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'Art is not about making a cheap joke at the expense of your subject' - Kutluğ Ataman

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Kutluğ Ataman: 'The key work in this whole exhibition is 'Turkish Delight', in which I am belly dancing. The message I'm trying to give is "look I'm capable of pointing the camera at me".'

GALLERY



Kutluğ Ataman: key works

Highlights from Ataman's mid-career retrospective, 'The Enemy Inside Me'; the internationally-successful artist's first major show in his native country

Kutluğ Ataman is one of Turkey's best-known contemporary artists. Specialising in film and video installation works he first came to the attention of the art world at the 5th Istanbul Biennial in 1997, fully making his name with the presentation of *Women Who Wear Wigs* at the 48th Venice Biennale. In 2000 he was selected by the Istanbul-based curator Vasif Kortun for *Fresh Cream*, the second in the *Cream* series, which presents 100 contemporary artists to watch, as selected by ten leading critics. In 2004 he was chosen as one of the Turner Prize shortlist. His work is currently the subject of a mid-career survey, *Kutluğ Ataman: The Enemy Inside Me*, at *Istanbul Modern* (until 20 February).

Q: You were selected by Vasif Kortun for *Fresh Cream*. What did it mean to you to be included in this book?

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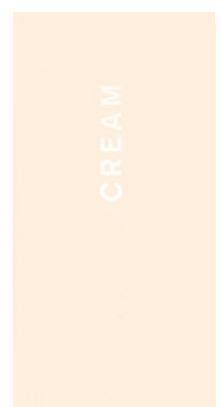
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I was in the beginning of my career and *Fresh Cream* was an indication that my work was being pursued in the international arena and had become valid globally - a number of curators who I met afterwards told me that it was the first time they recognised my name, even though some of them had already seen my work in places like Venice.

Q: How has your work and approach evolved and changed in the ten years since *Fresh Cream* was published?

By the time *Fresh Cream* had appeared I had made only one or two films and now I must have something nearer 30 works. And I now have my first solo show in Turkey, which is really important from a psychological point of view. For the ten years since *Fresh Cream* I've showed outside Turkey and not really in Turkey. In terms of approach am still pretty much doing just video. I remain very interested in our construction; how we construct our narratives, but I guess I have moved from people to community - how groups of people create their own common mythology, how we construct our knowledge of history and geography, how we re-write each other's stories and how these stories are imposed on cultures. I am working more on this area than on individuals who paint themselves in front of the camera. This was a natural evolution. I am still very much interested in the area of narrative, but within that extremely large area I am visiting every chapter if you like. I started with personas and then communities and history and geography.

Q: What are you working on at the moment?

I am working on two things. One is a series of works called *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*. I've completed the first half and now I am working on getting the finance for the second half and if that happens that will be finished before June. Meanwhile I am also working on a group of works - in other mediums as well as video - under the title *Fiction*, that I hope to realise in Cambodia. If it takes off it will probably come out in the UK first and then it will travel to other countries.

Q: You are currently the subject of a mid-career survey at Istanbul Modern. Would you say *Women Who Wear Wigs* is your most career-defining work to date? Which others from the show would you highlight?

They are all important, though *Women who Wear Wigs* is still extremely valid socially and politically and artistically [the work is a four-screen video installation of interviews with four Turkish women who discuss the reasons they have had to wear wigs; a terrorist who was forced to live part of her life in disguise, a well-known journalist who wears a wig to conceal hair loss from chemotherapy, a devout Muslim student banned from wearing her traditional headscarf in the classroom and a transsexual prostitute and political activist who had her head shaved when arrested by the police]. When I did it for the first time the artworld wasn't ready for that kind of technique, but you know what happened afterwards - people started to make these works using interviews. I had to defend it all by myself and it wasn't very easy, but it helped to crystallise my own theory at the same time and my own approach. When I look at the work that followed, all of them are natural evolutions of that theoretical research. The key

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work in that whole exhibition is a recent work called *Turkish Delight* in which I am belly dancing. A lot of the time the gaze of the artist is making fun of the subject. But art is not about making a cheap joke at the expense of your subject or for 'higher' art. Art has to be about intelligence. The message I'm trying to give is 'look I'm capable of pointing the camera at me'. The newest work in the show is called *Beggars* - the players are begging stories from the audience and the audience is begging stories from them. It's all about exchanging and telling your stories.

Q: What would be your recommendations for first time visitors to Istanbul?

I think if you really want to understand a country you have to be in touch with the whole place all at once. I don't think that someone who comes to Turkey for the first time should go directly to an art gallery or a museum. I think they should go to restaurants, I think they should get lost in a city; discover it, try to talk to people, to understand the place. What are the most urgent issues; socially, politically, culturally? How do people entertain themselves. *Then* I would go to an art gallery or museum. There are some interesting young galleries near the Istanbul Modern Museum, and the the IM is worth visiting, though it is more geared toward tourists coming to Istanbul and not so much towards Turks.

Q: What do you think are the biggest issues facing artists today? What do you wish you had known when you were starting out and what's your advice for aspiring artists?

I'm something of a single operator so I do not know very much about other artists but in the present climate financing is extremely difficult, certainly with video art. 90% of my time is spent on trying to find funding. I think I have been very very lucky in terms of what I wished I'd known. I was given recognition very early in my career, although then I was taking it all too seriously, and now I am much more relaxed. Maybe I would suggest being more diplomatic - it would have made my life easier!

Q: Where would you like to be in ten years' time?

I would like to have got to the stage where I could realise an idea without so much hard work. I would like to go back to my original basis in film making because I was trained as a filmmaker. I would like to be realising my screenplays for film, for entertainment. To go back into cinema, though cinema is changing very quickly so I will be very curious to see what happens to cinema in ten years time. Perhaps it will all be downloadable. Subject-wise it seems to be very much more about exploring myself, so maybe something more personal. In ten years' time I will be in my late 50s so God knows!

Kutluğ Ataman, thank you

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