

THE OBSERVER PROFILE by Vanessa Thorpe

Sam Taylor-Wood

Out of the gallery into the cinema

As a leading member of the BritArt pack, she made her name with a short film of David Beckham fast asleep. Now the Turner Prize nominee has turned her hand to a full-length feature and it could be an award winner

In the opening frames of Sam Taylor-Wood's first full-length film, a young lad on a bike whistles past a sign that reads Strawberry Fields. We must be in Liverpool then. And it looks like the years after the war. A moment late, both time and place are confirmed when the cyclist calls out: "Hey, Tarby!" to another Brylcreemed youth. Everyone with a knowledge of Beatles trivia is familiar with the fact that the golf-loving comic Jimmy Tarbuck went to school with John Lennon, so it's clear this is the early-life Lennon, imagined afresh by one of the leading names in contemporary British art.

Taylor-Wood's *Nowhere Boy* has been selected as the prestigious finale to the London Film Festival at the end of the month and it is already being saluted as a powerful directorial debut. The film stars Kristin Scott Thomas in the role of Lennon's buttoned-up Aunt Mimi and Anne-Marie Duff as his wayward mother, Julia, and is set to build on the acclaim for Taylor-Wood's short film, *Love You More*, in competition at Cannes last spring.

If *Nowhere Boy* goes down as well as predicted, the Turner Prize-nominated avant-garde artist may soon find herself in contention for the festival's inaugural Star of London award for best film.

Significantly, Yoko Ono is said to have accepted an invitation to the premiere and has also agreed to let the film-makers use her late husband's plaintive song, *Mother*, over the closing credits.

Photographer Johnnie Shand Kydd, a close friend of Taylor-Wood, is not surprised by the buzz surrounding her film: "It is absolutely extraordinary. It is immensely moving," he says. "You would have to be made of reinforced concrete not to find yourself in tears."

Both confidently and conventionally executed, *Nowhere Boy* steers clear of the daring dramatic effects brought off by Taylor-Wood's fellow contemporary artist Steve McQueen in his acclaimed first feature, *Hunger*. Instead, its strengths lie in good acting and sound storytelling. The screenplay is by Matt Greenhalgh, the writer who charted the decline of Joy Division's frontman, Ian Curtis, in *Control*, and his script has strong parallels with Taylor-Wood's troubled childhood. "It was written for her," says Shand Kydd. "There is a great autobiographical streak running right through it."

Both Lennon and Taylor-Wood were abandoned by their mothers, though Lennon's pain was later compounded when his mother was killed in a traffic accident.

As it turns out, the film has other unintended resonances with the private life of its director. Unsettling scenes between the young Lennon and his rediscovered mother are deliberately peppered with inappropriate sexual tension. Julia tells her son at one point that the meaning of rock'n'roll is "sex". Yet at the sight of 19-year-old Aaron Johnson, the newcomer who plays Lennon, flirting with a much older woman, it is hard not to see reflections of the unconventional real-life romance between Johnson and his 42-year-old director.

While the father of Taylor-Wood's children, gallery owner Jay Jopling, was last year pictured in newspapers frolicking in the sea with pop star Lily Allen, 22 years his junior, this summer Taylor-Wood went a step further. Johnson is 23 years younger than her.

Gossip pages are intrigued by the divorced couple because of their wealth and close associations with many famous names, including Damien Hirst, who showed his work at Jopling's White Cube gallery, and Elton John and Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys.

It is a long way from her early life as a south London schoolgirl who had to stand in the queue for free dinners wearing a home-knitted sweater.

When she was nine, Taylor-Wood's biker father left home. Several years later, in her teenage years, after a period living in a commune with her yoga teacher mother, her mother also walked out on Taylor-Wood and her younger sister and half-brother, leaving them with her stepfather.

A few weeks later, the teenage Taylor-Wood saw her mother closing the blinds at the window of a neighbouring house. The horror she felt then is clearly expressed in *Nowhere Boy* by Lennon's grief when the mother he has only recently discovered living nearby is knocked down by a car. From this age, 15, she felt she was essentially taking care of herself.

Taylor-Wood's introduction to her charmed circle of Young British Artists and attendant rich celebrities hinged on the suggestion of the polytechnic tutor who persuaded her, as a frustrated student, to transfer to Goldsmiths col-

lege in south London. Once there, she started to go out with Jake Chapman, the controversial artist who works with his brother, Dinos. Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Gary Hume, the key practitioners of the school now known as BritArt, were studying with them, each busily developing their trademark conceptual flourishes.

