

## Installations by Turkish video artist Kutlug Ataman provide extraordinarily intimate biographies of their eccentric, exotic subjects, says J J Charlesworth

**Y**ou might end up liking the bizarre and extreme personalities of Kutlug Ataman's world, or you might find them unbearable. Either way, bring a packed lunch because this is an exhibition that grows on you – if you give it time.

Turkish-born Ataman started his career in film, but more recently he's been making inroads into contemporary art with his engaging, often deliriously lengthy portraits of the more exotic examples of human life he's discovered on his way. Ataman's large-screen projections let us into the intimate, sometimes shocking biographies of individuals whose lives are anything but easy, humdrum or straightforward, and, by eliminating the time limits of the TV documentary or the feature-length film, his gallery installations let the videotape roll while his subjects unravel their improbable lives before us.

Take Ceyhan Firat, the subject of the three-hour-long *Never My Soul*. Firat is a "pre-op" transsexual, a witty, bitchy, moody legend-in-her-own-bathtub. As she (or he) chats about her life, we learn why she left Turkey for Switzerland; of her father's brutality, of living off prostitution, of murdered transvestites and movie stars, of porno flicks and the importance of product placement.

It takes a while, but eventually you realise that Firat's

monologues might not quite be the revelatory bio-documentaries they initially suggest, that Ataman might be conspiring with her in scripting her more melodramatic moments, and, before we know it, Firat and her doting boyfriend are performing the hardcore version of *Little Red Riding Hood* for Ataman's camcorder.

That our personalities are a kind of masquerade is an ongoing theme in Ataman's work, but this isn't just an idle celebration of self-indulgent hedonism, of acting out one's escapist fantasies for their own sake. Ataman's subjects may live in their own worlds, but the real one is close at hand, with all its casual violence, bigotry and prejudice, and their wilful refusal to conform runs the gauntlet of censure and disapprobation.

This clearly comes out of Ataman's experiences as a gay man in the restrictive culture of modern Turkey, and underlies his fascination with those who dare to push the narrow confines of what is morally acceptable.

The four-screen installation *Women Who Wear Wigs* nevertheless shows that Ataman's work isn't simply about those who fall outside the norms of gender and sexuality. It presents us with four wildly different women, bound only by their common act of wearing wigs. One, a successful middle-class journalist, uses wigs to hide the ravages of the chemotherapy undergone to fight cancer; another, a political mil-

itant still wanted by the authorities, has been in disguise for 30 years. The third, another transsexual prostitute, is regularly beaten up by the police, who shave her head to make business difficult, while the last is a young Muslim student whose wig replaces the headscarf she is banned from wearing at university.

These four would disagree about pretty much anything if put in a room together, but the wry humour of Ataman's com-

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**These people are flamboyant, passionate, hurt, obsessed – and profoundly cut off from the world**

mon link allows us into the hardship and resilience of each of them with an unassuming charm that belies the seriousness of their experiences.

And, while seeing each one in isolation might reduce their stories to single-issue polemics – the raw deal for prostitutes, or Muslims, or political dissidents, and so on – Ataman's installation of the four projections in a line ensures that we experience all simulta-

nously, surfing endlessly over this odd cross-section of modern Turkish reality, rendered all the more compelling by the work's unassuming common thread.

Ataman has become progressively more confident with the opportunities that showing in a gallery offers, moving away from single screen to these more elaborate configurations. The most recent piece, *1+1=1*, further breaks up our normal experience of documentary video; the subject is a Turkish Cypriot poet who, sitting at her smart dining room table, recounts with dignified calm the violence of the interethnic killings and the Turkish invasion of 1974.

Two projections mirror each other across the corner of the gallery, but each one presents us with a different point in her recollections. It's an uncanny trick that sees the subject "split in two" across both space and time, collapsing the divide between her act of recollection and the time of memory itself; personal identity, subjective memory and social reality are entwined but never quite add up.

It can nevertheless be pretty tough to keep up with hours of English subtitles from Turkish, which makes *The Four Seasons of Veronica Read* all the more appealing, hilarious and unnerving. Ataman has moved away from the Turkish contexts that frame his earlier works, and discovered in the London suburbs a home-grown variety of his favourite

persona. Ms Read is the country's authority on the amaryllis bulb, or hippeastrum. She is intensely, passionately, profoundly, wildly fascinated with this triffid-like blossom, and yes, she seems more than a little cracked.

But this is perhaps the fate of all those who believe in one thing to the exclusion of all else, and her monomaniacal passion for amaryllis is absurdly infectious after a while. As with all Ataman's protagonists, Read's inner world steadily blots out our previous sense of reality, until she has us all believing in amaryllis. Until, that is, she discovers an infestation of mites, at which point she embarks on a merciless campaign of extermination, coldly butchering any bulb unlucky enough to bear its taint.

Ataman lets us into the world of people whose inner lives have, for whatever reason, become monstrous. Flamboyant, passionate, hurt, obsessed, and profoundly cut off from the world – they're the hothouse flowers of human experience. But, unlike those media freak shows of the banal and the eccentric, of *Big Brother* "reality" TV and Martin Bashir interviews, Ataman presents his subjects with a gentle, unsentimental empathy that allows us to see in them a little of ourselves. Just don't forget to bring that packed lunch.

*The exhibition is at the Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, London W2 (020 7298 1515), until March 9.*