



# ‘It makes me smile because I forget. But I am: I’m a director!’

Conceptual artist-turned-filmmaker Sam Taylor-Wood tells **Dave Calhoun** why she’d now pick the Odeon Leicester Square over the Guggenheim. Portrait **Phil Fisk**

**S**am Taylor-Wood’s studio is a two-floored oasis of calm in a converted Victorian workshop near Old Street roundabout. Just as I arrive, the 42 year old who has been a fixture on the British art scene since the mid-1990s pulls up in a silver vintage car with boyfriend Aaron Johnson in the passen-

ger seat. They’ve been to St John in Spitalfields for lunch and Taylor-Wood, who is relaxed and welcoming from the second she steps out of the car, has brought us back a couple of Eccles cakes to share as we talk about her new – indeed her first – feature film, ‘Nowhere Boy’, in which Johnson plays the teenage John Lennon in the

years before The Beatles.

I had thought the elephant in the room during our interview would be the fact that Taylor-Wood and Johnson, her fresh-faced, 19-year-old leading man, are now an item. And not just any old item: they confirmed their plans to marry on the same night in October that ‘Nowhere Boy’ had its world

## Sam Taylor-Wood

premiere at the London Film Festival. 'That was utterly terrifying, highly emotional, an out-of-body experience,' she says. 'Incredibly exposing.' But here he is, 19 years to her 42, and hanging about her studio as we talk. The message is clear: nothing to hide. Johnson even proves sweetly defensive of his fiancée when I mention to him that some critics have been surprised at how 'straight' her first film has turned out, considering her background in multi-screen video work, perhaps with memories of Steve McQueen's 'Hunger' or Julian Schnabel's 'The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly' fresh in the mind. 'It's just bullshit,' he says. 'It's rubbish when people say that she's, you know, changed... or gone to some...' He gets a bit tongue-tied. Sold out? I suggest. 'Yeah, when people expect her film to be all, you know, *bizarre*. It's a narrative. She's. Telling. A. Story.' You half-expect him to end the sentence with an emphatic 'Duh'.

I check out a smattering of photographs on the wall while Taylor-Wood sorts out the tea and cake with her assistant. Johnson, who's wearing a baseball cap, hoodie, tracksuit bottoms and a wispy proto beard on his chin, settles down at a computer at one end of the room, tapping away while Bob Marley plays through the speakers. I can't help but wonder what Johnson – a stage-school kid from High Wycombe who's been acting on screen since he was ten – makes of this super-laidback, cultured, metropolitan environment. But what am I thinking? He must love it.

One of the photos on the wall is of The Beatles, I'd guess in about 1967 or 1968, and shows Paul, George and Ringo kneeling down next to a prone Lennon, who, it must be said, looks, well, *dead*. 'It's spooky, isn't it?' says Johnson from behind his screen. On a far wall is a much bigger print of Taylor-Wood herself, a self-portrait from her 'Suspended' series of photographs, of her hovering in mid-air. Another photo is a small William Eggleston print, those bleached-out colours a dead giveaway for the legendary American photographer's work. 'I think it's the only photo I've ever bought,' Taylor-Wood says, sitting down at a table in the middle of the room to talk shop. 'Everything else I've swapped for my work.'

We get down to business. I begin: 'As a director...' She laughs: 'It makes me smile when I hear that because I forget... But, yeah, I am! I'm a director.' Of course, the truth is that Taylor-Wood is no stranger to the moving image. Her artwork has so often involved film, from the famous video of a fast-asleep David Beckham to a more recent piece of a cello musician playing Bach with the cello erased from the film. 'The idea of making a feature film started ticking away in my mind a couple of years ago,' she reckons. 'My ambition was to extend that process, which I enjoyed so much, rather than just wanting to make a film.' Was she confident about the transition? 'I was nervous, I didn't know if I could tell a story.' How about the first day on set? Was that nerve-racking? 'A friend of mine who's an actor said: "You just have to look like you're in control, even if you're not; just give positive and strong answers to every question." So I put on



April 2004

'David': her filmed Beckham portrait at the NPG



October 2005

With then-husband Jay Jopling at Frieze Art Fair

**'You just have to look like you're in control even if you're not, so I put on big boots and talked tough'**



March 2009

Directing Aaron Johnson in 'Nowhere Boy'



August 2009

Out on the town with Johnson in London

big boots and talked tough.'

'Nowhere Boy' is less of a biopic or even a music film than a portrait of a young man at a formative period in his life. The Lennon we see is a guy in his late teens, discovering rock 'n' roll in late-1950s Liverpool but also reconnecting with his estranged mother, Julia (Anne-Marie Duff), while living with his stiffer, more protective aunt, Mimi (Kristin Scott Thomas). There's not a single Beatles song on the soundtrack and, teasingly, no one even mentions the word 'Beatles'.

'I just tried to think of it as a coming-of-age story about a teenager that goes through terrific emotional turmoil and trauma,' Taylor-Wood explains. 'The Lennon quote I had in my head a lot of the time while making it was: "I lost my mum at the age of five and then again at the age of 17."' Most intriguingly, she runs with the idea of there being a sexual frisson between Lennon and his mother, an idea that comes out most strongly in a scene in which she explains to her son that the true definition of rock 'n' roll is 'sex'. 'It came from a Lennon quote which we ran with a little bit. It's probably a John-ism, him wanting to be contentious. But he said something like: "I leant forward and brushed past my mother's breast and knew in that moment that I could have had her if I wanted her." I thought: I'll run with that.'

She might talk of nerves, but really Taylor-Wood is a tough cookie. She's survived two bouts of cancer, has two young daughters and spent 11 years married to the art dealer Jay Jopling, one of the most powerful figures in British art. As well as having a sensitive eye for human frailties, she clearly also likes the cut-and-thrust of modern life, which should stand her in good stead to be a significant force in the business – as well as art – of cinema. 'When you come up against someone like Harvey Weinstein [the American distributor of her film, notable for his no-bullshit reputation], you think: Oh God, this is such fun, to be having such battles with big people like that. I enjoy it.'

And what of the future? Is she still pursuing her work in the world of art? 'I'm still taking photographs regularly, but not with the same brain,' she says. 'It's almost like I've had to put one side of my brain on hold. Right now, I feel propelled with moving towards the next film.'

As we talk, one comment above all betrays how her mind is focused on cinema. How maybe there's no turning back. Talking of the huge premiere that 'Nowhere Boy' received in Leicester Square last month, an evening when she walked the red carpet with Johnson and then sat in the gods with him, her family and friends (including Jopling) to watch the film, I wonder whether she can think of any equivalent in the world of art, when an artist has to unveil a work in front of so many with so much pressure? 'A solo exhibition at the Guggenheim, I guess,' she says with little excitement, pausing, thinking. 'But even then, that's not *that* exciting. Not as exciting as Odeon Leicester Square. Not for me now. Maybe a few years ago. But not now.'

'Nowhere Boy' opens on Dec 25.