

Turkish Artist Comes Full Circle With Retrospective

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ISTANBUL — With his first retrospective in Turkey — “The Enemy Inside Me,” at the [Istanbul Modern](#) — the video artist Kutlug Ataman has come full circle.

After having been arrested during the military coup in 1980, and with much of his early footage seized and destroyed, Mr. Ataman left Istanbul for the United States as a young man to study filmmaking. Now, at age 49, his work is on display through March 6 at the premier contemporary art museum in Turkey.

“I was one of the millions who were arrested unnecessarily,” Mr. Ataman said during a recent interview. “I was not an artist: I was an 18-year-old boy who was interested in filmmaking.

“We had a Turkish cinematheque on Siraselviler Avenue, a nice place where mostly left-leaning intellectuals hung out, like in Europe. So there was a lot of cigarette smoking and watching of Eisenstein and long discussions.”

But a Turkish court accused him of showing subversive films. “Indeed, I was learning to be a projectionist at the time, trying to learn everything I could about filmmaking,” he said. “And the film I showed was John Ford’s ‘Grapes of Wrath.’ So you can imagine how absurd that was.”

In the end, the arrest “was great for me,” he said. “I remember the very first day I left Turkey, on a KLM flight to San Diego, and I felt that this is what life must be. I felt that I was reborn, I felt such a relief and an energy and a happiness that I had never experienced.

“When I arrived in San Diego, I learned English,” he said. “I didn’t know a word — I had had a French education. But I made a lot of friends and I had to catch up with life.”

He later moved to Los Angeles and earned a master’s degree from the [UCLA](#) film school. “But eventually I missed my country, my own culture,” he said. “And now that I am back, I am loving it.”

Since that time, the perception of reality and the politics of identity have helped shape his work.

“Kutlug is a political artist, of course,” Levent Calikoglu, curator of the Istanbul Modern and this exhibit, said in an interview. “You couldn’t see anything like this in Turkey before; the Turkish art scene was not ready for this show. Even this museum was not founded until 2004.”

Mr. Ataman’s works “show simplicity and complexity, and at the same time he shows us the ongoing identity struggle of Turkey,” said Mr. Calikoglu, the curator. “He speaks with ‘normal’ or marginal people and gives us some small clue to understanding what has happened in Turkey.”

Though Turkey now has what the artist calls “the most democratic government we have ever had,” that government includes “ministers who say that homosexuality is a disease,

and so in a way it is very upsetting for me to find myself in a position to say that I back this government, because I do,” said Mr. Ataman, who is gay and whose longtime partner is a European diplomat.

The exhibition is also a celebration of Mr. Ataman’s homecoming: he was born in the same neighborhood as the Istanbul Modern and now lives just 200 meters, or about 650 feet, from the museum.

“So you can imagine how it feels, after having gone all over the world, to be back and showing my work where I had never been able to before,” Mr. Ataman said. “Not just because of police reasons, but because they didn’t really understand video art in Turkey.

“Consider that even the first [Picasso](#) show here didn’t open until five years ago. But democracy and many other things are catching up at a mind-boggling rate.”

The 11 videos on display delve into how people construct their identities, whether they be a cancer patient and an invisible Muslim in “Women Who Wear Wigs,” or a transvestite playing the role of a Turkish movie star in “Never My Soul,” or even the artist himself, sashaying in a belly dancer’s costume in “Turkish Delight.”

“It was important that I do the belly dancing myself,” Mr. Ataman said, “because I deal with these extremely eccentric people and I wanted to put the camera on myself first, to establish that we are not talking about ridiculing anyone. I’m saying, let’s desensitize this issue and go to the next intellectual phase. I think it really serves that role, because

people know that it's me.”

“Also, I made this video at the time when the gallery I was with — well, they would never tell me they wanted me to sell out, but they would say something like, ‘Maybe you should try to do more seductive work.’ So this piece is kind of protesting against all that,” he said. “You have this delight that is nothing near anything pleasing: It’s a man with a beard, chewing gum and doing a really bad performance.”

Observers, however, should not confuse Mr. Ataman’s works with documentaries.

In his recent piece, “Beggars,” he mixes fact and fiction — real street people with actors — and challenges the viewer to decide which is which.

“I like this piece because it requires looking more so than just watching, like you would watch a film,” he explained.

“‘Beggars’ is a key to my work because on the one hand, it is kind of like a really good dry white wine: bone-dry reality. You can’t see it more clearly than at the level of the homeless who are part of the street. Or in war. Very real moments in which we feel real.

“At the same time, ‘Beggars’ has an element of theater performance, where fact and fiction meet and are superimposed, and you don’t know which is which. I wanted this synthetic feel to it and for people to really question, are these actors or are they real beggars?”

It is a device he also used in “Never My Soul,” the transvestite-actress piece which plays in an unconventional gallery space

furnished with sofas and easy chairs to resemble a living room. “Again, it is not what you expect,” Mr. Ataman said. “It’s synthetic. It’s blurred again.

“We put her life story on paper, and she learned every line by heart, like an actor would learn a screenplay. Then we literally re-enacted the whole thing. Then I intercut the two. Everything in that film is parallax. Is she really a movie star, or not? Am I an artist, or a film director?”

The exhibition, the museum says, is very well attended. Even that is a double-edged sword for Mr. Ataman.

“I am very, very happy because of this,” he said, “but at same time, it has made me a more difficult person. I guess I am also experiencing a certain mental fatigue from the art world, and so I’m a little bit worried that this show is going to make me a bit lazier now.”

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