

STILL LIFE BECOMES MOVING PICTURES

Best known for her photography, artist Sam Taylor-Wood has turned her talent to a film about John Lennon, writes **Hannah Tattersall**.

Masculinity and mortality are themes often explored by conceptual artist Sam Taylor-Wood, so for the first-time director to make a film about an adolescent John Lennon is perhaps not as ambitious as it sounds.

Taylor-Wood's photographs and video works have depicted dead hares, decaying fruit, animals consumed by maggots, men crying and a 67-minute film of footballer David Beckham asleep.

Nowhere Boy, about a teenage Lennon, is Taylor-Wood's first feature film, although she has often worked with actors and performers in her exploration of the human body and masculine vulnerability.

She also explores her own sense of mortality: Taylor-Wood has twice battled cancer and she created her self-portrait, *Single Breasted Suit with Hare*, shortly after she was diagnosed with breast cancer (the hare symbolises lust and passion).

For this reason, Taylor-Wood no longer sweats the small stuff. She says: "Hospitals make me nervous, real-life things make me nervous. I guess maybe the things I've been through make me stronger and less fearful about work things."

A film about a personality as big as Lennon's seems an ambitious project for a first-time filmmaker, especially when you consider the other big personalities indirectly involved in the script.

Yet as a long-time member of London's cultural cognoscenti, Taylor-Wood had no qualms about emailing Paul McCartney throughout the making of the film to check facts and was granted the rights to Lennon's heartbreaking tune *Mother* by Lennon's widow Yoko Ono, to use in the credits. Ono has said she approves of the film's portrayal of a young John, albeit at a time before her name became synonymous with his.

Taylor-Wood burst onto the London art scene after graduating from Goldsmith's College in 1990. She quickly established herself as part of London's YBAs (Young British Artists) with artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. All three were picked up by White Cube gallery art dealer Jay Jopling, to whom Taylor-Wood was married. Some works at her last exhibition with White Cube, *Yes I No*, sold for more than £100,000.

She is now engaged to the

19-year-old star of *Nowhere Boy*, Aaron Johnson, who is 23 years her junior.

Taylor-Wood has often made headlines for challenging the status quo. As an artist, she has always tried to push boundaries, something she says many artists seem to have forgotten.

"It's hard times for a lot of artists at the moment," she says. "When we all started out making our work, it was at a time when really no one was selling anything. It was a really difficult time, but that's really what made it a creative time."

"Today, post this kind of explosion of art in the market, artists expect to make a lot of money, which is the wrong way of starting. It's really about experimentation and ideas and that's where it should stay."

She says the explosion of video art as a movement has made things difficult for new artists.

"I don't know really where [video art] is at [now]," she says. "I felt like I was part of it, but there's another part experimenting with film, video and photography... we were much more about experimentation rather than how to market and push it. That just came along."

"It's not easy, because obviously the attraction in using it is that it's a medium that's readily available, a medium that's easy to have access to. But it's also something that is difficult for people to sell because it's easy to duplicate. It's quite tricky."

Taylor-Wood won the Venice Biennale's Most Promising Young Artist award in 1997 and the next year was nominated for the Turner Prize. An exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 2006 included her *Crying Men* series, which dealt with masculinity and vulnerability, themes she also explores in *Nowhere Boy*.

The film depicts Lennon, aged 15 to 17, growing up in 1950s Liverpool. It's the era of Elvis, pocket combs and skiffle. Everyone smokes, all the time. Lennon lives with his aunt Mimi, with whom he was sent to live when he was five. At 15 he reunites with his mother Julia, whom he discovers lives just around the corner, and she introduces him to rock'n'roll and teaches him to play the banjo. "You know what rock'n'roll means? Sex," she tells him.

It's not the first film Taylor-



Left, Sam Taylor-Wood's self-portrait *Single Breasted Suit with Hare*. Clockwise: Bram Stoker's *Chair III*; a detail from a still life; video installation of David Beckham sleeping; and a scene from *Nowhere Boy*. Photo AFP



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Wood has made about a famous male. Her footage of footballer David Beckham sleeping, commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery in London and made in 2004, was a reverential essay on notions of time.

"I had the idea that a film of him asleep would be really interesting as it's one way he hadn't been seen," she says.

"It's looking at the process of time and I use that a bit in the film as well, that scene where John's learning to play the banjo. [The footage] speeds up past him. It's a theme I've played around with in my work for a long time."

The 2006 exhibition of Taylor-Wood's work at the MCA in Sydney was curated by Rachel Kent. "They're dealing with issues about the body and transcendence... transcending one's mortality; ultimately, that perhaps refers back, in some small way, to her own sense of mortality," she says.

Last year Taylor-Wood directed

her first narrative short film, *Love You More*, which screened at Cannes and was nominated for a BAFTA award.

She says it was not her plan to become a filmmaker, but credits much of her confidence to her friend and mentor, filmmaker Anthony Minghella, who produced *Love You More*.

"He was the one that really pushed me," she says. "I had to fight very hard to get the part, if you like. But it was just the script and irrespective of who it was [about] I just thought it was an incredible story."

"I kept getting these sudden realisations that it was John Lennon, but most of the time reading it, I wasn't really thinking of him in the back of my mind. So the only time I got nervous about it was when I spent time in Liverpool and realised what I'd taken on; the scale of icon I was tackling."

Nowhere Boy opens on Boxing Day.