



From Turkey with love

Artist Kutlug Ataman tells **Florence Waters** why he's such a fan of British life

Kutlug Ataman is full of contradictions. He is a filmmaker who describes his work as "sculpture". He is a Turkish artist yet his latest film is a celebration of Englishness. And despite his reputation as a progressive, he confides: "I shouldn't tell you this - it's a secret - but my taste is actually very conservative."

The Istanbul-born artist, whose exhibited work includes *Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999), in which a wanted terrorist, a Muslim student, a Turkish journalist and a transsexual prostitute discuss their lives hiding under wigs, says, "It is easy to provoke anywhere, if you want to. But I don't really go for that shock thing. I think it's counterproductive, in fact."

Following a Serpentine show (2002) and Turner Prize nomination (2004), Ataman grabbed London's attention with his last solo show *Küba* (2005), about a Turkish shanty-town which was exhibited in a disused postal sorting office. The installation transformed the dilapidated space into a squat-cum-cinema where the audience, perching on rickety old armchairs, were left no choice but to experience the squalor. His next film, which premiered at the Whitechapel Art Gallery last month and opens to the public this week, promises to be just as engaging.

meet Ataman to discuss his film installation *fff*, which stands for "found family footage" but also plays on the sign for the musical instruction "triple fortissimo", which usually coincides with a climactic moment in a piece of music. The footage, made with 16mm and Super 8mm hand-held cameras, is of family scenes from the Fifties and Sixties. Ataman sees the images as quintessentially English: rowing on the Thames, the British Navy, gardens, weddings and "those cold-feeeling beaches".

We meet at his new London apartment (he has lived in the capital since 2000), which reflects his work: minimalist, pristine, deliberate. The twin paintings at the head of the room - two faces designed to teach deaf people the shape of "oh" and "eey" sounds - are clues to a fascination which comes across in this latest work: the careful art of understanding, dissecting and communicating with a new culture that you don't understand - in this case, life in Britain.

The short films mark a departure in his work because they weren't shot by him. "In that way I'm completely blind and deaf." But this is all part of his design: "It is a perfect metaphor for coming from an outside world into a local culture, which I had to accept as my own."

The film seems to experiment with building meaning out of technique: Ataman is right, these films are constructed in just the way that a sculpture might be. The footage has been taken

to pieces and then reassembled by him so that the memories are distorted. One of my favourite images is like a mosaic of tiny squares placed together in rows which don't quite fit. The result is that the grainy image of a toddler playing in a garden appears to shimmer. Like a memory, it is at once lucid and then inaccessible.

The installation in the gallery projects three of the films on to one wall at once. Far from the effect of a cinema, the footage appears small, fragile - almost like a jewel. The wind-up-box-like music by British composer Michael Nyman (*The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and her Lover*) enhances the sweetness. Nyman was not



allowed to see the footage before writing the music, so it's an uncanny coincidence that they should fit together so well.

So is the film about nostalgia for old England or an "anthropological" study of a foreign culture? It's both. Ataman is a big fan of England: "In my mind it is a model country. I feel safer here than in my home city, Istanbul. There are a huge amount of things you can criticise but I think Britain is very special as a culture that is distinct from the rest of Europe."

The trouble is, he is not always sure how to approach this "distinct culture". Like a deaf child looking at an "oh" mannequin, he wants to learn from his film. "What is the right way to behave? What is the right way of saying things? Am I going to be misunderstood?" Then it dawns on him. He says humbly, "Basically, the film does the same thing as those HSBC commercials - the ones with the tag-line "never underestimate the importance of local knowledge" - and bursts into hysterics. If only all artists were this modest.

❖ *fff* was commissioned by the Whitechapel Gallery and Arts Council England. It is at the Thomas Dane Gallery, London SW1 (020 7925 2505), from Fri

Engaging: an image from *fff*, top; visitors watch *Küba*, in a disused sorting office

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