



S A M T A Y L O R - W O O D Yes I No

FEELING GRAVITY'S PULL

*Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.*

– from 'The Ecstasy', John Donne

*...all of these processes – emotion, feeling, and consciousness – depend for
their execution on representations of the organism. Their shared essence is the body.*

– from *The Feeling of What Happens*, Antonio Damasio

*Your clothes and pantlegs lookin' out of shape
Shape of the body over which they drape
Body which has acted in so many scenes
But didja ever think of what that body means?*

– from 'The Songs We Know Best', John Ashbery

Towards the end of April 2008, a priest in southern Brazil strapped himself to the base of a tower of 1,000 brightly coloured helium balloons. As he climbed into the clouds, looking like the apotheosis of some enormous, motley jellyfish, the crowds beneath him cheered. He ascended to 6,000 metres, then called friends to complain about the cold and about the wind, which had blown him off course. Soon after, he called a friend to say that he was falling to the sea. A billowing knot of balloons was found on the surface of the Atlantic the next day; three months later, a tugboat crew pulled a corpse from the water. A DNA test revealed that they had found the body of Father Adelir Antonio de Carli, the ballooning priest.

The man of God had the earthly goal of raising money to fund a spiritual rest area for local truckers, but he ended up a latter-day Icarus whose fate unfolds on YouTube every day. And, like the errant youngster, Father de Carli has gained his place, if accidentally, among the immortals. But there is a key difference. Daedalus, Icarus's father and the builder of his wings, advised him to follow a course midway between heaven and earth. Icarus flew too close to the sun and was entombed in the sea. Father de Carli conceived his own wings and was old enough to know better, but he could hardly be accused of hubris. Although he had prepared himself for the worst, with enough water for five days, energy bars, protective clothing and a satellite phone, his flight still came across as a performance, a circus stunt gone awry, the act of a clown. He knew nature could outwit him at any moment, and it did. He sacrificed his body to entertain the crowds.

Sam Taylor-Wood's *Escape Artist (Multicoloured)* shows the artist strapped to a bulbous tower of brightly coloured helium balloons. The lumpy, comic plenitude of the balloons provides an abrupt counterpoint to the limp body that hangs beneath them. The setting, with its plain wooden floors and black backdrop, could be the tawdry stage of a fairground attraction, or even the backroom of a peepshow. You almost expect a thin man in a dark suit and top hat to enter from stage right, arms outstretched, shouting, 'Behold, the artist!' The atmosphere is pure theatre, but the central performer has given up all control of her body. The artist, like the priest, has put her body at risk to play the fool.

The figure of the fool in western culture often mocks one of its central tenets: that the body is fallen, useless but for sinning and for harbouring a soul during its brief sojourn on earth; the body is a mere vessel, a piece of flesh that must be discarded to allow the soul to progress. This, of course, depends on belief in an



Father Adelir de Carli
Courtesy Reuters/Ho New



Sam Taylor-Wood
Bram Stoker's Chair II, 2005



Sam Taylor-Wood
Self Portrait Suspended V, 2004



Sam Taylor-Wood
Escape Artist (Primary Colours and Green), 2008

afterlife, something fools usually have the wisdom to doubt: a clown might remind us that the body is the boundary of the soul and all we've got. The soul, in other words, is not some unchanging essence fastened to a dying animal, but a tenant of our body, and with a similar tendency to decay. Perhaps the best-known clown in contemporary culture is Springfield's Krusty, and it is no coincidence that he is the son of a very disappointed rabbi. The clown has always represented the inversion of priest or king, reminding us that our shared bodies equalise us all. With slapstick as currency, clowns strike a surprisingly philosophical chord.

Taylor-Wood considers her work a manifestation of an interior world. For a photographer and filmmaker, and one so interested in mortality, flesh and depictions of her own body, that may come across as an odd claim. Yet her pictures and films are characterised by their otherworldly mood. She compares her pictures to the fiction of Haruki Murakami, whom she acknowledges by using the name of one of his novels for the series 'After Dark'. Both artists describe the external world in vivid detail, but equally these descriptions seem to emerge from some deep well of feeling; and both are obsessed by the habits, appetites, frailties, shape and beauty of the body. The novel *After Dark* features a long, detailed description of a woman slowly waking up. As she emerges into consciousness, she is, the narrator says, 'groping uncertainly for the meaning of her own flesh'.

