

trying to film Samila and accommodate the extreme light conditions,



## Oreet Ashery DVD

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'For me Marcus is never about mocking,' Oreet Ashery once wrote, 'I never mean to mock, on the contrary; for me it is always about belonging, albeit a double edged belonging.'

The Jerusalem-born, London-based performer and video artist was referring to her most poignant creation, Marcus Fisher, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish man who was her alter ego for many years, and direct or indirect subject of three of the five pieces included on this DVD.

The earliest of them, 'Marcus Fisher's Wake', 2000, is a 16-minute-long mockumentary that traces his life from childhood. Raised by a mother who'd rejected the Orthodox community in which she was raised in favour of a secular life, he seemed,

from a young age, determined to reverse her journey; somehow, taking up the Orthodox lifestyle was akin to his rebellious or neurotic need to take up smoking.

His obsession seems not to have been with religion as such, but rather with the extremely gender-marked nature of the Orthodox ethos. To be an Orthodox man is to have a role in an all-male world of ritual and routine which Marcus looks on with yearning; he is especially obsessed with the 'combination of intimacy and public exposure' involved in the act of publicly binding one's arm with the leather straps of the tefillin (above all when performed by pretty young men: 'real men do it real tight', he used to explain).

Yet instead of remaining within the circumscribed world of the Orthodox, he can't seem to resist searching out alien environments, plunging into the demimonde of London as an underground performance artist (performing being a way of literalising his sense of a lack of reality) or Berlin, where he checks out the skinheads but ends up hanging out in Turkish émigré cafes – a different kind of all-male environment.

On a visit to Tel Aviv he ritually empties his pockets on the beach to throw his sins into the sea – including smoking – but back in London he continues to publicly perform his alienation and gets deeply involved in drugs—'all kinds of drugs, ketamine, cocaine, codeine, you name it.' 'This was the beginning of the end,' the narrator intones.

But if this 'Wake' was meant to put an end to the character Ashery had been exploring for several years, the effort to kill him off seems not to have been quite successful. He turns up again in 'Dancing with Men', 2003, in which Marcus joins a group of hundreds of men at a celebration commemorating the death of Shimon Bar Yochai, a famous Rabbi of the Roman period and the supposed author of the *Zohar* or *Book of Splendor*, the main text of Kabbalah, who enjoined his followers to memorialise him with dancing and celebration. 'Oh Jerusalem', 2005, the most recent work featuring Marcus Fisher, is in a different mode altogether.

A silent, speeded-up black and white loop, it shows him in quick alternation with an Arab man, also played by Ashery, as they each in turn fixate on a drawing of the city of Jerusalem on the wall behind them, it seems better suited to gallery installation than to domestic consumption.

At the same time, it does make a good hinge between the Marcus Fisher pieces and the other two works on this DVD, which are more straightforwardly autobiographical. In 'Why Do You Think I Left?', 2002, the artist questions her family about their interpretations of her reasons for having cut her ties with Israel, while 'Necessary Journey', 2005, chronicles a trip to Ramallah in the Occupied Territories – a journey forbidden to most Israeli citizens – to meet Sameh Abboushi, a Palestinian artist and architect with whom she had been corresponding, as well as to the Old City of Jerusalem to search out the site of her grandfather's shop in the Muslim Quarter, and finally to the village of Peqin where, according to the artist, Druze, Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived together peacefully for generations.

Lacking a device such as the figure of Marcus as a focus for her own ambivalence, and more loosely constructed than the obstinately questioning 'Why Do You Think I Left?', 'Necessary Journey' is the least resolved of the five works here, yet leaves the viewer curious about where Ashery's ruminations on identity will take her.

*Barry Schwabsky is a writer and poet living in London*



**Above:** Oreet Ashery, 'Necessary Journey', travel diary, 2005, 18 mins

**Left:** Oreet Ashery, 'Oh Jerusalem', 2005, 45 sec loop

COURTESY THE ARTIST