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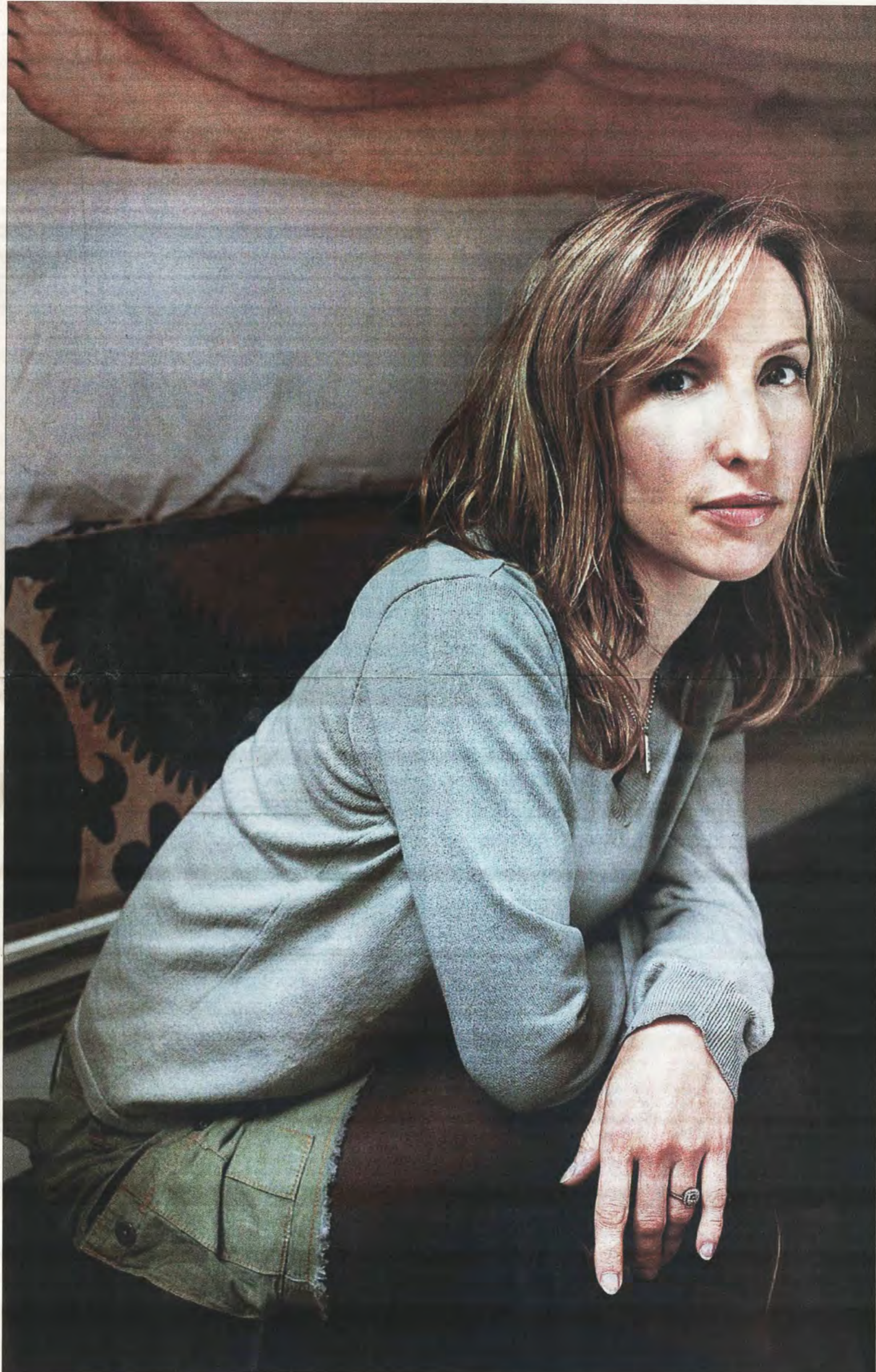
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The Herald
Arts Books & Cinema

Saturday July 31, 2004

Hanging in the balance

Sam Taylor-Wood, the high-flying artist who has overcome serious illness, is ready to conquer a new challenge – in the world of film directing. **By Moira Jeffrey**



THE artist Sam Taylor-Wood has just handed me a pile of new self-portraits to look at. We are sitting in the muggy city sunshine, on the balcony of her East London studio, talking about Strings, the film installation she will show at Edinburgh College of Art as part of this year's film festival.