This tension between corporeality and meaning is a fundamental preoccupation for Taylor-Wood. From *Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank to That White Rush*, the human body is central to her vision. Flesh and bodies feature prominently in *Pieta*, *Noli mi Tangere*, *Brontosaurus*, *Still Life*, *A Little Death*, 'Self-Portrait Suspended', 'Bram Stoker's Chair' and *Ascension*. When Taylor-Wood depicts her own body, this is not solely autobiographical flesh (a not uncommon misapprehension about her practice). Equally, it would be foolish to ignore the insights she gained during two bouts of cancer, and the urgency that brings to her work. And yoga, that discipline of monitoring and training the body, is part of her daily life. Both will have profoundly inflected her vision. But the point is that Taylor-Wood deals with the guts of *everybody's* life.

The 'Escape Artist' and 'After Dark' series extend this exploration into gloomier territory. Compare *Self Portrait Suspended V* and *Bram Stoker's Chair II* to *Escape Artist (Primary Colours and Green)*. If in the 'Self Portrait Suspended' series Taylor-Wood is a kind of angel hovering between heaven and earth, and in the 'Bram Stoker's Chair' series she is an acrobat balancing at the edge of the underworld, in the 'Escape Artist' series she has become a body feeling the full force of gravity's pull. The body in *Escape Artist (Pink and Green)* looks tangled up, smothered, with the head perilously close to the ground. *Escape Artist (Primary Colours and Green)* depicts the artist as if she were a freshly drowned corpse being lifted from the sea.

Hippolyte Bayard's *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*, one of the first self-portraits in photographic history, shows the artist half naked, eyes shut, his body slumped, his hands and face intentionally darkened to make them look dank with decay. The mood of the picture is remarkably similar to that in Taylor-Wood's 'Escape Artist' series. The artist portrays himself as a romantic hero: ignored, an abject figure killed by neglect. Bayard wrote a suicide note to accompany the picture, complaining that he died in obscurity because no one had recognised the brilliance of his inventions (direct exposures on paper), and that everyone was paying attention to Monsieur Daguerre. It was, of course, a canard, but the stunt proved very effective: by staging his own suicide, he became immortal.

In Sam Taylor-Wood's *After Dark (With Tunnel)* a clown stands on one foot, teetering on the edge of a Tube platform. Of all the 'After Dark' pictures, this is the one that has the strongest sense of eavesdropping on some kind of performance, whether that performance is mounted by the clown for himself, for the photographer, or for a crowd awaiting their train. A light source in the tunnel suggests that a train is hurtling toward him. This prank could end in a sudden, catastrophic loss of identity. The clown's body language is violently passive aggressive. Laugh, he seems to say, or this clown is mincemeat. And if you don't laugh, I will suffer a catastrophic loss of identity anyway. This is why the clown seems, as they often do, so creepy: he is ignoring what we might consider a natural, bodily response – getting out of the way – in order to fulfil his

role as clown. Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote that the poet is like an acrobat, 'Constantly risking absurdity / and death'. The artist walks a tightrope, putting her body in peril for the pleasure of others, always on the edge of failure. This is the existential risk faced by performers: a daily dance with humiliation.

The forlorn, self-sacrificing clown as romantic hero has been the subject of displaced self-portraiture for centuries. Velásquez, Watteau, Picasso and Georges Rouault, along with countless other artists and writers, have depicted clowns with an element of self-recognition, or at least empathy: Velásquez the dwarf at court, Picasso the destitute outsider, Rouault the suffering, Christ-like figure. Artists have sympathised with these seemingly disposable nobodies, figures simultaneously treasured for the pleasure they offer and consigned to the lowest end of society because their existence seems so precarious. In Disney's *Dumbo*, the big-eared elephant's sidekick Timothy Q Mouse lists all the horrid indignities he has had to endure – he was an orphan, he has hideously big ears, his mother is in jail – and concludes the list with, 'On top of all that, they made him a clown! Socially, he's washed up!' Even in a Disney movie the clown occupies the lowest rung on the social ladder.

