

# SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

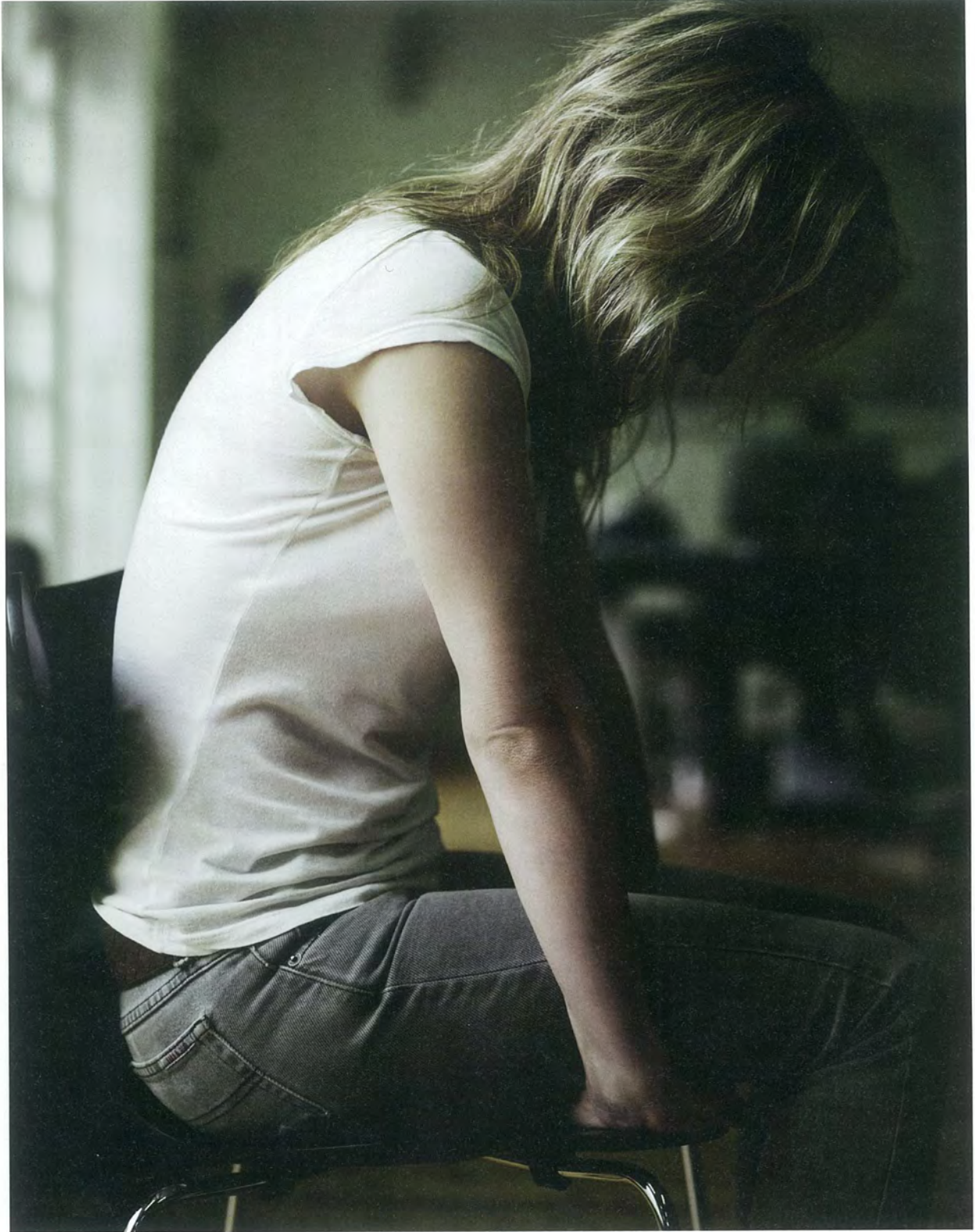
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THE ARTIST AND  
CONCEPTUAL VIDEO-  
MAKER STARTLED  
THE ART WORLD  
WHEN SHE SWAPPED  
THE GALLERY  
FOR THE CINEMA.  
BUT DURING THE  
MAKING OF HER  
FIRST FEATURE FILM  
CAME THE BIGGEST  
SURPRISE OF ALL:  
FINDING LOVE WITH  
HER LEADING MAN





