

Glimpses of strange lives

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Soul survivor: transvestite Ceyhan Firat talks about her troubles ()

Despite being virtually unknown in Britain, Kutlug Ataman, a 41-year-old Turko-British artist and filmmaker, has, thanks to the herd-like mentality of London's top curators, unexpectedly emerged as the art world's latest flavour of the month.

Alongside this, his first major show in the UK, Ataman is included in a group exhibition that opens at the Barbican on Thursday and, more impressive still, in the Tate's triennial survey of contemporary British art that begins in two weeks time. Inevitably this sudden burst of Ataman appreciation in Britain follows an international lead, specifically the critical acclaim his work received at a recent Venice Biennale and at a major international art exhibition in Germany held earlier this year.

The work that has so excited everyone is a body of long, simple and lightly edited documentary films, six of which are shown here, that, through their relentless recording on the minutiae of the lives of people who are either odd themselves or subject to unusual circumstances, serve as anthropological studies of the idea and practice of individuality. The three-hour long, *Never My Soul*, focuses on the Turkish transvestite Ceyhan Firat (pictured) talking about her struggle to be herself while the eight-hour epic, *Semiha B Unplugged*, features the clearly bonkers 92-year-old Semiha Berksoy, a Turkish ex-opera star who fancifully recounts her life story while sporting tragically overdone make-up and a collection of fantastic costumes. *The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read*, follows the eponymous woman, an obsessive, full-time breeder of Amaryllis flowers, through the cycle of the seasons.

Thankfully, Ataman doesn't expect you to sit through all this footage but rather to randomly sample chunks of these people's lives and thoughts, so enjoying the poetry of their real, everyday, though strange lives, engaging with their stories and feel a paradoxical sense of shared humanity with their attempts to be individual. Sadly, however, our culture is rather awash with "real", lightly edited, lowbudget footage of weirdoes going about their daily business and the Reality TV format is one that doesn't bear repeating in our galleries. Moreover, few are likely to positively identify with Ataman's subjects, being more likely to mildly ridicule them instead and thus Ataman's work inadvertently apes the sensibilities of Reality TV as well as its form. Not bad, but unnecessary, Ataman's films exploit the privileged space of the art gallery to harvest attention they would not get elsewhere. ■

- *Kutlug Ataman is exhibiting at the Serpentine Gallery until 9 March. Information: 020 7298 1515.*