

A close-up portrait of Sam Taylor-Johnson with her hand resting on her cheek, set against a solid blue background. She has blonde, wavy hair and is wearing a dark blazer over a light-colored top.

THE SUNDAY TIMES *magazine*
100 Makers of the 21st Century *Part three*
Fifty shades of Sam Taylor-Johnson

MARCH 23 2014



Artist. Film-maker. 'Cancer Surviving badass'

(And
married to
a younger
man...)

Why Sam Taylor-Johnson is an icon of our age

Interview by Bryan Appleyard. Portrait by Mary McCartney

A

ll four of her children — girls, aged 2, 3, 7 and 16 — are with Sam Taylor-Johnson in Vancouver. She is directing the film of Fifty Shades of Grey. So, er, what does she tell the kids she is doing?

“I tell them it’s a love story,” she says, adding firmly, “a love story they’ll never see.”

The children aren’t the only ones being kept in the dark. So are the residents of Vancouver. The muddy harbour-side base camp for the filming is protected by security “tighter than a duck’s butt” and curious passers-by are told that they are filming a children’s movie called The Adventures of Max and Banks. “A dark fairy tale” is Taylor-Johnson’s own description of The Adventures of Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey or, as 50 Shades is vulgarly known, “the bonkbusting bestseller”, “thinking woman’s porn” or — well, you get the picture.

“It’s like the world of the Grimm Brothers,” she says. “I like the transition of this girl and the journey that she goes on... I hope I haven’t said too much.”

She worries a lot about saying too much. The film’s producers have ensured that everything is tighter than a duck’s butt round here, including words. But she also worries about what she says about herself.

“Don’t ask me that question!” she says, when I innocently inquire whether she had read 50 Shades before she pitched for the part of director. Evidently not. She is also nervous about being asked the big question about what she is doing filming a bonkbuster in Vancouver. Why? “Oh God, I thought you were building up to the question ‘Why the f*** are you doing this?’” she says at one point. I wasn’t, as it happens. She had already answered it.

But, first things first, you may know Sam Taylor-Johnson better as Sam Taylor-Wood. Taylor-Johnson is the surname they both chose when she married the actor Aaron Johnson in June 2012. In fact, she was never really called Sam Taylor-Wood. She was just Samantha Taylor but her father left home and the ensuing stepfather was called Wood, so she split the difference. This nominative promiscuity is significant. I’ll come back to that.

We are sitting in her trailer in the muddy base camp. It’s a plastic parody of a cosy living room — the electric fire even has fake flames. There are pictures of her children and a faux-leather sofa filled with cushions amid which a spoilt mutt named Dusty — she

has eyebrows like Dusty Springfield’s — periodically poses. The one odd note is one of her photographs of a nearly naked Robert Downey Jr. She is always walking a fine line between these two implied worlds, but I’ll also come back to that later.

Taylor-Johnson is prettier and slighter than she appears in photographs and more tentative (and perhaps vulnerable) than her publicity suggests. There is something of the restless teen about her. Even her language is peppered with teen talk — “It was just SO...” or “It was, like, you know...” and, of course, everything is “amazing”. Her syntax and vocabulary, meanwhile, are odd, with the word “singular” constantly being misused or, perhaps, liberated.

The Daily Beast called her “a stunning, cradle-robbing [at 46, she is 23 years older than her new husband] blonde” and a “cancer-surviving badass”. “Stunning” suggests something more aggressive and glossy than her very healthy-looking prettiness and “badass”, on the evidence before me, is a bit strong.

That question she feared — “Why the f*** am I doing this?” — could reasonably be addressed both to her and to the film’s producers. As far as the latter were concerned, she had only one previous feature film to her credit — Nowhere Boy, about John Lennon’s early life — and that got fairly mixed reviews. Addressed to her, the question becomes: why should a high-art heroine, a central player in the 1990s drama known as The Young British Artists, take on such a gross audience-grabber? The answers lie, as they often do, with a broken family. “I think,” she says, “I’d have been a very dull and less interesting person if my parents had stayed together, so there are some things to thank God for.”

She was brought up in Streatham, an ill-defined London suburb lacking either the funk of Brixton to the north or the comedy of Croydon to the south, and later in Crowborough in East Sussex. She squirms a little at this point, partly because she seems to nurse a visceral loathing of Crowborough, but mainly because she lives such a chronologically compartmentalised life.

