

Tema Celeste
September/October 2002

Kutlug Ataman
Lehmann Maupin
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New York

Turkan Soray, the star of Kutlug Ataman's video *Never My Soul!*—presented at the Berlin Biennial last year and shown here for the first time in the US—has the poignant allure of a woman who was not born pretty yet has made herself beautiful through the alchemy of personality, determination, and artifice. Soray, named after a Turkish film diva, was born a boy. Because she is transgender (early in the work she raises her skirt, revealing that she is pre-op), her defiance of ordinary norms of beauty is bolder than other women's struggles to turn a perceived flaw into a triumph of appeal. Ataman's project merges documentary and biography with tropes of Turkish film. The work's title evokes Turkish cinema's clichéd virtuous, Lillian Gish-like virgin, who entreats her rapist, “You can have my body but not my soul.” Soray, who sells her body on the street after suffering abuse upon abuse—including a beating by an infamous Turkish police chief that left her with failing kidneys—retains the grace of traditional martyred heroines, from *Madame Butterfly* to *Mildred Pierce*. Ataman's portrait of Soray is tragic rather than dramatic or documentary, and her character is profoundly poetic. As she undergoes her daily dialysis she wears no makeup, a girlish ponytail, and hospital whites. With a hostess's grace, she gestures to the dialysis machine: “My blood goes in and comes out clean, redeemed. I start afresh every day. Every day reborn.” It is a simple observation, beautifully stated. Later she jokes that the machine is “the perfect husband. He gives me life and doesn't give me headaches.” Art about pain can be morally difficult. Human suffering does not necessarily make great art, but beauty wrung from adversity can be at the core of art's significance. Although Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Primo Levi, Frederick Douglass, and Bill T. Jones married witness with poetry, recent art seems more interested in chilly irony or pseudo-factual facade. A received wisdom today seems to be that suffering has a place only in melodrama. But as Ataman's video and Soray's eloquence prove, emotion does not diminish facts—it is a truly universal reality.