She has just been filming in Death Valley and taking photos in Los Angeles for a project – soon to be unveiled at a New York exhibition – which she will only describe as “actors in tears”. Claiming jet lag, she is unfeasibly lively and, in her striped shirt and denim mini, remarkably pretty.

We are some 10 minutes walk from the Hoxton Square, the current HQ of White Cube, the hip London gallery that gave her a first solo show in 1995 and whose founder, Jay Jopling, was later to woo and marry her.

It might, therefore, all seem terribly like the lifestyle columns she has been known to appear in, were it not for the extraordinary nature of the photographs in hand. They show the artist in T-shirt and knickers, apparently floating in mid-air, and experiencing what looks like a combination of physical pain and pure joy.

To make them, she explains, she invited a top bondage expert to tie her up and dangle her from the studio ceiling. In the photos, the ties were digitally erased, to allow her to appear to fly free. She incurred considerable bruising in the process. “I’m constricted in this completely compromised position,” she explains, “but when you look at the photographs you don’t have an ounce of that: you just see this moment of absolute release and freedom. You don’t have any sense of the restriction at all, but you know there must have been in order to get to that point. So I guess that becomes sort of self-explanatory.”

It is self-explanatory because along with Taylor-Wood’s story of success – short-listed for the Turner prize in 1998, the youngest artist to get a Hayward retrospective, in 2002, marriage and a daughter, Angelica, who is now seven – is another narrative of pain. The 37-year-old has fought off cancer twice, enduring surgery and chemotherapy

for cancer of the colon, in 1997 and the breast, in 2000. The keynote image of this period was a self-portrait made in 2001 that now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London. It shows her holding a hare, that old Dutch symbol of lust.

She is wearing, as the title of the work makes clear, a “single-breasted suit”.

It is hard when meeting Taylor-Wood not to have that in mind, it feels prurient to bring it up and yet it is the inescapable destination of our conversation. The images of Taylor-Wood flying free are a sign of both her public triumph and her private bonds she has overcome.

Taylor-Wood’s art is not and never has been confessional, but it has certainly always had an emotional timbre. From the dislocated and alienated bohemians, and decadent aristocrats who populated her series of photographs, Five Revolutionary Seconds, through the anxiety of videos such as Travesty of a Mockery, which feature arguments and confrontations, she as played both with feelings and with the enactment of feelings in art and entertainment.

In a world where the latter are often separate, Taylor-Wood is equally criticised and adored for her work with well-known faces such as Kylie Minogue and David Beckham, whom she was commissioned to portray for the National Portrait Gallery this year. “I’ve only used the people for projects that make sense rather than celebrating their celebrity,” she says. “If you look at art history, at Goya or Gainsborough, it’s always about acknowledging the people of your time who have influence. We are a celebrity-obsessed culture, these people do wield influence over us.”

Like her new self-portraits, Strings, the work that she will open in Edinburgh on Sunday, is another piece about freedom and constraint. It shows the Royal Ballet star Ivan Putrov in the crush bar of the Royal Opera House, suspended from the ceiling in a superman-style flying harness. He is enacting a mysterious dance, while beneath him, apparently oblivious, a string quartet play a melancholy movement from Tchaikovsky’s String Quartet No 2. Strings is an odd work, beautifully

lit, elegant yet ungainly. At times you wonder whether Putrov is a ghost, an angel, or the abstracted spirit of the men who play below him. At any rate, he seems unreachable: strung up, constricted, detached. “In a sense that’s how I sometimes feel,” says the artist. “Not here not there, not up not down, neither placed nor displaced.”