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Sam Taylor-Wood has just received some shocking news which has momentarily knocked her tightly scheduled world askew: she is being given a day off. After six months of non-stop work directing her first feature-length film, the last two of which have been spent shut away in an editing suite, working 'from dawn to dawn, pretty much', she has been informed by one of her team that she won't be needed tomorrow and has a whole 24 hours to herself. 'Oh my God, what am I going to do?' she mouths, slightly panicked. 'What day is it tomorrow?' she absent-mindedly calls up to her editor, who's hovering by the door of her office.

'Wednesday.'

Sam throws herself back on her sofa. 'Oh god I can do yoga and everything!' she blurts. 'I can get my toenails painted! I might have my hair cut! Oh the excitement, the joy! Girl MOT day tomorrow!' She struggles to remember the last time she had any time off from the project, and gives up '...I don't even know.'

Yet her relief is tinged with disappointment. By this stage in our conversation she has already confessed to being so preoccupied with her film – *Nowhere Boy*, the story of a young John Lennon in his pre-Beatles days – 'that it's hard to do anything else. It's difficult to get my head into any other world. I can't even read a newspaper.' But this isn't a complaint: working on the film is the only thing she wants to do. After making the point that the workload is 'relentless', she grins: 'I'm enjoying every millisecond of it! I wouldn't swap it for anything.' So time off isn't necessarily welcome. Having been removed from the editing suite in order to have her portrait taken and be interviewed for *COS* magazine, she has the air of someone who has been woken from a beautiful dream to receive a lavish breakfast in bed – happily enjoying the indulgence while quietly yearning to get back to the dreaming.

Making the kind of films that get shown in cinemas is a new departure for Sam. As an artist, she is well known for using film and video, but not in a conventionally cinematic way. Her

moving-image pieces are more concerned with mood than story, often built from fragments of action removed from identifiable contexts – such as 'Travesty of a Mockery', in which two figures, each on a separate screen, argue with one another, or 'Pent Up', a five-screen piece on which isolated characters deliver angry monologues. Other video works use so little movement that unless you stand and watch them you might easily mistake them for photographs. In 'The Last Century', a static scene of drinkers in an East End pub, a cigarette slowly burning away to ash is the only clue that this is not a still. Or, most famously of all, her film of David Beckham sleeping, one of only four video portraits among the otherwise still exhibits of the National Portrait Gallery. She isn't trying to tell stories with these works, knowing full well that art-browsing gallery-goers are unlikely to watch them all the way through. Back in 2002, on the eve of her major retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, she commented: 'I love the cinema, I love being in the dark and being told a story – but that is very different from what I do.'

In fact, making movies is something she had secretly always wanted to do: 'I just didn't have the confidence to make the leap.' It was Anthony Minghella, the acclaimed director, writer and producer, who gave her that confidence; they met when she joined the judging panel for the British Independent Film Awards, which he chaired. 'He really was the one who gave me a big push and said, I think you should make a feature film and I'd like to produce it.' Their first project together was a short called *Love You More*, the story of two schoolkids in late-Seventies London brought together by their love of the Buzzcocks. It proved a great start for her new direction, doing well on the festival circuit, winning a Sundance award and getting a BAFTA nomination. Sadly Minghella died early on in its making. 'So I had to go on and do *The Long Film* without him. Hopefully it's a good legacy.'