“I feel so far from that world right now. It feels like a lifetime ago. I don’t feel connected to that part of my world or my life.”

Every story she tells about herself seems to be a book rather than a chapter. She is always moving on, she sees herself as

TAYLOR MADE SAM’S ROUTE FROM YBA TO 50 SHADES

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1991

1992

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2008

2009

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2011

2012

2013

2014

Recreates John and Yoko’s famous final photo with boyfriend Henry Bond in a piece entitled 26 October 1993

Exhibits her video work Killing Time, her first video, in which four people mime to an opera score

Discovers she has breast cancer

Teary photos of Daniel Craig, Jude Law and Ryan Gosling feature in her Crying Men series

Directs her debut feature-length film Nowhere Boy. The 19-year-old actor Aaron Johnson plays John

Marries a musician and changes name to Sam Taylor-Johnson. They already have two children, plus a dog, and are getting married

Graduates from Goldsmiths College. Other YBA alumni include Damien Hirst, Gary Hume and Sarah Lucas



Marries the art dealer Jay Jopling. Her work is shown at the Sensation exhibition, and she is diagnosed with colon cancer

Nominated for the Turner Prize but loses to Chris Ofili

Plays the Virgin Mary cradling Robert Downey Jr’s Jesus in a video piece called Pietà



Video portrait of a sleeping David Beckham is commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery



Films Fifty Shades of Grey in Vancouver, with Jamie Dornan playing Christian Grey and Dakota Johnson as Anastasia Steele

episodic. This, I later realise, may explain her readiness to change her name — Samantha Taylor is not the same person as Sam Taylor-Johnson.

For the first nine years of her life, she sailed calmly in the direction of cosy. “It started as a fairly ordinary middle-class existence, then I moved into a chaotic hippie world.”

When she was nine, her dad (an accountant for a bikers’ club) made his contribution to British art and cinema history by moving out — to bike around the world — leaving her with her yoga-teacher mother. The abandonment seemed to unleash mum’s inner hippie. She indulged, for example, in the religious pick’n’mix characteristic of New Agers. “Religion in our house was whatever grabbed you. For a time, my mum insisted I went to church. But our house was very much about yoga and meditation. It was a meditation centre, people would come. She had an altar that had a jade Buddha, a picture of Khalil Gibran’s praying hands, a large poster of Krishna and then a crucifix decorated with rosary beads. “I once asked her what religion we were and she said ‘Hindu’. I remember thinking, ‘What the f*** does that mean?’ She taught yoga at my school, which was highly embarrassing.”

Her mother remarried. Sam and her younger sister, Ashley, got a half-brother. Then, when Sam was 15, her mother handed her a note to give to her stepfather — just saying she was leaving — and walked out too. Her daughters were left to be raised by their stepfather. Sam’s ironic take on all this and her habit of chronological compartmentalisation do not alter the fact that she still owes some kind of a debt to her wayward parents. Taylor-Johnson has not become a biker like her dad, but she still does yoga and, once or twice a day if she has the time, practises transcendental meditation.

“It’s become a personal thing with me. I wouldn’t be able to survive everything without the meditation that I do. It’s what I think has made me able to cope with the madness.”

Such practices may also help her cope with what she is pretty sure is a bad case of undiagnosed attention deficit disorder. She was hopeless at school.

“I couldn’t focus. It wasn’t called ADHD then, but I definitely had it. I still find it hard to focus on any singular thing. It’s why making a film suits me: you always have to

answer a million questions. If I try to focus singularly on something, it’s a bit of a disaster. I’m a daydreamer, a terrible daydreamer.”

But what about that second abandonment when she was 15? Did she feel like an orphan?

“It wasn’t that level of loss. I felt I was fending for myself. It gave me a lot of strength and it gave me my ability to assess situations.”

What is clear is that her childhood gave her, first, a habit of moving on, of leaving the past behind, of embracing the serial self. Second, it made her self-reliant. Third, it made her creative — she speaks of creativity giving her an escape. Fourth, it gave her a source of imagery and ideas: religion, for example, still haunts her work and her daydreaming gave her the habit of imagining strange possibilities. Her the a package that, on encountering the real world, could have gone horribly wrong, but, in the event, she had been born at just the right moment.

