

## SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

## In her life

A film about the young John Lennon is another unexpected departure for an artist who has known pain and success in equal measure

Marcus Field

Sam Taylor-Wood says her earliest memory is of dancing naked on her grandmother's table singing "Sugar, Sugar", aged about five. It's an image that could be considered the first work by the artist, now 42, whose whole life has turned out to be something of an extended performance piece.

Next week, the latest episode in that drama is due to take place when Taylor-Wood's directorial debut as a film-maker - *Nowhere Boy*, a biopic about the young John Lennon - receives its world premiere as the closing feature in the London Film Festival. Early reports on the movie are positive; it certainly has all the ingredients of a hit: the screenplay is by Matt Greenhalgh, who wrote the brilliant *Control*, the biopic of Joy Division's Ian Curtis; the fine cast includes Anne-Marie Duff as Lennon's mother and Kristin Scott Thomas as his aunt Mimi. Hollywood boss Harvey Weinstein has taken US rights.

So much for the movie. What will be of equal interest to many journalists and celebrity junkies on Thursday is who will accompany Taylor-Wood up the red carpet. The anticipation surrounding her partner for the night has been excited by reports that her current boyfriend is the film's young star, Aaron Johnson, who, at 19, is 23 years her junior. The pair were photographed at the Cannes Film Festival and, more recently, out on the town together. The deliciousness of the ensuing gossip was heightened by the fact that Taylor-Wood's (recently) ex-husband, the art dealer Jay Jopling, 46, was photographed last January while on a romantic holiday in the

Caribbean with the singer Lily Allen, who was then 23.

Such attention, while bothersome to others, can surely only delight an artist who has made her name with autobiographical work which often uses shock tactics and celebrity names to grab attention before asking viewers to contemplate its deeper meanings.

Taylor-Wood says she became an artist so she could reinvent herself. Her childhood, after all, had not been happy. She was born in London but, aged nine, moved with her mother and sister to a hippie commune in Sussex after her parents split up. "Everyone wore orange robes and meditated," she remembers. Her mother abandoned her completely at the age of 15, leaving her to look after her younger half-brother.

Soon after this Taylor-Wood enrolled on a fine art degree at East London Polytechnic, but later transferred to Goldsmiths where she studied alongside contemporaries Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Marcus Harvey, before graduating in 1990. Her boyfriend during these years was Jake Chapman, the artist who later became famous for the work he makes in partnership with his elder brother, Dinos.

After her graduation, Taylor-Wood says she thought about giving up art. She worked as a dresser at the Royal Opera House and as a manager at the Camden Palace nightclub. Slowly, however, she began to make work again, and it was at the 1994 show of her video installation *Killing* (now in the Tate) that she met Jopling. "It was an immensely moving piece," remembers the old Etonian. "I got to know her and invited her to make an exhibition at White Cube. She told me, and I remember I did not know then what the term meant, that she was a free school dinners kid."

Jopling, who already represented Hirst and Tracey Emin, became Taylor-Wood's dealer and sold several of her works to Charles Saatchi. These later appeared in *Sensation*, the show of the

advertising mogul's collection which caused such controversy when it opened at the Royal Academy in 1997. Although the exhibition included several of her elaborate video works, it was the photographic self-portrait *Suck, Fuck, Spank, Wank*, depicting Taylor-Wood posing provocatively with her trousers down, which appeared on a postcard and came to symbolise the kind of sexually graphic, autobiographical work for which the Young British Artists became famous.

In the same year as *Sensation*, Taylor-Wood and Jopling were married and she gave birth to their daughter, Angelica. (A second child, Jessie, was born in 2007.) Later that year, Taylor-Wood was diagnosed with cancer of the colon and came close to death. It is a typical example of the highs and lows of the Taylor-Wood story, however; that soon after her illness, in 1998, she was shortlisted for the Turner Prize. Looking back recently, she said the worst thing anybody has ever said to her was that she was shortlisted only because people thought she was going to die. The winner that year was Chris Ofili, but it didn't stop Jopling and Taylor-Wood from throwing one of their legendary parties on awards night, with cocktails named after her works.

