

NEW YORK:
 MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
 SAM TAYLOR-WOOD: THE PASSION
 21 September – 2 November 2002
 www.matthewmarks.com

Sam Taylor-Wood's current show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York literally represents its title – referencing both the Christian and sexual varieties of passion with considerable visual panache.

The usual intriguing mix of the oneiric, the art-historical and the erotico-transgressive marks the work in the current show, but it is also striking for its overt religious references, or at least its pointed references to the Christian art offered by Western art history. We enter a darkened, church-like interior in which a large film of the *pietà* dominates – a *pietà* in which the weight of Christ's body, hardly an issue in Michelangelo's sculptured version, is suggested by the artist's continual lifting and lowering of the corpse. A vague echo of the Chatterton motif from one of Taylor-Wood's most memorable *Soliloquies* provides an added *frisson*. (I know that Christ is being played by a druggie movie star named Downey, but since I have never seen him, I am unable to respond to his star quality.) Could this be a portrait of the dead Christ as a self-destructive artiste? In any case, there seems to be a *pietà* revival underway, but always cast in contemporary terms: one thinks of Paula Rego's idiosyncratic, totally contemporary Mary, with a heavy, dressed Christ on her lap, the central panel of her 1999 triptych, *Martha, Mary and Magdalen*, and, more recently, a similar work by Mark Greenwold featuring the same protagonists.

The figure represented in *Sleep*, Christ in the tomb, courtesy of Holbein's famous *Dead Christ* in Basel, is of course inert and touchingly vulnerable, but the boyish (well, almost girlish)



figure radiates seductive golden energy from his glorious red-gold hair, an energy which reaches a gorgeous crescendo at his literally burning bush, set off by the milky pailor of his complexion, only slightly marred by acne. And then we have *The Leap* – a leap of faith, perhaps? – the risen Christ suspended in the air (a model, formerly featured in one of the most suggestive of the *Soliloquies*, surrounded by pariah dogs), raising his hand in blessing, or balance, afloat amid the tree-tops, also pretty dishy and wearing trousers rather than the traditional loincloth. Taylor-Wood is particularly good at getting the most out of the seductive effect produced by nude or bare-breasted male figures; men wearing elegant, loosely belted trousers which look as though they

might come down in a trice if necessary have been featured in several of her previous works.

It is obvious that within this major topos of Christianity, sensuality looms large. Of course, this melding of the religious and the sexual is not new. Bernini's *St. Teresa*, writhing in pained ecstasy after being pierced by a beautiful angel's arrow, is a seventeenth-century case in point.

And what could the other animated figure be, a mourning girl in black titled *Breach*, but in the Christian context, one of the Marys at the tomb? Sad stuff, restated in a contemporary language of distanced sensuality, where the lonely protagonist obviously exchanges words with an unseen antagonist, and weeps and weeps. It is interesting, though, that another

classical topic of Christian iconography, the *memento mori*, is embodied not by a human figure, but by still life, as it was in seventeenth-century Holland. Taylor-Wood's *Still life*, a DVD film of about three and a half minutes, representing a classic plate of luscious fruit glowing with ripeness, contradicts the very meaning of the term 'still life' since there is nothing still about this image which is constantly changing. The fruit, obviously photographed over a period of weeks, quickly rots before our very eyes, is swiftly embraced by an unwholesome cloud of mildew, and is totally dissolved into a sinister shroud of grey fog by the end of the piece. Such is human life, for which the ill-fated fruit is but an analogue.

Some of the smaller works have a less direct connection with traditional Christian iconography, although the touching *Bound Ram* has a precedent in Zurbarán and is immediately associated with Christ's sacrifice. At least two of the smaller works seem like half-wistful, half-self-mocking portraits of the artist: the eerily-lighted *Self-Portrait as a Tree*, which reinterprets Caspar David Friedrich's romantic essays in pathetic fallacy, and the moving, totally frontal *Poor Cow*, which may stand for the artist, or equally, for everywoman (at least in England where the term is used as a generic referent for members of the female sex).

The overtly erotic portion of the show, the *Passion Cycle*, a series of 25 transparencies in lightboxes, is smaller in scale than any of the other works on view, suggesting Eastern miniatures of sexual themes, specifically Japanese Shunga prints. It is hard not to relate them to the religious images, especially in the difference-dissolving context of the dark room. The tender maternal physicality of the *pietà* is metamorphosed into what it has always suggested: a sexual rapport between mother and son. Here, in the series of exquisite, small-scale photos of a couple at erotic play, we get, so to speak, the unconscious forces behind the *pietà* played out. Delicately voluptuous, slightly orientalising in their décor, the series needs to be examined up close. The camera moves from middle-distance shots to close-ups then backs away to reveal still other angles of vision, and daylight instead of the original illuminated darkness. Yet, like so much erotica, for all its specificity, all the body parts offered up for our delectation, the suggestive positions, the beauty of the flesh in question, there is something distancing about the work, something hard and precious.

