

Sam Taylor-Wood keeps on rising in the art world, but now she's flying into feature films, hears **Waldemar Januszczak**

# She <sup>h</sup>as liftoff

It's Sunday afternoon. The phone goes. I pick it up, expecting the usual oily voice from Delhi trying to get me to change insurers, but instead I hear a delirious Sam Taylor-Wood babbling away in all directions, like a river that's broken its banks. Straining to catch her drift, I just about make out the words "big fight", "incredible" and "so exciting". It sounds promising. So I shout back into the babble that I will call her on a land line, then hit the info button that throws up her number.

It turns out that Taylor-Wood is in Berlin, where she has just watched Vitali Klitschko taking on Peter Samuel for the WBC heavyweight championship of the world. Or was it Samuel Peter? She can't remember. She's new to boxing. What she does recall, vividly, is how dramatic and sweaty it was. Vitali was all over his opponent, battering him so relentlessly that poor Samuel refused to come out for the eighth round. Or was it the ninth? Afterwards, she fought her way through the many layers of hangers-on who were clamouring to touch the new champ and pushed him into his dressing room, as agreed, where she instructed him to sit still for three minutes while she filmed him. Vitali closed his eyes and did exactly as he was told.

Earlier this year, she had done the same thing to his brother, Wladimir Klitschko, the current IBF, WBO and IBO heavyweight champion of the world, who was boxing at Madison Square Garden, in New York. The two films of these gigantic Ukrainians will eventually be shown side by side in a diptych called 3 Minute Round. Taylor-Wood is not the kind of woman you would expect to be interested in boxing, so I ask what she hopes to express here. Magically, the phone line grows clear as a bell and I hear her answer perfectly: "The stillness of these great giants. It's so beautiful."

A couple of days before, I too had gone a few rounds with Taylor-Wood in her studio, a converted factory located in the Brit Art corridor of London's East End, where she has effected the usual minimal transformation her generation insists on, involving stainless steel and granite. Pet Shop Boys have their offices downstairs. I am ushered into the sparser of her urban hangars and offered the choice of the black settees with which the room is furnished. Vinyl

or leather? I go for the leather, because it is more conducive to rumination and because Taylor-Wood currently needs plenty of thinking about.

The week before we met, news leaked out that she had split up with her husband of 11 years, the elegant and ubiquitous Jay Jopling, creator of the White Cube Gallery. Normally, none of us would give a Damien Hirst dot for such a break-up — who in the art world these days has the balls to stick out a marriage? — but in their case it was surprising. They were one of the capital's golden couples, seen together at every fashionable opening, he with his endearing Jerry Lewis grin, she with her impeccable sense of what to wear in the company of Elton or Kate or Sadie.

I had them down as stayers. Then, at the opening of Statuephilia, the sculpture exhibition I have just curated at the British Museum, I asked a well-known British sculptor what had really happened between Taylor-Wood and Jopling. "Sam," he sighed, rolling his eyes pessimistically upwards, "got too close to the movie world." He saw no hope for her.

That is certainly not the way she strikes me as she darts efficiently from picture to picture and talks me through the many different sights that are going into her new show at the White Cube's Mason's Yard space. The impression I get is of someone so busy and driven, there is no longer much room left in her life for the usual interstitials — not even for sadness. Having recovered spectacularly from two bouts of cancer, Taylor-Wood seems thoroughly determined not

to tolerate a moment's downtime. Her eerie American lay-bys were photographed on a road trip to Georgia. The spooky clown loitering in an alley was shot in London. The romantic landscapes were done in Yorkshire, near the house in which *Wuthering Heights* was set. See the two trees braced heroically against the weather? That's Cathy and Heathcliff. And the Klitschko picture was made in New York.

Vitali and Wladimir are now the undisputed heavyweight boxing champions of the world, in unison, so the logical thing for them to do next is to tackle each other and see who wins. But that will never happen. The brothers, she reveals dewily, have promised their mother that they will never fight.







'Like a fragile and discarded toy': Taylor-Wood's self-portrait *Escape Artist*, 2008; far left, the artist, who is recently single

Searching for seams of vulnerability in the rich and famous has become her unlikely crusade. This, after all, is the woman who spent an hour in bed with David Beckham, filming him sleeping, and noticed the cute way his tattoos heave when he breathes deeply. Armed with the greatest address book in art, she's on some sort of mission to humanise the inhuman.

What about this agitated-looking fox, Sam, the one pressing itself nervously against the skirting board of her studio, in whose eyes she appears to have captured a wild panic to be elsewhere? "That's a self-portrait. I really love that picture." She calls it *21st Century Fox*.

