

KUTLUG ATAMAN

Perfect Strangers

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

mca.com.au

22 June – 4 September, 2005

ALEX GAWRONSKI

Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman, through his various narrative videos, delves into the private worlds of numerous obsessive individuals and outsiders. Often using multiple projections, Ataman casts an ostensibly documentary eye over the activities of people, who for various reasons appear disassociated from the normative demands of mainstream urban preoccupations. Connected with such interests, Ataman draws implicit comparisons between the obsessions and compulsions of the individuals he portrays and traditional representations of artists as similarly 'mad' and 'irrational.' Not surprisingly, two central works in the exhibition *Perfect Strangers* explicitly focus on the obsessive collecting habits of those dedicated to propagating and amassing 'objects' of beauty; on the one hand, prized flowers and on the other, rare and brightly coloured moths.

Surprisingly, Ataman's video ruminations on the lives and obsessions of the individuals he portrays generally exude an air of cool detachment and moral neutrality, seemingly at odds with the passions of those depicted. That is not to say Ataman's work elides political or socially controversial topics though. Indeed, his revelation of the plight of Istanbul's transvestite community is frank and compassionate, as is his treatment of the stories of a female cancer sufferer, mortified at what she perceives as her waning physical attractiveness. Indeed, Ataman's works are virtually all imbued with suggestions, ambiguous and fleeting of what socially constitutes beauty. Such concerns again are marked by conceptions of beauty that stand outside those normatively inscribed by mainstream society. These underlying ideas in Ataman's work also stray into spiritual and existential territory, as he investigates the marginalised beliefs of persons convinced they are living second lives.

Central to the exhibition, *Perfect Strangers* are the related projection pieces, *The Four Seasons of Veronica Read* from 2002 and *Stefan's Room* from 2004. The first work appropriately utilises four projection screens depicting the horticultural activities of Veronica Read. Read is a woman consumed by the often-minute processes of propagating Amaryllis flowers in her home. These plants, seemingly a type of orchid notoriously difficult to grow, Read invests with almost magical properties, verging on the animistic. Here, Ataman films Read thoroughly engrossed in her dedicated



activity, as she undertakes a range of highly specialised and repetitive tasks; cutting, splicing, bagging, washing, clipping, freezing. Such processes are obviously underscored by accumulated scientific knowledge. Yet, in this instance the line separating science from eccentric passion is radically indeterminate. The screens comprising Ataman's installation physically emphasise this 'schizoid' blurring, as they comprise a bounded, semi-confined space. From the interior of this installation, the viewer is assailed by the sheer excess of Read's consuming obsession; immersed in her excited speech, her animated face at times unnervingly close.

Stefan's Room portrays the related personal collecting habits of Stefan Naumann, a man who has dedicated years to accumulating an extraordinary array of unusual, often spectacularly coloured moths from all over the world. In a personal and claustrophobic domestic space, surrounded by neatly arranged wooden filing draws, glass cabinets, folders, magazines and books, Naumann relates the lengths he has pursued realising his collection. Like Read, Naumann's idiosyncratic collecting habits waver between the dedicated pursuit of specialist scientific knowledge and the inner demands of a compulsion outweighed by mere rationality. At the same time and particularly in this instance, it is as if Ataman were also making analogies with his own function as an artist. That is, as an internationally renowned cultural 'professional,' Ataman recognises himself as similarly obsessed; in this case, with documenting, compiling and archiving the unique, but uncannily parallel stories of diversely located individuals. Nevertheless,

Stefan's Room is unlike the artist's previous video because, while Read verbalises her singular passion as though entirely unprompted, Naumann is noticeably more reserved, even wary on occasions of the artist's presence. This lends the work on occasions, an unexpected tension that is further emphasised by its spatial configuration; separate screens suspended at a variety of skewed and oblique angles.

The more socio-political of the works in *Perfect Strangers* are *Never My Soul* [2001] and *Women Who Wear Wigs* [1999]. The first presents the monologue of Ceyhan Firat, an Istanbul transvestite. Firat describes, in a surprisingly laconic fashion, her own experiences as part of a persecuted minority as well as those of her friends. These include torture at the hands of a local, especially brutal and authoritarian police chief, as well as various 'socially-conscious' attempts to re-educate such 'perverts', by cutting their hair and finding them respectable jobs, as waiters for example. The second video relates the personal stories of other transvestites, who describe the frequently laborious routines they undertake, as they transform themselves as women, alongside the social prejudices such a transformation generally provokes in Turkish society. Part of this multi-screen work also conveys the candid reflections of a female cancer sufferer, whose subjective experience of the disease is likewise conditioned by unspoken social imperatives to maintain her beauty at all costs. In this way, the subject's fear of mortality is overshadowed by what she regards as the more dire threat cancer poses to her beauty and sense of self. Likewise concerned with the existential crises of

individuals whose personal circumstances set them apart from 'normal' society, is the work *Twelve* [2003]. In this piece, six suspended videoscreens present the reflections of people convinced they have been reincarnated. One woman relates how she ran away from home in order to find her 'real' parents, eventually locating a family and presenting herself to them as their long deceased daughter, at the same time testifying to an uncanny knowledge of the dead child. In another, a youth describes his sense of self-alienation at experiencing himself simultaneously as two, very different, people—one good-humoured and youthful, the other, a taciturn and occasionally violent, middle-aged man.

Each of the works in *Perfect Strangers* enables particular chosen individuals to 'speak' on their own terms. Thus, the standard format of most of these works is the monologue. The implicit 'democratic' impulse underpinning this ongoing project, giving voice to the stories of eccentric and marginalised others, while backgrounding the artist's authorial role, is ultimately complex. Indeed, it could be questioned whether such a process merely 'vampirises', for the sake of international museum audiences, the personal stories of people whose lives are often marked by genuine suffering and the effects of marginalisation. From this perspective and taking into account the artist's favouring of the multi-projection format, such stories may be seen as simply contributing to a more generalised museum spectacle-culture of self-consciously displayed Otherness. Alternatively, by presenting the often extremely personal experiences of diverse, non-art world personae in a museum context, Ataman's work additionally draws parallels with the lives of seemingly 'ordinary' gallery goers, who regardless of external appearances, may have had similar experiences, hold similarly 'obtuse' beliefs or practice similarly obsessional hobbies. Intermittently nonetheless, the apparent neutrality of Ataman's working methodology fails to sufficiently transform the works' content. In appearing as a simple collection of multiple video-narratives, the potentially socially incisive import of some of them is lessened and recedes, while the work assumes an almost trivialising sensibility. Fortunately, in *Perfect Strangers* this not a uniform experience. Actually, at their most forceful, the artist's videos successfully question the limits of normative models, increasingly applied to contemporary societies as controlling ideals.