

ARTS

VISUAL ARTS

Return of the native

By Rachel Spence

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As my taxi whisks me through the leafy avenues of Nisantasi, I reflect that Istanbul's most glamorous neighbourhood is exactly where I would expect to find Kutlug Ataman.

This, after all, is the artist who made his name in the 1990s with feature films – *Serpent's Tale* (1994), *Lola and Bilidikid* (1998) – exploring gay sexuality in Turkish communities. As he morphed from film-maker to contemporary artist, his predilection for theatrically compelling subjects on the margins of society – the compulsive orchid grower, the diva on the verge of meltdown, a self-portrait as Turkish belly dancer – sustained his reputation as a showman.



Kutlug Ataman in his studio in Istanbul

Yet the man who greets me at his studio is a model of self-containment. “I can offer you water or tea,” he says graciously, gesturing for me to sit at a wooden table whose stylish minimalism reflects the overall ambience.

Ataman serves the tea and sits across from me. In a plain, dove-grey shirt, his dark eyes ringed by circles, he possesses the haunted, adrenalin-charged calm of an artist working flat-out for what is arguably the most important show of his career.

For Ataman is coming home. This week sees the opening of *The Enemy Inside Me* at Istanbul Modern, Turkey’s museum of modern art. It is Ataman’s first major show in his own country – incredibly, considering that he is Turkey’s best-known artist, the first to exhibit at the Venice Biennale (1999), shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2004, chosen as the only contemporary solo show for the opening of Rome’s Maxxi earlier this year. Asked why it has taken so long, he replies matter-of-factly. “I was never offered it before.”

Behind this simple statement lies a complex back story. Born into an affluent family, he recalls that “My parents expected me to become a diplomat because that’s what their parents did. They felt guilty [when I became a film-maker]. They thought it was their fault.”

In a way they were right, for Ataman’s passion was fired during the summers of his childhood when his family home – a grand modernist villa overlooking the Bosphorus – was rented out as a film location. “From the age of six to 12, all my summers were spent with film crews,” he recalls.

By the time he was 18 he was working as a projectionist in an Istanbul cinema. It was 1980; the country was being ruled by military junta. One night, masked policemen burst into his apartment and arrested him for showing subversive films. “One of the films they objected to was John Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath*,” he says drily.

He was held for 28 days, blindfolded, beaten and tortured with electric shock treatment to his tongue and toes, and hung from his arms. Yet he insists that the experience did not leave any lasting trauma. “I was immune but a lot of people weren’t. I saw people losing their minds, psychologically completely screwed up.”



Never My Soul' (2001) by Kutlug Ataman

It is possible that his experience at an exclusive yet brutal Franco-Turkish boarding school had toughened him up. “Whenever we made a tiny mistake there was corporal punishment, so I think I grew accustomed to it,” he muses.

Nevertheless his rapport with Turkey was scarred. He fled to California and enrolled in film school. “I kind of rewrote my story and recreated myself.” Since then he has lived in Paris, South America, Germany and London. In 1997, having won respect across Europe for his darkly poetic feature films, Ataman parachuted himself to the summit of the art world when *Kutlug Ataman’s Semiha B. Unplugged* – an eight-hour epic in which a Turkish opera singer talks with intense melodrama and dubious factual accuracy about her life – caught the attention of Rosa Martinez, curator of that year’s Istanbul Biennale.

Since then, he has produced a body of work marked by paradox and ambiguity. Frequently, his subjects – a Muslim woman denied the right to wear her veil to university (*Women Who Wear Wigs*, 1999), his Armenian nanny whose family were killed by Turks in 1915 (*Testimony*, 2006), a shanty town peopled by impoverished Kurds (*Kuba*, 2005) – give voice to Turkey’s most troubled narratives. Yet his approach, which often involves multiple screens and contradictory, rambling narratives, defies simplistic interpretations.

“I don’t make a documentary about political repression,” he explains, adding that one of his favourite artists – “and there aren’t very many, I promise you” – is Rachel Whiteread. This is because he appreciates her exploration of negative space: “My work is like following a bear, or a soldier. You see the mark the feet made on the mud. You are seeing this repressive regime that has screwed up the lives of all of its citizens, maybe even themselves. Yet I don’t talk about it. I talk about the effect which is both indirect and very direct.”

Ataman's attitude towards his country is still profoundly ambivalent. On one hand, he is still intensely angry. (Indeed, he is starting legal proceedings against his torturers.) On the other, he has too wide and intelligent an imagination not to reach beyond Turkish micro-politics towards a more theoretical vision.

"What really interests me is how we are constructed both as individuals and as communities," he says. "We are constantly working to create these narratives with which we can operate, otherwise reality is too scary and pornographic, too raw."



The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read' (2002) by Kutlug Ataman

He describes his latest film *Beggars* (2010), which premieres at Istanbul Modern, as "a key to open up all the other works". Shot on seven screens, in monochrome slow motion, the film shows beggars on the streets of Istanbul directing their pleas to the camera. "Beggars are bone-dry reality; the bottom of the bottom of society ... " Ataman observes. "Yet there is also performance and theatre because you are never sure if they are what they seem to be." To heighten the uncertainty, he has mixed in actors. "So no one knows who is real and who isn't." The result, he hopes, will be a reminder that "as individuals we all beg to the rest of the world to create our own space and existence."

Ataman is thrilled by the prospect of his Istanbul show. "It is very symbolic for me ... I never really felt welcome. This is like closing a circle. It's very satisfying."

Apart from the time he spends with his partner, a British diplomat based in Islamabad, Ataman is now living in Istanbul and recently became a Turkish citizen again. Is he not alarmed that his return coincides with the rule of the Justice and Development party, condemned by many as conservative Islamists?

Not only is he not alarmed but he has actually voted for the government – twice. "I do not agree with their conservative policies, their moral statements and, at times,

their homophobia and nationalism but I still believe that they are the most democratic force in Turkey today.”

Ataman’s inquiring intellect makes it unlikely that he will ever spit out what he contemptuously describes as “easy, pre-cooked, politically correct solutions” in either his art or his politics. Let’s hope that his country knows how much it needs him.

‘The Enemy Inside Me’ is at Istanbul Modern, November 10-March 6 2011
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