



SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

MIRIA SWAIN

A large video projection of a male opera singer lip-synching to a silent soundtrack provides an unusual opening to an exhibition by an artist better known for her cacophonous soundtracks. The piece is called *Mute*, which is also the title of the show. According to Adorno, music has lost its power to entertain and has been relegated to the status of background noise, there simply to fill the gaps of silence 'brought on by anxiety, work or undemanding docility'. By removing sound and exposing the gaps of silence, Taylor-Wood's new work could be seen as a comment on the loss of communication in society.

In fact, one sound does succeed in puncturing the silence of the exhibition: the low frequency drone from a discarded amp and guitar. This repetitive hum is in part a subtle joke on the inane media 'buzz' that surrounds Taylor-Wood's life and that of her celebrity friends. Rather appropriately, at the private view the silence of the exhibition was superseded by the very same media 'buzz' of hangers-on and star-spotters.

Another silent film, one half of a two-part installation *Breach (Girl and Eunuch)*, depicts a contemporary

penitent Magdalen. Myth is intertwined with religious references through the juxtaposition of this film with a large concrete sculpture of a unicorn. According to myth, the unicorn comes to the rescue of damsels – particularly virgins – in distress, and yet Taylor-Wood's unicorn is paralysed, petrified and sunk in the ground from the waist down. This sexual beast, like the castrated eunuch who stands guard for the harem, is no longer equipped with the means to fulfil the physical nature of his being.

This idea of helplessness is also presented in Taylor-Wood's video

appropriation of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, in which the artist herself struggles to cradle the strong but helpless body of a dying Christ, the actor Robert Downey Jr. The piece is full of irony: plucked out of rehab, Downey Jr. may be dying for his own sins, but he is hardly dying for ours.

It is difficult to read Taylor-Wood's work without recourse to biographical references, but it would seem as though, in turning down the sound, the artist has created a deliberate tension, drawing us away from the kind of celebrity razzmatazz that normally envelops her work: the pervasive hum as a contemporary mantra.

The possibility of spiritual significance is carried through into a photograph entitled *The Leap*, in which a young man is suspended in mid-air, his hand held up as in an act of blessing. One is tempted to see the parallel in Taylor-Wood's life: her blessed survival from cancer, a motif running through much of the exhibition.

In any case, this exhibition is certainly a refreshing foil to commercially fuelled work like the Selfridges wrap project. It will be interesting to see what happens when Taylor-Wood turns the sound back up.

SAM TAYLOR-WOOD: *MUTE* was at White Cube², London, 23 November 2001 – 12 January 2002.

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SAM TAYLOR-WOOD, *Pietà*, 2001, c-print photograph, 134.5 x 134.5 cm. Courtesy: Jay Jopling/White Cube, London