

---

## The best and brightest 2003: The artist

---

### Kutlug Ataman

Talking is a form of rebellion for the Turkish-born filmmaker turned artist. Niru Ratnam meets the man who's got art taped

---

- [Niru Ratnam](#)
  - [The Observer](#), Sunday 29 December 2002
- 

Kutlug Ataman's art is simple to make. He points his camera at people, and they talk. Sometimes they sing or visit the hairdresser, tend their prize-winning flowers or manually pleasure their boyfriends. But mostly they talk - poignant, torrential, hilarious and captivating monologues about themselves. 'It'll be a bit of a cacophony,' says Ataman of his upcoming first solo UK show at London's Serpentine Gallery. 'I've never had so much work in a single space.' He's momentarily worried but brightens when he remembers that most Serpentine visitors won't understand Turkish. 'They'll all be reading the subtitles anyway! But I'll put in lots of soundproofing just in case.'

And rum subtitles they are, too. Ataman's work features an eclectic bunch. There's legendary Turkish diva Semiha Berksoy, dressed outrageously though she's well into her eighties, recounting a life as epic as the operas she's starred in. And in 'Women Who Wear Wigs' - the piece that Ataman showed at his debut New York exhibition in February 2001 - four films are shown side by side featuring a wanted terrorist, a Turkish journalist, a Muslim student and a transsexual prostitute who all wear wigs. 'I only select people who are extensions of myself,' says Ataman. 'I'm drawn to people who broadcast who they are. I like to draw attention to the way identity is formed through talking.'

Art critics have been falling over themselves to cast Ataman as a purveyor of truth about complex, contemporary identities that bend gender, cross borders and reject fixed sexuality. Ataman shrugs this off. 'Identity is a dress that other people put on you and make you wear - but then talking is a form of rebellion because you can work against those perceptions.' Ataman's own identity as an artist was accidental. Born in Istanbul in 1961, he went to film school in Los Angeles and graduated with an MFA from UCLA before going home.

As an openly gay filmmaker in Turkey, Ataman received plaudits and homophobic abuse in roughly equal measure. His second feature 'Lola and Bilidikid' was particularly well received ('A kind of gay Streetcar Named Desire,' noted The Guardian). Then, in 1997, Ataman pointed his camera at opera singer Semiha Berksoy for almost eight hours.

'I started making "semiha b. unplugged" and it struck me as very different to conventional filmmaking,' he recalls. 'I didn't really know what it was. Just after I finished it, my partner invited Rosa Martinez round for a drink.' Martinez was

curating the Istanbul Biennial and Ataman's description of his new film intrigued her. When Martinez saw it, she was so taken by Berksoy's extraordinary performance that she put it in the Biennial. Ataman's work was then picked up for the 1999 Venice Biennale and, earlier this year, the grand-daddy of all art shows, Documenta, came calling.

'I didn't even know what Documenta was,' he laughs. But 'The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read', a beguiling four-screen study shot over 12 months in the life of the gardener who is the National Plant Collection Holder of the *Hippeastrum*, was one of the stand-out hits of the show. So much so that in addition to his Serpentine exhibition, Ataman is also taking part in major group shows at both Tate Britain and the Barbican this spring. Not bad for someone who's made a grand total of six pieces of art. 'It's great. The art world's much more democratic than the film world,' Ataman enthuses. 'But, then again, if I'd trained as an artist I wouldn't have come this far - I would have been far too worried about what career moves to make.' There's not much point in Ataman worrying now: like the protagonists of his works, he seems to have happily stumbled headlong into his own most remarkable story.

- Kutlug Ataman is showing at the Serpentine Gallery, London, from 11 February to 16 March. Ataman's work also features in the group shows *Days Like These* at Tate Britain and *Witness* at the Barbican from 13 February to 27 April.