Taylor-Wood identifies with the clowns in the 'After Dark' series, and, like many of us, and most artists, from time to time she probably feels like the outsider on the edge of failure. But something else is at work, too. The figures are distant, reduced to suggestive gestures. The images' lugubrious, layabout mood brings to mind the figures in Picasso's *Les Saltimbanques* or Walter Sickert's *Brighton Pierrots*. Despite being in costume, here the clowns are off duty, just hanging around. Their loose, floppy clothes reduce the body to a kind of amorphous life force. (Think also of Watteau's *Pierrot*, standing stiff and formless as if enwrapped in a silk balloon.) The clowns have been reduced to the soft contours of their bodies so that we, the viewers, have to imagine what they are feeling. A variety of moods are registered by their body language, from lethargy to, in *After Dark (Unicycle)*, a kind of ecstasy. The rough, post-industrial interiors that the clowns occupy make them look isolated and undervalued, cranking up the gloom. And yet, significantly, these clowns give the impression that they want to be there.

In *After Dark (Through Window)* the clown is retreating from glorious sunshine to enter a dusty, abandoned warehouse. The picture dramatises the clown's purposeful withdrawal from the external world. This is a retreat to the interior, to the self, and to the body. A similar mood of introspection pervades all the 'After Dark' pictures, and the architecture plays an essential role in creating this: the brick arches and shadowy spaces could be the chambers of the mind, the clowns, whether alone or in a pair, homunculi on their coffee break. (The homunculus is the little man who inhabits our skull, he who watches the non-stop theatre of our mind and who monitors our consciousness – or so argued an ancient theory of the mind.) What's important in these pictures is that Taylor-Wood's interior world, her consciousness, is a kind of theatre in which the body plays a crucial role.

Consciousness is, of course, a deeply complex – some say insoluble – knot of problems and questions that is nowhere near to being fully unravelled by either scientists or artists. Perhaps this is why it obsesses Haruki Murakami (read *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*). Taylor-Wood's claim that her work emerges from an interior drama, not to mention the hint of psychosomatic theatricality that is one of its qualities, demonstrates a similar obsession. But Taylor-Wood can't write narratives that describe or mimic 'the music of what happens', the beautiful phrase that Antonio Damásio adapted from Seamus Heaney for the title of one of his books. She makes pictures, still and moving, and most of these depict the body in space, with very little narrative attached. This is what makes her work interesting in relation to Damásio's ideas: he describes coming into consciousness as being like the actor 'stepping into the light', and he argues that consciousness emerges from the 'entire unit of our living being, our body as it were'. For him, rather than an immaterial function of the mind, consciousness and reason are inseparable from the body and its emotions.

Damásio describes the body as a constant, unchanging thing – the organism that reacts to confronting an object (i.e. a train, a picture, a smell) with an emotion. This causes a change in our body state, which then



Hippolyte Bayard (1801-1887)
Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man, 1840

Courtesy Société française de
photographie, Paris



Sam Taylor-Wood
Escape Artist (Red), 2008



Alexandre Cabanel (1889)
Birth of Venus, 1863

Courtesy Musée d'Orsay, Paris / Giraudon /
The Bridgeman Art Library

produces neural patterns and images. These images occur simultaneously with a sense of self in the act of knowing them, happening in the brain, and which Damásio calls 'feelings of feelings', or 'representations'. These representations build up to form an integrated representation of the organism, or 'proto-self', which is wholly unconscious but produces an ongoing report on the current condition of the body. Our 'core self' monitors the 'proto-self', and the 'autobiographical self', or 'extended consciousness', combines memory and feeling to create the nuanced consciousness that we experience on a day to day basis. Importantly, when we need to recall an emotion, we create 'cognitive representations' of body states. In other words, representations of the body have a deep, metaphorical resonance in our emotional life.

Look at *Escape Artist (Red)* beside Alexandre Cabanel's *The Birth of Venus*. The goddess emerges from the sea, voluptuous and inhumanly smooth. The sea is a useful image of the unconscious – vast and unfathomable, it can swallow bodies, desire and meaning. Venus rises effortlessly above the waves to present her body to a cluster of welcoming putti – and nineteenth-century art critics. When it was exhibited, a critic praised Cabanel's *Venus* for conveying a soul, whereas a competing goddess was judged as having only a body. (This wasn't Manet's *Olympia*, though they were painted in the same year.) The critic meant a divinity evoked by the beauty of her forms, whereas the other Venus was too naturalistic, a piece of flesh prone to decay. (This debate probably kicked off when Caravaggio used a prostitute as a model for Mary, and depicted her decidedly earthly human feet.) Cabanel's Venus inhabits a gravity-free zone, where it is impossible to drown and transcendence is a daily affair – unlike in the worlds of Icarus, Bayard and the hapless Father de Carli.

