

arts

My world and welcome to it

VISUAL ART

Sam Taylor-Wood and Falklands artists are the product of their environments, says **John Russell Taylor**

The usual image of Britpack art and artists is one of squalor and grunge: Tracey Emin's unmade bed, Damien Hirst's giant, brimming ashtray, Sarah Lucas's documentation of her drunken, grubby home circle. But **Sam Taylor-Wood** stands alone among her peers not just for the quality of her photographic, film and video work but also for the way she presents a very different image of life, and therefore presumably of her life.

The characters in her films and videos seem to be placed in grand surroundings, which might be exclusive West End clubs, or stately homes, or fashionably stripped, minimalist modern interiors. And what are

they doing? Sitting, listening to opera, or attending smart cocktail parties, or even, on occasion, taking part (fashionably stripped, of course) in an orgy.

Because of our contemporary snobberies and neuroses, this chic middle-class subject matter may present some sort of problem. Where is the ethnic diversity of a properly multicultural society? And who can suppose that these (as we read them) shallow, worthless people — why, they even include one or two recognisable film stars — are worthy of anyone's serious consideration?

Admittedly, there are pieces in the show which seem to go against this view of Taylor-Wood's work as a whole. In *Sustaining the Crisis*, a two-screen projection, a young woman walks bare-breasted, with reasonable sang froid, around a fairly deserted semi-industrial area in one sustained travelling shot on one screen. Meanwhile opposite, as though looking at, or at least visualising, her, a young man goes through a sustained crisis of heavy breathing, which seems to have more to do with high anxiety than, say, sexual excitement.

This piece actually points to what seems to be Taylor-Wood's obsessive subject: personal and emotional isolation. As in such classic Antonioni films as *L'Avventura* and *L'Eclisse*, non-communication and emotional isolation can occur even within the most social of contexts.

The partygoers in *Third Party* are each given one of the seven screens to themselves, and are clearly not connecting with one another or any kind of communal party spirit. Whether that has anything to do with their celebrity (among those present are Marianne Faithfull and Ray Winstone), or is just part of the normal human condition, we are left to decide for ourselves.

The same question arises with the five-screen projection *Pent-Up*. Each screen is allotted to one character. A woman walks round St James's Square. A shaven-headed elderly man sits in a fairly opulent interior, almost unmoving. A young man in underpants runs a bath and contemplates getting into it. A young woman, evidently maudlin drunk, staggers round in a dimly lit bar, disregarded by the background drinkers. A crazed young man stamps round a paved patio.



Sam Taylor-Wood's elegantly surreal *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare*

Each speaks, on and off, and sometimes the character on one screen seems to be reacting to something said on another. But finally each is individually confined to his or her own situation, which ranges from agony to apathy.

So whatever Taylor-Wood's world may be, it is not a comfortable, or even a very pleasant, one. At best, its inhabitants are, as the title to another four-screen projection puts it, *Killing Time*. (In that the four are listening, with varying degrees of discomfort, to Strauss's *Elektra*.)

It is summed up most succinctly in *Pieta*, in which we see the artist herself holding, in a pose suggested by a Michelangelo sculpture, a half-dressed and dead-looking Robert Downey Jr. The video introduces a new element in recreating the familiar image: here we are aware of the weight of the male body, and the struggle the female has just to hold it.

The show constitutes a retrospective of the artist's work during the past ten years, bounded chronologically by two photographic self-portraits: a downbeat Taylor-Wood sporting a Britpackish, expletive-bearing T-shirt from 1993; and the elegantly surreal *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare*.

Sam Taylor-Wood

Hayward Gallery

★★★★☆

Traces of Conflict

Imperial War Museum

★★★★☆

Though superficially she has travelled a long way, in fact she seems to have arrived back much where she started, with confirmation of the old despair.

The work of the four artists, belonging to much the same thirtysomething generation as Taylor-Wood, who are involved in the Imperial War Museum's commemoration of the Falklands war, *Traces of Conflict*, is also marked by fastidious finish and immaculate photography. Whether it also represents any gloomy or even questioning response to the subject matter of the show is another question.

All four come from Duncan of Jordan College of Art, Dundee, and visited Mount Pleasant, Britain's base on the Falklands, at the request of the commanding officer, to improve the environment of the Millennium Mile, the main artery of the base.

Elaine Shemilt photographs

some abandoned buildings with a nude young woman, representing apparently the ghost of her younger self, placed among them in pensive poses. Gary Gowans homes in on objects to suggest his own (and the home public's) distance from the war. Roland Ashcroft also uses symbolic objects, in relation to Falklands landscapes or studio set-ups. Gareth Fisher makes collages combining photographs of Falklands landscapes with elegantly abstracted watercolours based, by the look of it, on contour maps.

They have all collaborated on a computer-generated, interactive projection which combines all their characteristic motifs with other documents of the time. This also is well put together, but coolly distancing. What may surprise visitors who felt then, or feel now, that the Falklands conflict was a crucial moment, whether for British military patriotism or for late-flourishing colonialist guilt, is the speed with which it has dwindled into being merely history.

● Sam Taylor-Wood is at the Hayward Gallery, South Bank, SE1 (020 7928 3144), until June 21. *Traces of Conflict*: The Falklands Revisited 1982-2002 is at the Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, SE1 (020 7416 5000), until June 23