On the lookout for a Long Film to make, Sam's friend and *Atonement* director Joe Wright alerted her to the script for *Nowhere Boy*. Written by Matt Greenhalgh, who had penned the

Joy Division biopic *Control*, it was inspired by the account of Lennon's childhood written by his sister. 'Joe said, "This one's very you." I read it and knew exactly what he meant. From that point I had a burning desire to make it. I basically stalked the producers till they handed it over to me!'

What links *Love You More* with *Nowhere Boy* is the theme of teenage obsession with music. It appears to be a defining subject for Sam too: although she hasn't decided what her next film will be, she says it too will be 'music-motivated – it just makes me happy'. Even as we speak, Johnny Cash is crooning through the speakers in her office: 'I tend to have music on all the time. I love working with music.' As well as being a karaoke addict – 'I'm just a show-off, really. Give me a microphone and I won't let go of it. "Fairytale of New York" is my big one, or a good old country tune. Anything melancholic – she has directed a video for Elton John and last year even put out a single, a cover of The Passions' 'I'm in Love with a German Filmstar' produced by The Pet Shop Boys. 'They rent a recording studio downstairs off me – I always joke that Neil's my Tennant, haha – and literally on the last day of *Love You More* Neil came up and said, "We're just recording this record, can you come down and put some vocals on?" Her pop-legend neighbours persuaded her to spend 20 minutes in front of the microphone while she complained, 'Hurry up, I've got to go.' 'And then they said, "It's really good, let's put it out." I wasn't expecting it to go out into the world.' A poster for the single sits on the

giant pinboard by her desk: a still from the video, in which Sam, shot in monochrome in top hat and bow tie à la Marlene Dietrich, sits motionless before the camera. As with 'The Last Century', only the wisp of smoke twisting up from her cigarette alerts you to the fact that this is a video.

Logistical issues aside – the first scene Sam had to shoot featured Lennon and a friend surfing on top of a double-decker bus as it drives through Liverpool – one difficulty the script for *Nowhere Boy* presented was that it features a teenage Paul McCartney, played by Thomas Sangster; she knows the real-life Paul McCartney. 'I had to really separate myself from that. And the same with Lennon, although I never met him. I had to approach this as a coming-of-age story and not focus in my head too much on who these two boys became. Every time I did that it became overwhelming.'

The transition from her more abstract gallery-based work to conventional storytelling came much more easily. 'Normally within my own [art] work I'm slightly in the dark and creating my own structure as I go. So it's almost a relief to be given a script to give you that structure.' So far from being a struggle, making her first feature film 'felt incredibly natural – like finally I was in a position of deep comfort!' But her favourite part of the entire process was directing the cast. 'Working with the actors was the bit I loved most and couldn't get enough of. It was fantastic.'

One cast member in particular whom she couldn't get enough of was Aaron Johnson,

the teen heart-throb and star of *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snoggin*, who plays John Lennon. She breaks out in a big dreamy grin when I bring up his name. In May this year their relationship became public knowledge when they were photographed together in Cannes, instantly making them the subject of mild scandal in uptight British tabloids, not least because of their 22-year age difference. 'We met during casting and it was all quite instant,' she says quietly, pausing to choose her words carefully. 'But, er, you know, we had to remain professional till the end of the film. It didn't really take off till the end. So, um...' She laughs. 'It did not at all in any way compromise anything on set.'

*Nowhere Boy* still has another four weeks of editing, but promotion for the film has already begun: last week Sam and Aaron were photographed together for a fashion magazine. 'It was good fun. We do work well together,' she smiles. The shoot reminded her how much she misses her own photography. But it seems that particular passion will have to remain on hold for a little longer – she wants to move straight on to her next film. 'Oh yeah. I can't wait! I want to just keep going.'

Is she mad? 'Haha. Everyone keeps asking, aren't you totally sick of it? And part of me...' She trails off with a weariness that suggests she could probably do with a break. 'We're both going to try and take some time off together. Yeah. I dunno.' For the moment, her mind is too wrapped up in the joys of cinema to think about holidays.

*'Nowhere Boy' is out 25 December*