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# Kutlug Ataman, Istanbul Modern, review

A new show by Kutlug Ataman is worth flying thousands of miles to see, says Richard Dorment .

By [Richard Dorment](#) 7:30AM GMT 16 Nov 2010

Although based in Britain, Kutlug Ataman is Turkey's best-known contemporary artist. He's also one of the few artists of any nationality whose work I'd travel anywhere in the world to see. So when the invitation to attend the opening of his first major exhibition inside Turkey arrived, I didn't have to think twice before accepting.

I was familiar with pieces shown at the Venice Biennale, the Serpentine Gallery, and Tate Britain's Turner Prize exhibition in 2004, but to see his funny, shocking, and passionate video installations in Istanbul was a very different experience from seeing them in London. The show transformed my understanding of his art.

At the entrance to his retrospective at Istanbul Modern, "The Enemy Inside Me", visitors are confronted with a work from 2007 entitled Turkish Delight. Here in Europe, the giant single-screen video might be mistaken for a light hearted jeu d'esprit. But against a Turkish backdrop it is so toe-curlingly, excruciatingly embarrassing that it was almost unbearable to watch. In it, Ataman films himself performing a lumbering belly dance while scantily clad in a gold-sequined costume and wearing a woman's wig.

Ludicrously shimmying and shaking for the camera, he dips and swirls, a parody of voluptuous female sexuality performing the dance that has come to symbolise Turkey itself.

But look a little closer and you see that his face is a mask of detachment. Indifferent to our lust or laughter, the dancer signals his disdain by the simple device of chewing gum. Like women who have to do this kind of dancing for a living, or like a proud near-Eastern country seeking entrance to the European Union, even as he stoops to seduction he is still in control. He knows that once he's grabbed our attention, he is the one who will call the shots.

And sure enough, just like that cross-dressing belly dancer, every work that follows makes compulsive – if frequently uncomfortable – viewing.

Ataman had another good reason for placing Turkish Delight at the entrance to the exhibition. In 1980, aged 18, he was imprisoned for suspected political subversion, blindfolded, beaten, and tortured. On his release, he left Turkey to live abroad, where he built an international reputation as a film-maker and video installation artist. But as a gay man who makes art that his culturally conservative countryman find threatening, to show Turkish Delight in Turkey is indeed to become the “enemy inside”.

Holding up two fingers to the forces of intolerance and authoritarianism that still threaten the liberal values he cherishes, Ataman makes it clear that he doesn't give two hoots what his critics think.

The show's title also refers to the enemy within us all, the person we know ourselves to be but disguise or suppress for religious, cultural, social, or political reasons. In his four-screen video installation, *Women Who Wear Wigs*, we meet four different women talking about how the simple act of putting on a wig enables them to become the person they truly are. A television presenter who has had chemotherapy is able to feel attractive again; a student circumvents the ban on headscarves in Turkish universities; a political activist finds safety in disguise; a transsexual prostitute wears a wig to attract clients. Ataman's point is that the concept of identity is fluid. Who we are is who we need to be in different situations and at different times in our lives.

And when that is not the case, something is terribly wrong. In one of Ataman's best-known works, he interviews an apparently ordinary, middle-aged Englishwoman who has devoted her life to cultivating *Hippeastrum* bulbs (a species of amaryllis that flowers once a year). As this gentle person talks and talks about her passion for these phallic-shaped scarlet flora, it gradually dawns on us that her relationship with the 800 pot plants she grows in her two-bedroom house is distinctly obsessive. She even takes slides of her favourite specimens with her on holiday to ease the pang of separation. Although *The Four Seasons of Veronica Reed* is presented as a documentary about horticulture, it is actually a portrait of a desperately lonely woman whose rigidly constructed identity (as the world's greatest *hippeastrum* expert) serves to exclude virtually all other human experiences.

Veronica, we come to understand, is performing for the camera. The stories she tells us serve to give a structure to her life and to keep anxiety at bay. Without them, what would she have?

Like a psychoanalyst, Ataman gently questions Veronica until, not fully understanding what she has said, she reveals that she once had a job caring for the dying, but found the experience too distressing to continue. Is her compulsion to plant, tend and nurture these bulbs, then, a refuge from the memories of what she has seen and the thoughts of what she must know lies ahead?

You experience Ataman's work physically as well as visually. The film of Veronica Reed is projected on both sides of four separate screens arranged in a square. While it is easy to view each screen from outside, it is more difficult to squeeze between them into the centre of the square to see the same images from inside, looking out. The artist wants us to understand that things look different depending on whether we see them from inside or out – but getting inside isn't always easy.

In contrast, in one of the most powerful works in the show, a devout Muslim recites the 99 names of Allah on four separate screens, which are arranged so that they ascend diagonally from floor to ceiling, like a prayer rising up to God. At floor level, the devotee rocks slowly back and forth, softly intoning the holy names. Gradually, his rhythm accelerates and the volume increases until in the fourth screen, suspended from the ceiling above eye level, the believer violently beats his breast in a paroxysm of religious frenzy.

Here, Ataman looks at the way believers obliterate their own identity to seek ecstatic union with God, much in the way Bernini did in his Ecstasy of St Teresa. The arrangement of the screens is therefore open, so that it is easy to see both sides of the projected image, which, by implication, has no "inner" or "outer" dimension, because in an altered state the believer has no consciousness at all. These are complex ideas which could only be communicated visually.

A novelist once told me that if she were to stop any stranger at random in the street and asked them to tell her the story of their lives and family background, she'd have the raw material for an epic novel. That's Ataman's secret: he looks at his subjects and accepts them as they really are, with all their complexities and contradictions.

There is nothing unkind or ungenerous in Ataman's make-up. His art succeeds because he never condescends. The stories these people tell to the camera become the raw material which he shapes through skilful editing. A Turkish transvestite on dialysis talking about her admiration for a famous movie star; a Californian plastic surgeon who believes that with his help immortality is just around the corner; a mild-mannered young American who likes to host orgies in his living room: many people would regard the people in these films as freaks or madmen. But seen through the eyes of this great artist, nothing human is ever boring.

**'The Enemy Inside Me', sponsored by Garanti Bank, is at Istanbul Modern until March 6. Details: [www.istanbulmodern.org](http://www.istanbulmodern.org)**

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