Or Sam Taylor-Wood. Her Venus is sagging, heavily, just above the hard ground. Instead of winged putti trumpeting her arrival, she is held up by fleshy-red party balloons struggling to save her from falling to the earth. This is more deposition than apotheosis and, I think, a forceful re-imagining of what the body means: the grounds of intelligibility do not exist in an order beyond time, as an idea, but in the immanent flesh. Despite the perfection on the surface of Taylor-Wood's photographs, I think she wants to show us earthly, imperfect feet in order to create an image of the self perceiving its feelings. And if a feeling is understood as a cognitive representation, or image, of a body state, I would go further to say that her photographs are like representations, à la Damásio, of emotions. Think of the Symbolist tenet that an art work is not a window to the real but a manifestation of a state of mind that offers an equivalent experience. Taylor-Wood's clowns and self-portraits are representations of internal states, like incarnations of a moment of consciousness, the self 'knowing its feelings'.

Just as clowns invert social relations and the cosmic structure they imply, Taylor-Wood's photographs show how consciousness is inseparable from the body, and thus invert the traditional relationship between the body and the soul. *After Dark (Alone)* depicts a clown in a dreary, vacant factory, slightly hunched, and with a spongy, joke spanner hanging from one hand. His costume and make-up are still on – this is the self that the outside world recognises, but he is alone in a kind of self-reflexive theatre. To his right, he casts a thick shadow that is chillingly reminiscent of the Grim Reaper, the useless spanner his scythe. The shadow overrides his motley costume and make-up to create a vivid representation of his body, and thus a manifestation of his emotional state. Just as the chairs in the 'Bram Stoker's Chair' series don't cast shadows because the immortal world is dead and fleshless, Taylor-Wood emphasises the wisdom and the imperfect beauty of the body. The flesh is the boundary of our inner life, the source of our consciousness, and the only viewpoint we have. Taylor-Wood depicts the soul as a bulky thing, prone to gravity, and suspended from little balloons that might, at any moment, pop.

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B I O G R A P H Y

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Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2008 Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland
Contemporary Art Museum, Houston
- 2007 Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta
STUK Kunstencentrum, Leuven
- 2006 DA2 Domus Artium, Salamanca
Still Lives, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and City Gallery,
Wellington
- 2005 *Sex and Death and A Few Trees*, Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome
- 2004 Engineer's Palace, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg and
Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow
Ascension, Donald Young Gallery, Chicago
New Work, White Cube, London
Sorrow, Suspension, Ascension, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York
Strings, The Sculpture Court, Edinburgh College of Art,
Edinburgh
David, National Portrait Gallery, London and Manchester Art
Gallery, Manchester
- 2003 BAWAG Foundation, Vienna
- 2002 *Still Life/Object/Real Life/Memento Mori*, Collection Display,
Tate Modern, London
Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, Montreal
- The Passion*, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York
Hayward Gallery, London
Films and photographs, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Shiseido Foundation, Tokyo
- 2001 *Mute*, White Cube², London
Künstlerverein Malkasten, Düsseldorf
Photographies et films, Centre National de la Photographie,
Hôtel Salomon de Rothschild, Paris
Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw
Espacio Uno, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia,
Madrid
Matthew Marks Gallery, New York
- 1999 Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart
Directions, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Washington
- 1998 Prada Foundation, Milan
Donald Young Gallery, Seattle
- 1997 *Sustaining the Crisis*, Regen Projects, Los Angeles
Five Revolutionary Seconds, Sala Montcada de la Fundació "la
Caixa", Barcelona
Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich and Louisiana Museum of Modern
Art, Humlebæk
Le Creux de l'enfer, Thiers
- 1996 *16mm*, Ridinghouse Editions, London
Pent-Up, Chisenhale Gallery, London and Sunderland City Art
Gallery, Sunderland
- 1995 Galleri Andreas Brändström, Stockholm
Travesty of a Mockery, White Cube, London
- 1994 *Killing Time*, The Showroom, London