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# Message from remission



Sam Taylor-Wood's new show is a sombre meditation in the aftermath of her cancer, says **Richard Cork**



*Still Life*, in which Sam Taylor-Wood "takes the European still-life tradition and pushes it into a state of outright decomposition"

Step inside Sam Taylor-Wood's exhibition at White Cube<sup>2</sup> and you sense soon enough that something is cruelly wrong. Straight ahead, a young man on a screen covers his bowed head with his hands. He could be praying, even imploring. Then, slowly, his face rises, both hands slip down, and he starts to sing. But no sound emerges from his lips, and we realise that the film will remain mute for its entire six minutes.

The longer he sings, the more frustrating this silence becomes, for the man's emotions are deeply engaged with the music. The feeling of deprivation provoked by our inability to hear is intense. He seems to plead with us, his body swaying as one hand reappears and touches his neck. Strongly lit from the side, he ends up going into a trance-like state and sings with a faraway gaze. Then he stops, and the camera lingers on him until the screen goes blank.

The anguished mood grows as we explore the rest of this powerful, mortality-haunted exhibition, titled *Mute*. Taylor-Wood has recently fought off two separate bouts of cancer, and the trauma involved in those struggles affects everything on view here.

A nearby colour photograph shows a young, fair-haired woman standing in a tall-ceilinged interior. Wearing only a bra and jeans, she is seen from behind. But the figure could be Taylor-Wood herself, and her head is bowed like the singer at the beginning of *Mute*. Her hands are raised, possibly in order to conduct a careful examination of her own body. Sunlight hits the deeply recessed window-niche, but the blaze fails to disperse the deep shadows elsewhere in the room. Its gloom seems to match the woman's self-absorption. Everything appears as becalmed as in another photograph called *Poor Cow*, in which the animal stares out blankly from a flat field interrupted only by a few withered weeds beneath an implacable grey sky.

Isolation and stillness seem to dominate these images. A naked youth crouches in blackness, his left hand resting tensely on the floor while his right elbow is balanced on his thigh. Once again, the head hangs down as if dejected. Although the figure recalls antique relief carvings, we are aware, from the strain in his sinews, that he cannot maintain this position much longer. Will he arise, or collapse on the ground? Taylor-Wood keeps the options open, but in her filmed

work she adopts a more relentless approach.

At first, the fruit heaped in a woven container looks as luscious as a still life by Caravaggio or Zurbaran. But as our eyes roam over the peach-bloom, the light alters subtly, and a pear-stalk droops downwards like the singer's inclined head. Everything, suddenly, is on the move. Although the film lasts only three minutes and 44 seconds, the changes it charts are as fast as they are catastrophic. The peaches sprout a pale grey mould, the cherries are assailed by a bilious green growth, and soon everything seems about to be smothered in a frost-like blight. Once piled high and swollen with ripeness, the fruit now sinks lower and lower, until an annihilating black substance creeps across everything. In this short yet devastating film, Taylor-Wood takes the European still-life tradition, with its ominous hints of transience, and pushes it into a state of outright decomposition. At once seductive and desolating, Taylor-Wood's memento mori begins with heady sensuality and ends in rotting negation.

The second half of this outstanding show, the finest Taylor-Wood has staged, concentrates on suffering and stoicism rather

## Once swollen with ripeness, the fruit sinks under an annihilating black substance

than extinction. On the floor, a large sculpture of a unicorn lies half-embedded. He twists to one side, like the fiery *Whistlejacket* in Stubbs's great painting. But the wholeness and rearing energy of Stubbs's steed cannot be found in Taylor-Wood's sculpture. Only half its body is visible, and it looks increasingly desperate in its floundering struggle to emerge from the ground. Although mythical, it appears unable to escape from corporeal limits and defy gravity. It must envy the half-naked man in a colour photograph called *The Leap*, who seems to float among trees and raises an arm as if to bless.

Is he a contemporary embodiment of Christ, the archetype of martyrdom? The possibility seems greater when we encoun-

ter Taylor-Wood's filmed homage to Michelangelo's early *Pietà* carving in Rome. For the artist herself adopts the role of the mourning Madonna, seated on a wide flight of steps as she strives to hold the inert body of a man sprawled across her lap. She looks as coolly composed as the Virgin in Michelangelo's carving, but the body she supports gradually falls lower, like the fruit festering in the *Still Life* film. She attempts to raise him at one point, but he slumps back. As she tries again, and turns away as though looking elsewhere for help, the image fades.

We are left wondering how long this slender young woman can continue to cradle him — and wondering, too, why Taylor-Wood cast Robert Downey Jr in the man's part. The knowledge that the Christ-like figure is played by a Hollywood actor pulls our attention away from her central concerns.

That is why *Breach*, a ten-and-a-half-minute film of a girl slumped on the floor, is more moving. Nothing distracts us from the unexplained plight of a girl who, at the start, rests both hands on her bare, outstretched legs. She shifts a little, gives her nose a brief wipe and looks round impatiently. The room, however, must be as empty as a

prison cell. She sinks into despondency. After looking sideways, upwards and down at the floor, as if wondering how long she must sit there, she succumbs to a fit of crying.

Wholly unforced and devoid of theatricality, she sighs and resumes staring. But nothing seems real except her own misery, and it makes her for the most part as paralysed as the *Bound Ram* in a photograph on the same wall. Condemned to stand in its own urine, the hapless animal is trussed and doleful. Taylor-Wood awakens memories of the Lamb of God, whose Christ-like death redeemed the world. She is unafraid of such references, and her involvement with Renaissance art undoubtedly enriches her work. But it is, ultimately, rooted in the contemporary world — like the wind-battered tree leaning at such a perilous angle in a bleak and deserted landscape. She calls this photograph *Self-Portrait as a Tree*, and its chronic instability prompts a shudder. At the same time, though, the tree's stubborn resilience provokes admiration as well. And so does the rest of the work in this brave, painfully heartfelt show.

● Sam Taylor-Wood: *Mute* at White Cube<sup>2</sup> (020-7930 5373) until January 12