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ART IN REVIEW

Kutlug Ataman 'Never My Soul!'

Lehmann Maupin

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By Roberta Smith

The videos of the Turkish-born filmmaker Kutlug Ataman are ostensibly documentaries, but the best of them achieve a visual and psychological density that feels more like art. A good example is "The Four Seasons of Veronica Read," a standout at Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany, this summer. A four-screen video installation, it immerses the viewer in a female horticulturalist's obsession with the amaryllis. The work is a heady concoction of erudition, sexual innuendo and bright floral prints, in addition to the flowers themselves.

In "Never My Soul," the two-and-a-half-hour video that forms Mr. Ataman's second solo show in New York, the real-life subject is Ceyhan Firat, a breathtakingly gorgeous Turkish transvestite living in Switzerland. Lounging around her apartment amid filmy fabrics, or in a bubble bath showing off her perfect breasts, Ms. Firat recounts her brutal childhood and adventures with the Turkish police; enacts the story of a struggling singer who sacrifices her virginity for her career; and plays sexual games with Jessie, a Frenchman who is madly, touchingly in love with her. Fantasy, fiction and fact mesh confusingly, in alternately wrenching and seductive ways.

Alternately wise and mercenary, and always vehemently protective of her immaculate maquillage, Ms. Firat alternates between screen goddess; real-life Irma La Douce and, well, screen god. The complexity of Ms. Firat's character, Jessie's vulnerability and the offhand, hothouse beauty of the shooting (by Mr. Ataman, who functions, as usual, as an off-screen character) creates a novelistic richness.

The "Never My Soul!" video is sometimes shown as a six-screen installation, which might intensify its effects, but the large single projection, with Ms. Firat's voice filling the gallery, often seems to be enough, and most of its short episodes give a good sense of the whole. Mr. Ataman's obvious theme is the malleability of identity. Beneath this politically correct surface, he also confronts the unnaturalness of nature, the ubiquity of sexuality in all living things and the human urge for artifice as creating deeper truths.