She went to Hastings Art College and then Goldsmiths, and started a seven-year relationship with Jake Chapman, who, with his elder brother, Dinos, was to become one of the stars of the Young British Artists. It seemed purposeful, but she was drifting.

“Being in the shadow of Jake was not a problem. I never really saw myself as an artist. I was in awe of his abilities...”

Again, she confesses to a difficulty in transporting herself back to an earlier time. It’s as if she has to reimagine herself so that memory is a work of art she does not wish to undertake. She drifted through various jobs. She went to work at the Camden Palace nightclub and was immediately made manager, apparently because she seemed a bit posh. She hated that. But she loved the Royal Opera House. She is reluctant to pick a lightbulb moment at which she realised she was going to be an artist, but admits her year working as a dresser at the ROH may qualify.

“It was like being in a sort of bubble away from the world. Everyone would be at work at eight in the morning right through to the end of the show, so there was no time for an outside life. We lived and breathed whatever the production was. I’d never had any contact with opera before that. I had no real sense of what I was going into.

“My first job was to carry the bear costume to the man who was playing the bear in Verdi’s Attila, and I felt all the excitement from the music and the audience, a tingling feeling. When Attila walked ➤➤➤

BELOW
One of Taylor-Johnson's self-portraits in her *Suspended* series, from 2004, after she defeated breast cancer

BOTTOM
Wrecked (2006), her portrait of *The Last Supper*, featuring a bare-breasted female Christ

out he took my breath away. I thought he was the most beautiful man ever, until later, when I had to deliver his wig.”

Opera, like religion, also crops up in her work, as does that sense of the excitement of performance. Much of her work involves herself and she has used operatic scores in her video art. One way or another, she seems to have left the ROH as an artist and, in 1997, it became clear she had chosen the right moment. Two big things happened to her that year. First, she married Jay Jopling, the supreme London gallerist of the time and the promoter and marketer of London and the YBAs. Second, her work *Wrecked* appeared at the *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy, the show that announced the arrival of the new school.

Whatever you may think of the YBAs — I think most of them are grievously overrated — they represented a fairly typical youth revolt and one that was inevitable. It was a revolt into ideas and away from craft. New technology, new materials and new systems were changing the world and these artists saw the pursuit of new means of expression as their destiny. They also embraced the mass media and *Sensation* was a deliberate attempt to get art into the tabloids. In this, at least, it worked.

Wrecked was a photograph, Taylor-Johnson's version of *The Last Supper*, the disciples are a load of drunks and Christ has become a bare-breasted woman, her arms spread, apparently appealing to the heavens.

“It was reflecting the environment I was in — everyone was drunk in that picture and dressed to go on somewhere else. The woman in the centre was just slightly out of another realm, in a moment of total abandonment.”

So she was now officially a YBA — a title she and most of the others hate — or, rather, as she was married to Jopling, the commercial king, she was the unofficial queen of the movement. The marriage, of course, led to charges of opportunism. She shrugs and brushes this off and, to be fair, she did not act like a queen. Indeed, she scarcely had a chance because one more thing was to happen to her in 1997 — she was diagnosed with colon cancer. By then she had a baby daughter, Angelica. She survived only to be struck down by a completely unrelated breast cancer three years later. “I know — two brushes with death, I'm not doing that any more, it's totally overrated. I think of the whole thing as unbelievably good luck because I came through.



If I think about it as bad luck, it denounces the fact of coming out the other side.

“The first time I was very much in denial, I wanted to get straight up and carry on. Then I got hit hard again and I felt I had really learnt my lesson. I felt I had to listen and shift my perspectives and my lifestyle, my everything. You can't help but be altered by something like that — all the clichés like realising the importance of small things in life, what is important to you and what isn't.

“My eldest [Angelica, now 16] was so small, there was that sense of having to get through this because I didn't want her to grow up with a sense of loss. I had somehow

to fight my way through this for her.”

She has had, over the years, quite a few savagely bad reviews. “I'm a living, breathing, feeling person. Nobody likes to have insults flung at them from afar by faceless people.”

One she did read, however, included the aside that she seemed to think cancer had made her interesting. “I wanted to go round and be fairly physically violent with the person who wrote that. People love to hate...” Through it all, the art just kept coming. There was one obvious post-cancer work — *Suspended*, a series of photographs of her apparently floating in midair (the supporting straps had been ➤➤➤)