Hanging around the room is a suite of more obvious self-portraits, in which Taylor-Wood, stripped down to her pants and a vest, shows herself floating miraculously in the air, suspended from garish clusters of party balloons. She looks like a fragile and discarded toy. A feather has more meat on it than she currently has on herself.

"It's the stress," she grumbles, but there's no elaboration. The floating self-portraits were done by hanging herself from the roof, then removing the supports digitally, as I suspected; but a conventional harness would have pressed into her flesh, leaving bruises and indentations. So she got in a man known as Master Rope Knot, an S&M rope specialist, the best in the business, who ties people up in ways that leave no marks. I guess he gets plenty of work from the Conservatives, I quip. It was bloody painful, she insists. What are the floating self-portraits called, Sam? *Escape Artist*.

All this is beginning to add up to a theme. Trapped fox. Floating body. *Escape Artist*. In addition to the *White Cube* show, she has a single coming out soon that she's recorded with the Pet Shop Boys downstairs, in which she trills lightly to a disco beat in the manner of mid-period Kylie. And as if that wasn't stepping far enough away from the confines of the art world, there is also her film, which begins shooting in February. Ah yes, the film.

This summer at Cannes, she made her debut as a proper film director with a charming 15-minute short, *Love You More*, which was selected for competition in the *Palme d'Or*. Starring the gorgeous Andrea Riseborough — who startled me mightily by popping up on BBC4 a few weeks

*Continued on page 11* ▶

Watch Sam Taylor-Wood videos, including *Still Life*, *Hysteria* and *A Little Death*, at [timesonline.co.uk/visualarts](http://timesonline.co.uk/visualarts)





► *Continued from page 9*

later playing the young Mrs Thatcher in *The Long Walk to Finchley* — it's the story of a 15-year-old girl who goes out to buy the new Buzzcocks single and brings home a boy she meets in the record shop for a sizzling display of underage naked passion.

As a result of *Love You More*, she was “bombarded” with Hollywood offers with names like Keira Knightley, Brad Pitt, Naomi Watts attached. She turned them all down. “I knew I wanted to make a British film,” she says. “And I wanted to make something that shook me to the core inside. My agent in LA thought I was a complete prima donna. Because I didn't have the pressure of having to do something quickly, I just knew I'd know it when I read it.”

After ploughing through 200 scripts, she was finally sent *Nowhere Boy*, the story of John Lennon's childhood, adapted from the memoirs of the Beatle's half-sister by Matt Greenhalgh, the writer of *Control*, last year's fine biopic about Ian Curtis of Joy Division. *Nowhere Boy* will be filmed by Seamus McGarvey, her usual collaborator, who shot *Atonement* and whose dense romantic textures are a perfect match for her elusive and poetic story lines. But McGarvey didn't film *Sigh*, the extraordinary new work that will form the centrepiece of her *White Cube* show.



*Sigh* confronts you with a 56-piece orchestra playing a new tune composed by the Art of Noise's Anne Dudley — without any instruments. The absence of violins, flutes, cellos forces you to look extra-closely at the players and their movements. So, it's another rescue mission: a set of neglected humans are being saved from the anonymity of the orchestra. It's what Taylor-Wood does best. *Treasuring every moment of existence*. Her own. And every-one else's. ☐

**'Treasuring every moment': Self Portrait as a Tree (2000) by Sam Taylor-Wood**

*Sam Taylor-Wood's Yes I No is at White Cube, Mason's Yard, SW1, from Friday, with Escape Artist at No 1 The Piazza, WC2; her single, I'm in Love with a German Film Star, is out tomorrow; her short film Love You More, backed by Film4, will be screened at the London Film Festival on Friday and October 27; and she will be the subject of ITV1's The South Bank Show on November 16*

## Other art films

Turner-winner Steve McQueen's debut film, *Hunger*, has already won awards at the Cannes, Sydney and Toronto film festivals. Out on October 31, it follows the final weeks of the IRA hunger-striker Bobby Sands, who died in the Maze prison, Belfast, in 1981. It has confidence and maturity, clear evidence of McQueen's track record as a creator of striking video installations. He brought in the Irish playwright Enda Walsh to write the script.

The photographer Duane Hopkins, whose *Better Things*, about young drug addicts, also premiered at Cannes, wrote his own screenplay. Hopkins says he visualised his dying drug-taker before shooting a single frame. His next film will be about the underclass in Britain, living on the breadline.

Predictably, Jake and Dinos Chapman are plotting a very different route for their first feature: a comedy about the art world. The brothers plan to write and co-direct, as the Coens do.

**Richard Brooks**