

Out of the box

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Kutlug Ataman

Sherman Galleries, Sydney, until February 18

ONE of last year's best exhibitions was the Kutlug Ataman retrospective at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art. The show asked for sustained attention over many hours - and, ideally, multiple visits - but it was beautiful, harrowing and enchanting at every turn. The MCA erred in pairing it with a group exhibition, *Situation*, that included vast amounts of written text and hundreds of hours of video footage. Viewers who went upstairs from *Situation* to the retrospective, which included a filmed interview of eight hours' duration, may well have been ready to throw in the towel before they even started.

I erred in reviewing the shows together, which meant not doing Ataman justice. So I welcome the decision of Sydney's Sherman Galleries to begin its 20th anniversary year with an exhibition by Ataman. Though far smaller than the MCA show, it gives Australians a chance to catch up with this beguiling and influential Turkish artist.

Most of his works at Sherman Galleries are more or less in line with expectations of contemporary art shows: they use moving images in novel, conceptually driven ways; they show considerable flair in the way they are displayed; and they contain no talking. Each of them is convincing in its own way, but none is quite characteristic of the work of a man who once said, "Talking is the only meaningful activity we're capable of."

More characteristic are two video works that were seen in the MCA retrospective as part of *Kuba*, a 40-screen installation of face-to-camera interviews with residents of a Turkish shantytown. One of them, *Hero*, is an interview with a young man, Hakan, shot straightforwardly with what appears to be a handheld camera.

Hakan talks in Turkish to Ataman, who sits behind the camera, about his life. He is unremarkable: tall, painfully shy, likeable. But as he talks, something more moving - which is to say, a stronger story - takes shape.

Hakan, who lives in *Kuba*, has long hair, a pimply face and an obsession with Enrique Iglesias. He is gentle and has female friends, but no girlfriend. His male friends say, "You are a man, what do you want with Enrique Iglesias?" He can't really answer, but he admits: "If he made an album and all he said was, 'Hello, I'm Enrique Iglesias', I'd go out and buy it."

Thus, like many of Ataman's subjects, he is obsessed and full of barely disguised yearning. At one point, after much hesitation and off-camera cajoling, he breaks into one of Iglesias's songs. It doesn't go well - he insistently rubs his hand on his forehead, and his eyes are mostly shut - but it gives him enough courage to try singing his favourite Iglesias hit, *Hero*. "I can be your hero, baby," he sings, mously, in English. "I can kiss away your pain."

This, like the first song, peters out, at which point Hakan admits he doesn't know the meaning of the words he has just sung. He guesses from the rhythm that they're about trying to say something meaningful to a girl. And he knows from the video clip that the hero in Iglesias's song has sacrificed his life in order to save the girl he loves. "I was moved," Hakan explains. "I was jealous because I've never been able to do anything like that."

Hero, like most of the work that has made Ataman a leading light in contemporary art, consists of a cleverly edited interview with a subject whose trust he gained over a long period. It falls more naturally into the tradition of documentary film-making than into standard traditions of art.

Ataman, who started out as a feature film-maker and has been showing his work in art galleries and biennials only since 1997, claims that people versed in film history and film theory tend to tap into what he is trying to do more easily than aficionados of art. (He was discovered and championed in the art world by Rosa Martinez, curator of the 1997 Istanbul Biennial and the last Venice Biennale, after she saw his eight-hour interview with an aged Turkish opera singer.)

"I assumed that people in the art world knew about the evolution of cinema," Ataman says. "But they didn't know anything. Art education is completely separate from cinema education. I don't know any curator who can really talk about the history of cinema with full authority. They couldn't even talk with me at the student level. The same is true for cinema people: they don't understand art. That to me is quite mind-boggling. I think they should be interlinked, on top of each other. People connect the history of sculpture and architecture to painting, but the moving image is considered separately. Why?"

It's a good question. Documentary film-making has a complex tradition of its own, one that has bred many schools, all of them trying to solve the question of how to balance truth-telling with storytelling. Of all the pivotal figures - including Robert Flaherty, John Grierson, Dziga Vertov, Robert Drew, Marcel Ophuls, Claude Lanzmann and Jean Rouch - Ataman seems to derive the most from American Frederick Wiseman, who refers to his documentary films as "reality fictions".

Wiseman goes to great lengths to practise as objective and nonjudgmental a style as possible. His films have neutral titles such as *Hospital*, *Juvenile Court* and *High School*. But he always acknowledges his approach is in fact just that, a style.

