



EVERYWHERE

girl

GLASS enters the
multi-faceted world of
Sam Taylor-Johnson

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If you'll pardon the pun, the boundaries between art, photography and filmmaking are becoming increasingly blurred. And with it, the very rules that define artists. Their inspiration and their genre are increasingly being eroded away. A whole current generation of artists are moving effortlessly between disciplines, applying their talent across a range of seemingly unconnected subjects and interests.

One such artist is Sam Taylor-Johnson. Inadvertently lumped in with the so-called 'Young British Artists', Taylor-Johnson's 20 year career has seen her do everything from making some of Hollywood's most powerful men cry (in her powerful *Crying Men* series of photographs which featured the likes of Woody Harrelson, Michael Gambon, Jude Law, Robert Downey Jr., Paul Newman, Ed Harris, Benicio Del Toro and Willem Dafoe), produce Turner Prize-nominated multi-screen video works (such as *Pent Up*), and making music videos (REM's *Überlin*). And 2009 saw her direct her debut feature film, the much-lauded biopic of a young John Lennon, *Nowhere Boy*. It was through the making of *Nowhere Boy* that a then Taylor-Wood met nineteen year old male lead Aaron Johnson, whom she married in 2012 amidst much misplaced publicity (interesting to note that when a man does the same thing, which is commonplace, no one would bat an eyelid). The couple already have two children to add to Taylor-Johnson's first two from her marriage to art dealer Jay Jopling.

Whilst ordinarily it might not be necessary to mention an artist's family context, upon meeting Sam, it's immediately obvious how important and central family is to her life and consequently the work she undertakes. It's also important to note her own considerable personal challenges in managing to fight off cancer not once, but twice. Through her genuinely delightful down to earth-ness, it's easy to see how she has achieved success in so many different things. Her total lack of pretence means that she sees each opportunity, no matter how big or small, as a genuine learning experience, helping to keep her interests as broad as possible but carefully sharpening her focus.

So, what was it that originally inspired you to be an artist?

I think what inspired me initially was the desire never to work for someone. To always be able to determine my own day. From being a teenager to being in my late twenties, I had so many different jobs. I did everything I possibly could, from working in an earring factory, to waiting tables, to managing the Camden Palace at one point.

Portraits by JOE MCGORTY
Make-up & hair NAT VAN ZEE at
NAKEDARTISTS by Nat van Zee using
CHANEL cosmetics and AVEDA Hair Care
Editor NICOLA KAVANAGH
Photography assistant LIAM BUNDY



Ghosts VI, 2008, C-print, 43 x 55 1/2 in. (109.2 x 141 cm) (unframed)

All those really bad jobs pushed me towards what I wanted to do, gave me a sharper and sharper focus. Waiting tables was the best thing I ever did, because I could observe people.

I imagine all those experiences and interactions gave you a great grounding for photography.

Yes, it gives you a palette. Especially when I was at Camden Palace. That was the lowest point of my life and it was then that I started to incorporate my life into my work. Until then there'd always been separation.

What drew you to photography in particular?

I studied art and sculpture, but it didn't really feel part of me. I realised I'd always liked looking at photography. So it came naturally to me to pick up a camera, although I consider myself technically inept because I never studied it.

And how would you distinguish fine art photography?

I don't. It's all just photography. People always ask me if I consider myself an artist, photographer or filmmaker, but I don't differentiate. To me it's just applying what I do to a different format.

How do you see those formats interacting?

Well, when I was filming *Nowhere Boy* I found I couldn't take my own film stills. It was like one part of my brain had shut down in order for the other one to operate. And then, as soon I finished making the film, I could pick up a camera again.

You're increasingly a filmmaker. Is that because you've grown in confidence?

I don't think it's that I've grown in confidence so much, more that I've always enjoyed collaboration; especially when you have the opportunity to work with people like Seamus McGarvey, who's one of the best cinematographers. We've worked together for about 15 years, grown up together. Now, it's like we almost communicate by dolphin clicks.

I'm not really a 'lonely, sit in my studio' type of person. I like to work in a creative way. Film gives that to you on such a big scale and in so many different ways. My brain comes alive because I don't have time to think too much. It's meditative in the sense that I can't think too much, only act on decisions. I find that liberating.

With the experience and ultimate success of *Nowhere Boy*, would you approach another feature film differently?

Yes, I would. With *Nowhere Boy* I went in feet first and luckily landed. I had a tricky time in some respects with it as I was always answerable to people providing money for the film. Normally I'm in a position where I don't need to answer to anyone. That was a bit of a wakeup call.

So, would you consider doing another feature?

I would and there's a couple of opportunities. But I've got four kids, so it would have to be something pretty special for me to leave them for the demands of making a feature film. It's tough on the family.

How has your second round of motherhood changed the work you do and your outlook?



Crying Men (Benicio Del Toro), 2002, C-Print, 28.44 in x 40.06 in



Crying Men (Ray Winstone), 2004, C-Print, 34.25 in x 24.25 in



Crying Men (Steve Buscemi), 2004, C-Print, 38.88 in x 38.88 in



Crying Men (Ryan Gosling), 2002, C-Print, 22.19 in x 22.19 in

It's not changed things too much. It's a lot of work. I feel like I've spent the past couple of years being creative with motherhood and now I've got my energy back to be creative outwardly. It's logistical though. It's: 'how do we manage ourselves as a family?' We travel together and haven't separated out to work.

