viewers may smirk, Mr Ataman sees her, as he sees all his subjects, as kindred spirits. "The women I record in my films are both true individuals and extensions of myself. I am particularly interested in divas and transvestites because they are extreme individuals who are constantly performing their personalities," he says of his distinctive filmic portraits. "I am not observing them in a voyeuristic way; my films are a form of self-expression."

Mr Ataman's four-screen film installation, "The Four Seasons of Veronica Read", became the surprise hit of last year's Documenta, the international contemporary art show held in the German town of Kassel every five years that can make or break reputations. Normally tight-lipped critics raved about the "flower lady film"—its bulb fertilisation scene was at once comic and erotic and provided a rare moment of light relief in the strait-laced exhibition. Suddenly Mr Ataman shot from being the art world's best kept secret to becoming its darling. On February 11th a show of his starts at London's Serpentine Gallery. His work also opens soon at two other London venues, and later this year in The Hague. Since Documenta, the five editions of the Veronica Read film have sold out and his work has been purchased by private collectors and museums such as the Ludwig in Vienna and the recently opened Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich.

"It's funny," says the 41-year-old artist. "I always behaved as though I was famous—I guess that's the diva in me. I didn't think it would take five years." Nonetheless, Mr Ataman remains surprised by his success in the art world and unsure whether he belongs there. He left Turkey after the military coup in 1980 and attended film school at the University of California, Los Angeles. When he returned to Turkey in the late 1980s, his first feature-length film, "Lola and Bilidikid", was accepted at the Berlin film festival and managed to make a profit on the art house circuit. He was poised to work his way through

the independent film world when he met Rosa Martinez, the influential curator of the 1997 Istanbul Biennale, in an Istanbul bar. As he wondered aloud where he could find a cinema willing to show “Semiha B. Unplugged”, his eight-hour monologue of the 80-year-old Turkish opera diva recounting her life, Ms Martinez suggested he present it as a work of art in her exhibition. After all, no one could be expected to watch it from beginning to end (“Even the most devoted viewers have to go to the loo,” quips Mr Ataman), so instead the audience was invited to walk in and out of episodes of Semiha’s life as she chatted her way through a history of Turkey in the 20th century, from Ataturk onward, in which she is invariably the star.

A different kind of story

Rather than a narrative film, the work becomes a moving image self-portrait made out of Semiha’s recollections of her life. Whether she tells the truth or a lie is not important. The point is that as she tells her story to the world, continually recreating herself in words, like an aged, modern-day Scheherazade. Mr Ataman’s low-tech, hand-held camera both makes the film more intimate—Semiha looks as though she is speaking directly to the viewer—and constantly reminds us that it is a fabrication. He has shot a cross between a confession and chatty gossip, a documentary and a talk show.

Showing films in art galleries is nothing new; artists have been doing it since Andy Warhol started the trend in the 1960s. But it seems to be undergoing a renaissance at the moment. Mr Ataman believes the gallery is a particularly effective venue for his work because, as viewers walk in and out of his films, everyone has a unique experience. No one sees the same parts of Semiha’s or Veronica’s life. Viewers make up their own montage as they encounter his installations. It may seem frustrating that he gives only snippets of lives, that there is rarely a beginning, middle and end, and that there is no big message. But Mr Ataman prefers limited information because he believes that comprehensiveness is impossible: we can never know the whole story, no matter how much someone says. “I’m not interested in facts,” he explains, “I’m interested in pointing to how people tell their story and how they manipulate the facts.”

Mr Ataman’s work is physical as well as verbal; personal as well as public. “Women Who Wear Wigs”, which premiered at the 1999 Venice Biennale, documents the funny-sad stories of four Turkish women wearing wigs for different reasons: one is an activist hiding from the police, another is a religious student who covers her head with a wig after veiling it with a scarf was forbidden on campus, another is a transvestite whose head the police shaved and the last one is a newscaster undergoing chemotherapy. Although their stories touch larger issues of political, religious and sexual control in Turkey, their

experiences are gripping on a personal level. Anyone watching will be absorbed by these tales of disguise and self-transformation.

Mr Ataman's experiments with film strike a chord because they pose questions about the human need for self-expression and freedom. His characters exist at the margins of society and are able to free themselves from its grip, even as they struggle to be accepted. As their interminable true confessions draw us in, they also act as parables of a knowledge culture which stimulates an appetite for information without giving satisfying answers.