

Portrait of the artist as a young woman

For **Sam Taylor-Wood**, her initiation into photography came in the form of three nightclub bouncers and an idea that wouldn't go away

▶▶ A friend got me a job on the door of the Camden Palace nightclub, which quickly progressed to running the place. My nights started at 5pm and mostly ended at 5am when I would stumble, rubbing my stinging eyes, into a Datsun Cherry minicab that took me home to my bedsit in Wandsworth. This was six days a week; I'd sleep a few hours, then get up and try to come up with some ideas for sculptures that I might make in my friend's studio – before going back to work.

I looked forward to only one aspect of my job and that was when Basil, Ray and Steve would arrive. Steve often made me a herbal tea with milk and two sugars, Basil would click out his teeth and thrust them in my hand each time he weighed in on a fight, and Ray would put on his lead-lined gloves and we'd flirt: "If you were my bird I'd treat you like a lady, send round a roller, take you somewhere fancy ..."

I loved them, they were the frontline behind which I cowered. Basil used to say to me: "You're the wrong girl in the wrong place. Be careful – one day it could be the wrong time." I knew what he meant. It was a pretty threatening place, but I needed the money to make my work and the daylight hours in which to do it.

Then, late one night, I thought about taking them to the Tate and standing in the Rothko Room. It became an image I couldn't shake and wanted to see. So I put it to them: "Fancy coming to see some art? And can I take photographs of you in front of paintings?" It was the first time I'd felt my separate lives collide into an image, a photograph that I could see.

I wrote to the Tate, who said we could go in after hours for 45 minutes to make the pictures in front of the paintings I had chosen: Whistler, Rothko, Leighton and Kline and maybe one other but I've forgotten. I didn't really know then



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how to use lights or a medium-format camera, so I asked a professional (Anthony Oliver) to come and help me out.

He set everything up while I explained to the boys that they had to assume the "your name's not down, you're not coming in" pose, which was their natural stance. I wanted the paintings to be shielded by these men. My access was being denied to the world I so wanted to penetrate and then ... CRASH ... I did it, I had made the first artwork that meant ME.

After that I quickly threw myself

into "aperture awareness" – the fundamentals of photography. This counts for some of the success of a good photograph, but for me the director's talent has always been the most important thing.

Even today I work with Niall O'Brien, who is far more technically astute than I am, but I still have the clearest idea of every detail I want in my photograph. And when a person is in front of my lens, sitter and artist are like collaborators: they have that same clarity. I talk and tell stories endlessly to them, negotiating every emotion I need, from nonchalance to distress.

I'm motivated every second by my work; it doesn't switch off. The pictures I make come from every blink of my lashes.

Sam's next project is a short film written by Patrick Marber called Love You More, produced by Film Four and Mirage Enterprises



Above: Bram Stoker's Chair VI, 2005.
This elaborately orchestrated self-portrait required significant visualisation and pre-planning

Above left: Basil, Ray, Steve and Kline, 1992. Taken at the Tate Gallery in London in front of Franz Kline's *Meryon* (1960-1)