The work was a return to Covent Garden for Taylor-Wood, who spent an influential period there as an opera dresser after she graduated from Goldsmiths College in 1990. Her work is immersed in notions of stage and staginess. “Everything at the opera house was heightened and passionate and such theatre,” she says. “But it was also matched by what was going on in the universe backstage.” Working this time with the Royal Ballet, she says. “What really struck me were the extremes that they go to with their bodies to create these characters.”

The tension in Strings is between that extreme and the professional distance of the musicians. “They were so funny,” she says. “They were about as humourless as you can get, one of them was getting really irritable because he kept thinking that Ivan was going to kick him in the head.”

Putrov is one of number of striking men that she has worked with. “It’s difficult for me to work with women, because I find that direct references are made back to me too fast,” she says. “Working with men, it gives it a little distance.”

She hopes to start work with another charismatic man next spring, the actor Ray Winstone, who has invited her to direct him in a feature film about the artist William Blake, which will be written by the duo behind Sexy Beast. The project also includes her long-term collaborator Seamas McGarvey, the cinematographer with whom she has worked for 10 years.

“The film needs to be about a rough Londoner,” she says. “And not too reverent because Blake wasn’t a reverent person. We need to be as irreverent with him as he was with the world. What I feel most excited about is how we deal with the visions and I’d like to deal with in the same way that I make my work. He’s making my life difficult of

course, because some of the visions it’s like... a host of thousand angels and you just think... oh shit.”

So, these days, is she Sam Taylor-Wood film director? “If you have the ideas and you’re a creative person, then you don’t really differentiate in how your ideas manifest themselves. If I can do it, I like challenging myself. I’m not somebody who likes to sit still for very long.”

Sitting still, you realise, was something Sam Taylor-Wood may never have been very good at, but these days it has a much deeper dimension.

“I’m finding it literally hard to sit down now,” she says. “I’m pacing around even in the studio and I find it very hard, increasingly hard, to be still. I wasn’t sure whether it was something to be worried about and then I read Lance Armstrong’s autobiography Every Second Counts and – apart from the cycling obviously because I’m not a cyclist – I felt like I was reading my own thoughts.”

IN SUSPENSE: Sam Taylor-Wood sits in front of one of her latest works from the Strings exhibition. Picture: Mary McCartney Donald

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Armstrong is the Texan cyclist who, last weekend, celebrated a record six Tour de France wins after being given only a 40% chance of surviving cancer in his mid-twenties. “It is about what it could be like – what it is like – for life to change in a split second,” explains Taylor-Wood.

“You don’t want to waste any time. It does become its own illness in a sense. You are afraid of losing times, you’re afraid of missing opportunities, you’re afraid of that moment when someone says ‘right time’s up, have you achieved everything you want to achieve?’ and you are not ready.”

That focus can be good, say when it comes to juggling the different roles of artist and mother. But at times, she says, one can become too blinkered, too focused.

“Through going through illness you kind of develop a core of steel. You have to, in order to process the information, to digest what’s happening to you and then to forge

ahead and try to survive it. And then what happens is the day the chemotherapy finishes, everyone forgets you’re an ill person. But you don’t. You continue. If you’re not fighting for your health you’re fighting for something else, you’re driving yourself. Once you’ve got that drive its very hard to lose, you don’t really want to lose it.”

The steeliness in Taylor-Wood, though, does nothing to dilute her charm in-person, and while the shadow of her own story casts some light and shade on her work, it would be wrong to see it purely in those terms. I look at those pictures again. Bound or free? Taylor-Wood herself is already on the move. “I’m really excited about making this new film,” she grins. “It’s a new world. A new world to conquer.”

Strings, by Sam Taylor-Wood, is at the Sculpture Court, Edinburgh College of Art, Lauriston Place, from August 1–27. Part of the Edinburgh International Film Festival.