

1 A still from Sam Taylor-Wood's film *Nowhere Boy*. © Sam Taylor-Wood.

2 Sam Taylor-Wood's artworks often play with the boundary between stills and motion. This photograph is entitled *Bram Stoker's Chair VII*, 2005. © Sam Taylor-Wood.



1

## SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

[www.whitecube.com/artists/taylorwood](http://www.whitecube.com/artists/taylorwood)

Sam Taylor-Wood has been working on moving and still images for years, from her 2004 single-take film of David Beckham sleeping to her series of self-portrait photographs, seemingly frozen in action (such as *Bram Stoker's Chair VII*, 2005 [4]). So when she took her first step into feature films in 2008, directing the biopic of John Lennon, *Nowhere Boy*, she was technically confident she could do it. "Making a feature film didn't feel too far out of reach," she says. "[Director of photography] Seamus McGarvey and I have worked together for 12 years."

Taylor-Wood always shoots on film, not video, and was keen to do so again this time – video footage looks like TV, she says, and makes everyone's work seem the same. But while she and McGarvey hired in kit familiar from previous projects, the shoot was bigger than anything she'd done, and she had to get used to the sheer size of the crew. "As director, people are continually asking you what's happening next," she laughs, "and unlike working

solo, you can't just get your head down and get on with it. We only had nine weeks to shoot, but we could only work five days a week because people had to have their weekends off. That was hard, I'm very used to just turning things around but. It's a very different process because it's so much more collaborative."

The tight timeframe meant Taylor-Wood had to film at least twice as quickly as normal, so the shoot had to be well organised from the start. She was also conscious it was the first time she had shot a narrative, so she spent six months working on the script prior to filming with screenwriter Matt Greenhalgh, before it was storyboarded by Jonny Meakin.

"The existing script was already very good but I had to feel confident I could do it, and that I could put my stamp on it," she says. "Aesthetics are as integral to good filmmaking as narrative and character, and I have a very particular way of filming things because I've spent years looking into the lens. But you have to not be self-indulgent. While you're lingering on a single beautiful

image, the audience will be wondering what's next."

The film was already fully funded when Taylor-Wood was invited to join it, which meant she didn't have to work out the finances, but also meant she inherited many expectations about how it would turn out. Film4, the UK Film Council, the distributor and the other associated companies each had their own vision, she says, few of which coincided with each other and most of which differed from her own. She had to negotiate a delicate path, staying true to herself but remaining responsible throughout. "It was very different, because I'm used to dictating how things will be seen, but you have to be realistic," she says.

"I'd love to make films like Tarkovsky [using long, slow takes] but in the current environment, you'd never get it funded in a million years. I watched Antonioni's *The Passenger* recently and, while it's fantastic, I was thinking 'The script must be maximum 20 pages long'. There was one scene [in *Nowhere Boy*], when Lennon learns to play the guitar. Julia [his mother] and John are on opposite sides of the room at normal speed, her

daughters are shot in time-lapse in the middle of the room, then the camera zooms in on John. Much of my work has looked at the passing of time and movement, so I was happy to be able to do it."

Editing the film was the biggest challenge, because while directing the actors and working with the cameras and lighting felt reasonably familiar, Taylor-Wood had spent little time in the editing room prior to *Nowhere Boy*. She was dependent on the experience and skills of her film editor-in-chief, Lisa Gunning, she says, and the editing took about three months. In total Taylor-Wood spent two years on the film, which was a critical success on its release in 2010, and earned a Bafta nomination. While still a committed photographer, Taylor-Wood would love to direct something else.

"I just finished shooting some new stills, and it was very nice to take some time to do that quietly, at my own pace," she says. "But now that I've done it I'm keen to gear up again at full pace. The problem is finding the right script. I'm impatient to get started, but it has to be right because it's two years of your life." *BJP*

