

When Sam Taylor-Wood persuaded Hollywood actors to cry for the camera, she created a series of modern-day saints, says Serena Davies

This vale of tears

It's tempting to mock *Men Crying*, the centrepiece of Sam Taylor-Wood's new show. It consists of 28 male film stars, lit reverentially in lustrous hues, or shown in grainy black and white, all photographed in tears. Taylor-Wood insists that they are experiencing real feelings: she could recognise when a flicker of the eye meant genuine pain.

And so we are invited to become emotional voyeurs of the poster boys of our age (some are even on sale as posters). See how Tim Roth has to bite his finger, Steve Buscemi wrinkles his nose, Robert Downey Jr sprawls semi-clad on a bed. These are pictures for which *OK!* magazine would pay good money; possibly even more than White Cube's asking price.

But there is more going on here – not least the fact that Taylor-Wood has persuaded a set of grown men, and some fairly large Hollywood egos at that, to cry for her. The pictures are reminders of an obsession of our age: Blair's touchy-feely world of the emotional confessional, private life up for public scrutiny. But also, presented as art rather than paparazzi snaps, and with the sadness unexplained, they become symbols.

These are beautifully shot, beautifully framed photographs of suffering individuals, who retain an elegance despite their distress. They show us people in whom popular culture has come to invest an almost saint-like significance. These

men are icons, worshipped by many for their talent, their looks, their success. Partly because of their fame, they have gained a meaning beyond their physical presence.

Reduced to tears, their grief has an authority we would not necessarily grant to anonymous individuals. With her stark and simple images, Taylor-Wood is seeking to bestow on her sitters a spiritual significance born of their celebrity, akin to that of the crying saints in Medieval and Renaissance art.

This quasi-religious element is most explicit in Taylor-Wood's portrait of Laurence Fishburne. The actor confronts the viewer head-on. A monolith of a man, looming over the picture space, his head is haloed by the window behind. His tears are streaks of sorrow over an inscrutable physiognomy.

The artist gives every one of these actors gravitas but none more so than Fishburne, a man now most associated with the towering god-like presence of Morpheus in the *Matrix* films. Like a beatific Madonna, he stares through us and beyond us here, in a profound state apparently beyond our ken.

Similarly, Philip Seymour Hoffman, sitting on his bed miserably contemplating the floor, seems to bear all the sorrow of the world on his hunched shoulders. Accustomed as we are to see him play bullies and weirdos, he now takes on a Quasimodo-like (and Christ-like) persona: the tormented outsider suffering because of

others' ignorance. The cherubic face of Hayden Christensen, his beauty smudged by crying, conjures damaged innocence; Woody Harrelson's serene downcast glance brings to mind noble suffering; and Benicio Del Toro's desperate look tells of the hard man's redemption.

Taylor-Wood is certainly fascinated by celebrities; they've featured frequently in her work, most famously in the adulatory *David*, where a sleeping Beckham is presented as a Michelangelo. But it is a fascination that the world shares. *Crying Men* makes riveting viewing because these are familiar figures in unfamiliar poses; the gods of the modern age exhibiting human sorrow in order to remind us of our own.

Upstairs from *Crying Men*, we are freed from the anxiety of the celebrity presence – indeed from regular earthly constraints entirely. Taylor-

Wood's series of works, *Self Portrait Suspended*, are a joy. Taken with the help of a bondage expert, Taylor-Wood was strapped into poses that left her black and blue but looking as effortless as a bird in flight. She hangs in her studio, her body framed by the large window, the wires of her supports digitally removed, so that she seems to tumble in the air. It is the simplicity of the images that give them their magic.

A normal room, a normal girl, in unsexy vest and knickers, has taken on the attributes of an angel. Suddenly, a space in east London becomes a setting for the sublime; and Taylor-Wood reminds us how uplifting a small flight of fancy can be. In refreshing contrast to the miserable faces down below, we leave with a delightful reminder of the unbearable lightness of being.

'Sam Taylor-Wood: New Work' is at White Cube, Hoaxton Sq, London N1, (020 7930 5373), until Dec 4.



Monolithic: Laurence Fishburne, photographed by Sam Taylor-Wood