"All the material is manipulated," he says, "so that the final film is totally fictional in form, although it is based on real events."

There is a similar tension between fiction and reality in Ataman's work. The instinctive appeal of most documentaries comes from the feeling that we are getting to see real life as it is lived off-camera. At first, this is the appeal of Ataman's films, too: his unusual, marginalised or eccentric subjects talk in a way that is almost shockingly intimate and unguarded, and one feels exposed to previously hidden truths. But what is really going on is subtler: a complex weaving of self-disclosure, deception, fantasy and suppression, all enacted through the activity of talking.

Ataman is certainly no Michael Moore, putting himself in front of the camera at every opportunity, but he does belong to the tradition of documentary-makers who subtly underline their involvement and empathy with their subjects.

In the first place, Ataman can occasionally be heard off-screen, asking questions, gently prompting. But, more important, he only chooses subjects with whom he feels points of connection, whether because they are, like him, outsiders (he is a gay man from a Muslim culture) or because they are, again like him, prone to obsessions and fantasies.

"I have a tendency to fictionalise, or put into a structure, my own life in order to be able to talk about it," Ataman says, after describing a childhood in which his home was rented out by his bored mother to film crews for use as a set. "And I don't know how much of it is true. The facts are true, but once you talk about something, you give it a form."

Like the American writer Janet Malcolm, Ataman is interested in what happens when we shape and edit reality, as all of us do all the time, even just by looking around us. The truth, writes Malcolm in *The Crime of Sheila McGeough*, is "messy, incoherent, aimless, boring, absurd. The truth does not make a good story. That's why we have art."

Ataman goes further. He dismisses the idea of truth altogether and thinks of human

identity as "theatre, as something artificial and constructed. Reality is in fact a form of creation. And for that reason we are all performance artists, we are all acting." He combines this position, which might be described as relativist or post-structuralist, with a powerfully felt humanism, a poignant sympathy for his subjects.

What of the other works in the show? Dominating the main space, visually and aurally, is a work called 99 Names. Across five screens, each suspended from wires at odd angles, are projected moving images of a man rocking back and forth in a kneeling position. The intensity of the rocking increases on each screen, so that on the first screen the man is seen front-on and meditating calmly, and by the final screen he is filmed from behind, rhythmically shouting and hitting himself vigorously. The placement of the screens, rising as they form a curve across the room, suggests flight. (The work's first setting, in a cathedral in Copenhagen, doubtless made the allusion to transcendence clearer.)

The title alludes to an old Sufi text, Ninety-nine Names of Allah, which, in the manner of the pantheon of Greek gods, attributed to Allah every conceivable way of being human, from the most peaceful to the most violent and destructive. Ataman's piece has sexual overtones, too: block out the images and the grunting, chanting sounds of the man can sound orgasmic. For Ataman, the piece is "a picture of the human psyche from id to superego". It's a little overdetermined, perhaps, but the effect is certainly striking.

It contrasts neatly with Martin Is Asleep, a piece Ataman was commissioned to make for the turn of the millennium. Irritated by the grand artworks and even grander statements unleashed at that time, he wanted to create something with a counterbalancing effect. Martin Is Asleep consists of a tiny image of a naked man, seen sleeping on his side, projected on to a doll's-house bed on the floor. The projector, low to the floor, conjures the sinister image of Big Brother, in contrast to the sleeping man, who is peaceful and oblivious, but also vulnerable, in need of protection.

Two other DVD loops belong to the same series as works that were seen at the MCA. They are examples of Islamic script animated to form images, and belong to a long Islamic tradition of distorting calligraphy into figurative shapes (examples of which can be seen in Crescent Moon, the show of Southeast Asian Islamic art opening soon at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra). In the best of the two, a Farsi word meaning image, face or copy, splits and rotates, forming at one point the turbaned head of a man. At other points in the rotation the turbaned man takes on a monstrous appearance, giving the piece a certain political bite. "It's really a piece about how any image has a language hidden in it," Ataman says.

Ataman's influence on contemporary art has already been deep. Documentary films are screened in increasing numbers at art museums and biennials across the world. They aren't always as compelling as Ataman's and even when they are, one might reasonably question the appropriateness of their display in art galleries rather than cinemas. But work as subtle and as moving as Ataman's challenges our prejudices about what is and is not art and, in his case, it is the kind of challenge one should welcome.