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Kutlug Ataman: PERFECT STRANGERS

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

by Adam Geczy

Turkish director Kutlug Ataman's feature films work with the classic documentary form. As an artist, he is a curator of people's experiences. In all his works, the inscrutability of a recorded moment is used to maximum effect: people talk to the camera, but the viewer is unable to talk back, interrupt or offer any feedback. Though anchored in very particular experiences, ordinary and extraordinary, the people that offer their testimony to Ataman's camera take on a strange, mythic quality, as if they were speaking for a collective. Thus Ataman is not simply an archivist, he is also an allegorist.

As part of his showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), his acclaimed video installation, *Küba* (2004) was held off-site from the core exhibition at the MCA in a building once used as a storehouse. Curiously unslick and makeshift, it presented a stirring electrical hubbub, a swarm of 40 monitors amid castaway furniture arranged with calculated disorder; augmented by vivid shifting colors and lights emitting from the installation's screens; all emanating a mixed cacophony. Chairs scattered about the room provided viewers an invitation to sit, listen to and observe Ataman's subjects relating stories of their lives. This exhibition was not for those on the run as it demanded both patience and attention. This effort reaped special rewards though it is doubtful whether anyone has watched all of the monitors not for want of time, but rather because of the harrowing accounts captured by the artist's camera. Gathered from various Middle Eastern communities, these are tales of violation, family instability, rape, death amid drug overdose. Ever the sensitive observer, Ataman, like the best interviewers, all but disappears from view.

This is borne out in two other works also included in the exhibition: *Stefan's Room* (2004) and *The Four Seasons of Veronika Reed* (2002). Both revealed their subjects as reflected through their hobbies. For Stefan, it is his extensive collection of tropical moths, while Veronika is the proud gardener of a rare breed of orchid. One in Berlin the other in London, these people create microcosmic paradises within their apartments, offering temporary protection from the outside world.

All of Ataman's films convey a melodramatic and obsessive quality. As a director, his emotional dial is turned to high. But what mostly saves his work from the histrionic and overwrought is way in which his subjects seek out their own beauty in a troubled, ravaged world.