



'When I met Sam, I fell in love with her'

Elton John and artist Sam Taylor-Wood talk about what bonds them – and what drives them mad

The British contemporary artist Sam Taylor-Wood and Elton John have been friends for more than a decade. Soon after they met in 1997, John commissioned Taylor-Wood to direct a music video starring Hollywood actor Robert Downey Jr for his hit single *I Want Love*. Earlier this year, they attended the Cannes film festival, where Taylor-Wood's short film *Love You More* had been nominated for a Palme d'Or.

Their frank conversation was filmed as part of an ITV documentary about Taylor-Wood's life and work which will be broadcast tomorrow night, to coincide with her two-part exhibition in London. Here, we present an edited transcript of that conversation. Since it was filmed, Taylor-Wood has separated from her husband Jay Jopling, the celebrated British dealer of contemporary art.

Elton John: Sam is one of the greatest artists I've ever met. We first met at a Pet Shop Boys concert at the Savoy Theatre. I'd never really heard of her before; but we got on like a house on fire. We've done album covers and photograph sessions together, such as the *Crying Men* series [photographs of tearful film actors, taken in 2002-4]. I wrote to some of the actors and asked them to do it, and it was like pulling teeth until Sam got the first done. And then, when people had seen them, more people came into it and collected these 26 incredible photographs of men crying. I have all of them up on the wall in my house in London.

Sam Taylor-Wood: We sold them all for Elton's Aids foundation.

EJ: Which was fantastic. As soon as I met Sam, I fell in love with her. If I wasn't in a relationship with David [Furnish], and I was to go the other way again, Sam would be the woman that I would want to spend the rest of my life with. When we met, I was getting much more into art and photography and collecting and I'd been sober for a few years. I'd collected black-and-white photography from the 20th century, but I didn't get into contemporary photography until I saw Sam's [work] and started to collect it. I think I've got about 80 photographs of Sam's now... I've [also] got a lot of work by Irving Penn and Robert Mapplethorpe. But I love Sam's work. It's so varied.

STW: When I was really ill [with cancer], Elton and David looked after me. I felt like I'd lost all my creative ideas, energy, oomph, everything. And Elton called me and said, "Come on, why don't you do my next video [for *I Want Love*, in 2001]?" It was a big kick up



the arse. Doing that video gave me the confidence to begin the next phase of my work.

That has often happened when I've gone into a slump. We talk to each other all the time, practically every day. He knows when I'm not myself and keeps me going, imbuing me with the same energy that he has.

EJ: I don't like being around self-obsessed artists who just talk about themselves. Sam certainly doesn't do that. In fact she is very shy. She cringes a lot. All creative people are monsters sometimes. Not in our behaviour towards other people, but in our behaviour towards ourselves. Sam is very stubborn and very strong-minded.

STW: I can be very self-destructive, but quietly.

The artist and the pop star: Sam Taylor-Wood and Elton John, above. Below: 'Ghosts II' (2008) by Sam Taylor-Wood



EJ: Sam doesn't like pretentiousness, doesn't like people who are self-absorbed. She likes to laugh. But when she went through that hideous cancer stuff... that

alters the way you are as a person; the way you think, the way you look at life, the way you sometimes have that fear that it will come back. I've never talked to her about it but I know it's one of the big reasons she does so much work – I think she thinks, "Maybe it will come back." And that's why you get this incredible drive and the amount of work that she does.

She's done a short film, photo shoots of people, two or three new series of videos, a new series of photographs, all in the last nine months. That's an awful lot of work. I think there is a deep-rooted drive in her – that is fuelled by the fear of the cancer coming back.

STW: Yes, totally. You can see it with the *Wuthering Heights* [series of Brontë-inspired photographs, now on show at London's White Cube gallery]. Knowing how I felt when I did those pictures, being in that barren, disturbing landscape – there is a base level that definitely comes from what I've been through.

'Sam doesn't like pretentiousness, doesn't like people who are self-absorbed'

EJ: Sam is married to the most successful contemporary art dealer in Britain, so some people think – wrongly – that she has had an easy ride. Sometimes that works against her, especially in America. I don't think she has been represented very well in America. And that may be a lot to do with her husband Jay being very protective of her; I don't think he's found her the right place to be. And that has held her back. I don't think it has been easy, because Jay represents so many other different artists. I don't know whether it's Jay's fault.

STW: It's complicated because galleries like control of their artists and it's already a tussle, but being married to Jay, then it's a whole other battle that they feel they don't really want to fight.

EJ: It drives me crazy. It's not the same for Damien [Hirst] or the Chapman brothers or people like that. I love Jay to death but it's something that needs to be sorted out because it has been going on for too long.

STW: Yeah, I know.

✦ **The South Bank Show:** Sam Taylor-Wood will be broadcast on ITV1 at 10.45pm tomorrow. Taylor-Wood's new two-part exhibition is at White Cube Mason's Yard, London SW1 (020 7930 5373), and No 1 The Piazza, Covent Garden, London WC2, until Nov 29.

MUST SEE

EXHIBITIONS

Chosen by Richard Dormant



Babylon

From the Tower of Babel to the Hanging Gardens, treasures from the city synonymous with the wonders of the ancient world. British Museum, London W1 (020 7323 8299), until March 15.

A Great British Collection:

the Pictures Collected by Sir David and Lady Scott Enchanting Victorian narrative and genre paintings. Sotheby's, London W1 (020 7293 5555), until Wed.

Renaissance Faces:

Van Eyck to Titian From men and women whose names we don't know to princes and popes: the people who look out at us in these pictures live forever. National Gallery, London WC1 (020 7747 2885), until Jan 18.

Janet Cardiff & Georges Bures Miller

Installations involving objects and sounds inspired by thrillers and film noir. Modern Art Oxford (01865 722 733), until Jan 18.

Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision

The largest exhibition to date of the painter of such well-loved pictures as *The Awakening Conscience* and *The Scapegoat*. Manchester Art Gallery, (0161 235 8888), until Jan 11.

THEATRE

Chosen by Charles Spencer



La Cage aux Folles

As an antidote to the credit-crunch blues, *La Cage aux Folles* is unbeatable. Playhouse Theatre, London WC2 (0870 060 6631).

A Month in the Country

Based on the novel by J.L. Carr, this is a beautiful and moving way of marking the 90th anniversary of the end of the Great War. Salisbury Playhouse (01722 320333).

The Norman Conquests

Ayckbourn's early comic masterpiece, which follows a fraught family gathering through three linked plays, returns in triumph and helpless hilarity. Old Vic, London SE1 (0870 060 6628).

To Be Straight With You

Final performances of this enthralling show by DV8, who give this campaigning piece their impassioned all. National's Lyttelton Theatre, London SE1 (020 7452 3000), today mat & eve.