In person, Taylor-Wood is witty and self-deprecating - characteristics which also regularly appear in her work. After she developed breast cancer in 2000 and underwent a mastectomy, for example, she exhibited a large photo of herself with a culled animal titled *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare*. She also enjoys playing games with image and identity. She has now recorded two songs with the Pet Shop Boys, for one of which - a cover of Donna Summer's "Love to Love You Baby" - she used the pseudonym Kiki Kokova.

This sense of fun, which Taylor-Wood shares with her ex-husband, combined with the huge wealth he made from brokering contemporary art, are among the factors which made them what journalists called First Couple of the Art World and put them on Tatler's "Most Wanted" invitation list. Gradually they gathered a glittering circle of friends, holidayed at Elton John's villa, and hosted parties with guests including Kate Moss, David Walliams and Guy Ritchie.

When big names such as Robert Downey Jnr, Jude Law and David Beckham (her one-hour video of the sleeping footballer was commissioned

by the National Portrait Gallery) also began to appear in Taylor-Wood's work, some critics were clearly irritated. "It is a surreal moment, when publicity was mistaken for art, the hubbub for the event," wrote one critic of her Hayward show in 2002.

In truth, many of Taylor-Wood's best works do not feature celebrity actors. Her *Still Life* (2001), a slow-motion video which shows fruit slowly rotting, for example, is an exquisite memento mori. And of the works in which actors do appear, the superficial glamour of the names often pales beneath the darker depths of the image. Who could not be moved by *Pieta* (2001), in which a woman struggles to cradle the weight of her dead son? The Virgin-like figure happens to be Taylor-Wood, and the Christ is played by Robert Downey Jnr, but that is only one of the layers of meaning in the work.

With her two bouts of cancer and difficult childhood, Taylor-Wood certainly knows enough about pain and the presence of death to depict it convincingly in her work. In her life, however, she has always been able to wear her cares lightly. Her regular

appearances looking fit and sexy on celebrity pages belie her struggles. And friends talk fondly of the weekends of walks and pub lunches that the Joplings hosted at their country house in Yorkshire.

There must have been fears, then, that the announcement of their separation in September 2008 would mean more pain for Taylor-Wood. But so far signs are that what they described as an "amicable" parting are true. Taylor-Wood had a show of her work at White Cube after the split, regularly attends the gallery's openings, and is still represented by Jopling. The couple's divorce has recently been finalised, leaving Jopling living in the grand Marylebone house they previously shared, and Taylor-Wood in a London apartment.

So the premiere of *Nowhere Boy* this week marks another line in a new chapter for Taylor-Wood. If she wins the approval of the critics, more feature films may follow. She may also have this new man, Aaron Johnson, and she may not. Sam Taylor-Wood is a performance artist, a master of fiction, and everything in her life's work is not always as it seems.

## In brief

**BORN:** 4 March 1967, London. She has a younger sister Ashley and half-brother Kristian.

**EDUCATED:** A graduate of Goldsmiths, University of London.

**FAMILY:** Married art dealer Jay Jopling in 1998. They separated in 2008 and divorced this year. They have two children, Angelica (born 1998) and Jessie Phoenix (born 2006).

**CAREER:** Gained success as conceptual artist in the mid-1990s before finding herself at the heart of the Young British Artists movement that took shape soon after. Nominated for the Turner Prize in 1998. Famous figures crop up frequently in her work, among them Robert Downey Jnr, Elton John, Jude Law, and David Beckham. She is a long-time collaborator with the Pet Shop Boys. From video art she has turned to film, and her first full-length feature, *Nowhere Boy*, about John Lennon's Liverpool boyhood, plays at the London Film Festival next week.



Taylor-Wood's 2004 video of a sleeping David Beckham AP

**SHE SAYS:** "I'm annoying to be around because I keep twitching. You keep trying to be in the now, but you can't."

**THEY SAY:** "She has acute self-awareness and yet a kind of generosity about using her own body in her work. There is a grace and serenity about Sam and yet a steeliness too." Tim Marlow, director of exhibitions at White Cube