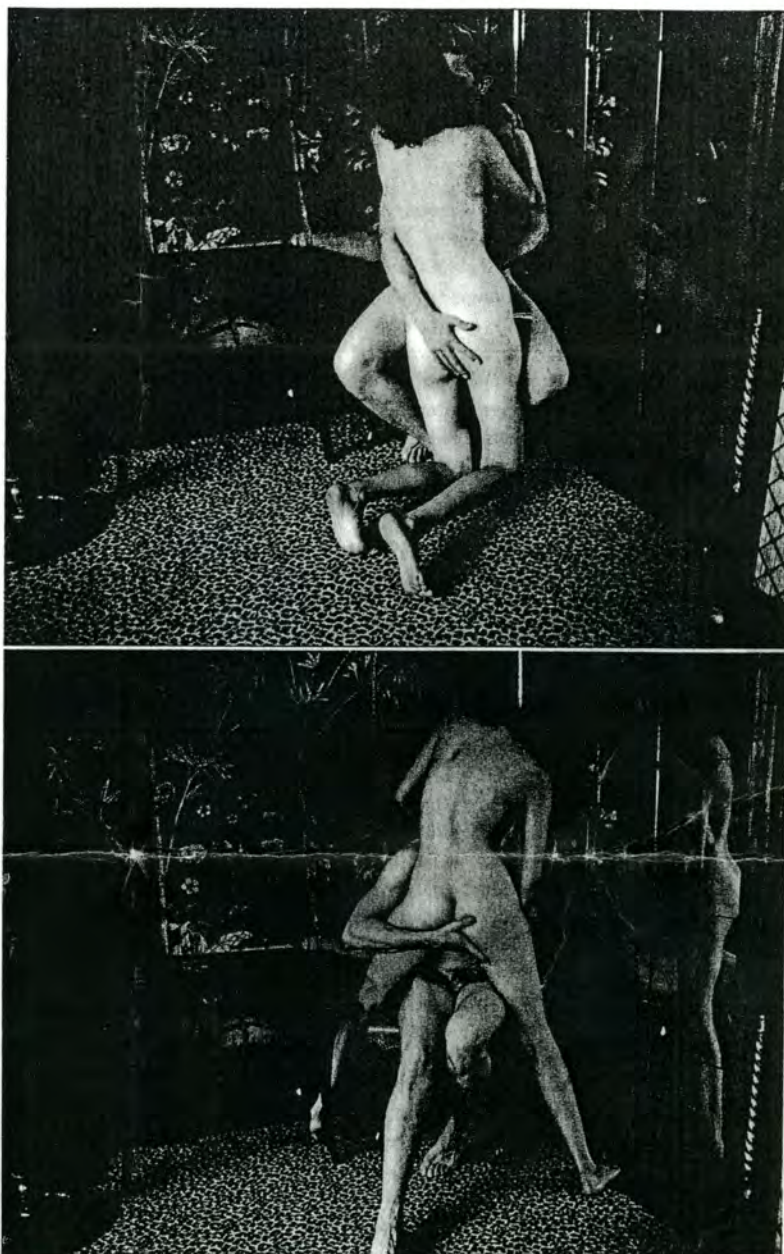
I will end with some questions. Why does this exhibition have to be shown in darkness? I suppose for several reasons. First, because it increases the sense of religious portentousness, like the dark interior of a church. Well maybe.

More to the point is the case made out by film theorists for the darkened *salle* as an equivalent of the unconscious, drawing viewers into the projected fantasy world by weakening their rational defences. Certainly Sam Taylor-Wood's work takes on deeper and more poignant overtones in this setting.

If given the chance, I would have titled this review 'Guilty Pleasures?' Why? Well, first, because I think all pleasures – and Taylor-Wood's work provides deep pleasure – involve some degree of guilt, and perhaps they should, especially if the guilt heightens the pleasure. But secondly, because I really find the so-called religious works more sensual and arousing than

the overtly sexual ones in the *Passion Cycle*, in which the images of foreplay, fucking in a variety of positions and vantage points, despite their close-up specificity and focus on bodies and organs, etc., seem more like instructive illustrations than actual human passion in action. I think this is because, despite their elegance and occasional ambiguity, these photographic miniatures leave little room for this female viewer's erotic imagination, unlike the gorgeous guys playing Christ in the religious images, where I can fantasise to my heart's content, unimpeded by the presence of a female rival.

LINDA NOCHLIN



SAM TAYLOR-WOOD, *clockwise from left: Passion Cycle X, XI, XII, 2002, transparency and lightbox, 18.3 x 21 cm. Courtesy: Jay Jopling/White Cube, London*