"We were conscious that what we were involved in was momentous," Taylor-Wood has said. "Exhibitors and curators were flying in from abroad to look at our work. There was a real, surreal sense we were part of the zeitgeist."

Looking forward, rather than at art history, the group were absorbed with what they might make that would be arresting and new. "My influences were my contemporaries," Taylor-Wood says. Both Lucas and her friend Tracey Emin made a big impact. "I could see them every day doing what they wanted - which was mythical."

A video portrait of a sleeping David Beckham brought Taylor-Wood's own work into the spotlight and established her links with celebrity, rather unfairly thinks Tim Marlow, the director of exhibitions at White Cube: "Jealous people are sometimes critical of Sam and suggest she chooses high-profile subjects, but the truth is that the National Portrait Gallery approached her with a commission for a portrait of Beckham. Sam was not convinced at first, but I think her solution was complex and strong."

It's an image so potent, in fact, that last week the Thyssen-Bornemisza museum in Madrid started selling condoms in packets decorated with a still from the film.

Marlow sees Taylor-Wood as gifted with images of masculinity. Her 2004 photographic work, *Crying Men* - which featured performers such as Michael Gambon, Laurence Fishburne and Tim Roth in tears - was a case in point. "Crying Men was an incredibly draining process for her and for the men involved," says Marlow. "She did not tell her sitters what she wanted until she was with them and then they had to cry."

Taylor-Wood's art is not as personal as Emin's and not as confrontational as Lucas's, yet it often has a heavy emotional content, playing with ideas of distance. "Her subject to a large extent is the self," says Marlow. "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."

Critics have suggested that the artist's marriage to Jay Jopling was crucial to her career, but Taylor-Wood has had far from an easy ride. At the age of 29, shortly after the birth of their eldest daughter, Angelica, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. Only four years later, she had to contend with breast cancer and a mastectomy. "Just because you've faced your own mortality doesn't make it any less frightening the second time," she said.

Friends say she has handled her divorce with characteristic calm. She and Jopling often attend the same events and appear to remain close friends. She now lives in a London apartment, but uses their house in Yorkshire too. And her glittering associations with the famous continue. Taylor-Wood's 40th birthday was celebrated with Elton John, who turned 60 at the same time, as a joint centenary and she made her drawing room available to Kate Moss for part of the model's epic 30th birthday party.

In 2008, after working with her friend Baillie Walsh on his film, *Flashbacks of a Fool*, starring Daniel Craig, Taylor-Wood hit back at snide comments about her use of established talent.

"When Scorsese or Coppola cast celebrities in their work, it goes without question. And yet when I do..." she complained. It is a comment that reveals her unabashed determination, rather than any arrogance, say her friends.

Taylor-Wood, like many artists, has a love of rock and pop music and has recently released a cover version of the Passions' song *I'm in Love* with a German Film Star with the Pet Shop Boys. Before this, she made a video for Elton John and sang on two Pet Shop Boys songs. So music was clearly part of the appeal of telling Lennon's story, but the links with her own childhood trauma were the bigger draw.

Marlow believes it is Taylor-Wood's connection with other people's experiences, combined with her visual skill, that will establish her as a great film-maker.

Taylor-Wood suspects, though, that it is simply her huge appetite for life that will carry on pushing her artistically. "I'm annoying to be around because I keep twitching," she has admitted. "You keep trying to be in the now, but you can't."



THE TAYLOR-WOOD LOWDOWN

Born In London in 1967. Younger sister Ashley and half-brother Kristian. Ex-wife of Jay Jopling, father of her daughters, Angelica and Jessie Phoenix.

Best of times Celebrated in the Nineties as one of the stars of the Young British Artists (YBAs) and a contender for the 1998 Turner Prize. Now making her way in film with a very high-profile debut feature, *Nowhere Boy*, which has been

selected as the closing film in the London Film Festival, and a possible winner of the Star of London award.

Worst of times Facing cancer for the second time in four years as the 33-year-old mother of a small child.

What others say "The impression I get is of someone so busy and driven, there is no longer much room left in her life for the

usual interstitials - not even for sadness." Art critic Waldemar Januszczak.

What she says "I knew I wanted to make a British film. And I wanted to make something that shook me to the core inside. My agent in LA thought I was a complete prima donna. Because I didn't have the pressure of having to do something quickly, I just knew I'd know it when I read it."