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SCREEN THERAPY

Kutlug Ataman has run the gauntlet — from Turkish jail to college in LA, from coveted film-maker to successful artist

By Martin Herbert

Kutlug Ataman has built his life on contrasts. Aged 193 he was jailed and tortured for seditious activities in his native Turkey. A few years later he was in sunny California, studying film. In 1998, his third full-length movie, *Lola and Billy the Kid* — a chronicle of gays and transsexuals living in Berlin — won him awards and homophobic death threats; the following year he showed at the 48th Venice Biennale. At the time he said he hoped Hollywood wouldn't find out about his "night job" in the artworld. Now, though, the moment of truth may have arrived; certainly this month's show of seven video installations at the Serpentine Gallery isn't likely to slip unnoticed under the cultural radar.

It's the kind of story that would rock the Biography Channel, but Ataman hates documentaries. "There is this huge machinery that makes 99 per cent of all documentaries, claiming they're bringing you reality while using the format of fiction. It's all plot developments and character arcs. Ask for a grant and they'll ask for your story before you've even filmed it." This is interesting, because many of Ataman's gallery-based works — such as *semiha b. unplugged* (1997), an eight-hour verité study of an 80-year-old former prima donna of the Turkish opera; *Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999), a devastating look at a quartet of women forced to wear hairpieces for reasons that range from the medical to the political; and *Never My Soul!* (2001), a bittersweet, multi-tiered interview with a flamboyant Turkish transsexual — would seem to belie such animus. Filmed with a hand-held camera and plunging the viewer into fascinating real-life crises and fleeting joys, they look like docu-dramas. But they're not.

"With *Never My Soul!*, for example, the subject talked to me in documentary, interview-style first," says Ataman. "Then we transcribed it. she learned it, and then acted it. I intercut that with the real — to create this parallax, this disturbing sense of "is t real or not?". I wanted to point towards the fact that what you watch as reality always has to be somehow fabricated. For *Women Who Wear Wigs* I made sets to interview all the characters in — I wanted the locations to look haphazard but not quite real."

So if a documentary isn't a faithful picture of its subject, what is it? "It's always as much about implicit subjectivity is the real twist in his videos; though their subjects are typically fascinating and hold court with ease, for Ataman they are proxies for something else. "My work is not really about choosing interesting characters ... I see it almost as a process of talking to myself; they're always some extension of my own occupation or obsessions. With Ceyhan, the subject of *Never My Soul!*, it was about my sexual history as a gay man in Turkish society."

In fact, every aspect of his installations is designed to convey only a partial sense of identity — not just Ataman's but that of the filmed subject too, which is as much as one can ever hope to get. Size matters here: who's going to sit — or worse, stand — through an eight-hour record of an aged Turkish diva? "No, you are not supposed to see the whole thing from beginning to end," agrees Ataman. "I'm forcing you to expose yourself to someone's life or reality, and you can never totally attain it. With *Women Who Wear Wigs* the viewer has to oscillate between the four screens, so really you're not going to see the whole thing..." Still, such is the quality of performance — and make no mistake, Ataman's characters generally know they're on show — that you might find yourself spending much longer than expected.

As Matthew Barney, Atom Egoyan and others have proved, exclusive definitions such as video artist' or "film-maker' seems terribly old-fashioned these days, but Ataman is aware that film producers might still imagine that his commercial films will be touched by the spectre of Art. "'Arthouse' is basically used as an insult. It means a film made with lottery money that makes a loss." Does he think he'll ever have to choose between the gallery and the cinema? "I don't think so, and I hope not. I'm extremely satisfied with the immediacy of the artworld — I can decide something, film it and bring it straight out." The tensions of commercial cinema and of splintered selfhood can be dissipated all at once: "To me," says Ataman, "it's a healing practice."