It hasn't changed your view of the world or interests?

No, it's just made me more discerning about the material. But I've got to be careful that I don't get overly discerning and never do anything again!

How do you feel being grouped as part of the 'Young British Artists' movement (this is the name that has been tagged to the loose group of British visual artists that started exhibiting together in 1988 and includes the likes of Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst), was it a help or a hindrance?

I don't know if it's affected anything, to be honest. It's just helped people say, 'Ah, there's a group of them'. The interesting thing is that there's no particular style amongst us. So the only thing that we could be grouped by was that we were young, British and made art. These days I feel much more associated with the film world than the art world.

You are viewed as a cultural icon for women. What's your response to that?

Wow, am I? I've honestly never thought about it. If it encourages women to juggle a million things and take on as much as possible, then great! I'm lucky that I have such support from my family. That counts for more than anything.

One of your most famous works was the 'Crying Men' series of photographs. What was your intention behind that?

It came initially from GQ, who asked me to do a Hollywood portfolio. I said only if I can do whatever I want. I thought it would be interesting to do it in a way that wouldn't ask people to project an ego, but to show vulnerability in a very male magazine – looking at these very powerful male icons and put them in a very vulnerable place. It took three years to do. There were very specific people I wanted. Some people felt too vulnerable and didn't want them published. It's great for me now because now I know who I would and wouldn't cast!

In terms of celebrity, your own celebrity status has grown massively these past few years. How have you coped with that?

I think like anyone with a level head, the term 'celebrity' makes me cringe. What does it even mean? It's an uncomfortable term and not one I want. When you hear the term it suggests you've not actually done anything. I don't know what a better term is, but certainly being well known for what I do.

That must be the challenge, particularly when some people are more interested in who you marry.

That side of things doesn't interest me at all. You can't control it, so why bother? The only thing I decided was to be open about everything so there's no story for them in that sense.

How do you think your experience of fighting off cancer has changed you?

Well, it's toughened me up a bit. It's enabling in a way, which



Bram Stoker's Chair II, 2005, C-Print, 48 in x 38 in



Bram Stoker's Chair VI, 2005, C-Print, 48 in x 38 in

All Sam Taylor-Johnson images copyright the artist and White Cube, London.



Photographs by Joe McGorty

is hard to explain to people unless they've stared into that void. Now, if I step into a room with some heavyweight producer who wants to give me shit, I don't take it. Once you've been through hospital doors and have been told all sorts of scary scenarios, not much frightens you after that.

So do you think you would have dealt with situations like this differently in your twenties?

Hell yeah. It's made me more ballsy. Actually not ballsy. There's that great quote, which goes something like, 'Why ballsy? They're soft and vulnerable. It's more cunt because they take a pounding'. That's my version, anyway.

There's a theme of music throughout your work. As well as popular music, some of your work references opera and classical. Does that come from a particular love of the genre?

It's an interest in music in general – that simple thing about how music can transcend, how it can shift your mood from one thing to another. You can radically change the way people feel. I don't see music as an added dimension to my work but the work itself. With *Nowhere Boy* it was a challenge, because the music had to be so specific, although it was a great resource. The next film I do I want to use score and not have it so dictated.

I was very interested in your video for REM's *Überlin* (comprising husband Aaron Taylor-Johnson ridiculously dancing around the streets of London amidst bemused onlookers). Here you had a very American band with a very British video. Was that juxtaposition intentional?

“I think like *anyone* with a LEVEL HEAD, the term ‘celebrity’ makes me cringe. What does it even mean?”

I'd never really thought about that before. It's one of the best things I've ever done. It came out of me asking Michael Stipe, who I know anyway. He said go make a video – just go be creative. So the video came out of total creative freedom. And that's when I'm at my best. The budget was nothing, and all the passers-by that you see are real. We did about five or six takes, all totally improvised. Aaron has that great spirit where he can go wild like that.

Where did the idea come from?

The idea came from what we call 'morning dance' in our house – trying to get the kids into their school clothes and out the door isn't easy. So, he tends to whack on the radio and get everyone dancing. His dancing is pretty wild, so I thought, 'I have to document this'. Now all the kids dance with him.

I wonder if at REM gigs fans copy the moves.

Yes, apparently there are a lot of squirrel moments that people do.

And moving forward, you recently worked with Brad Pitt on a Chanel No. 5 campaign.

That's been very interesting. Chanel are using Brad Pitt as the first male face for Chanel No 5. It may be the first time that a male figure has been used as the face of a female perfume. They simply asked me to shoot behind the scenes of him being filmed. It's just one of those things where you think 'this is just a gift from heaven'.

You've been doing more and more for the fashion industry recently.

Yes, I did something for Solange and I just did something with Martin Margiela for H&M. I believe it's always better to be in motion, whatever you're doing. H&M allowed really good creative freedom, and it was great working with an anarchic brand like Margiela and knowing it's going to a massive audience.

With family, it's also better to do these short projects. You always pick up new things along the way, for example I did a few new things with lighting. I'll be shooting a new feature film in Spring.

And finally, the theme of this issue is joy. What brings you joy?

Family. All the things that make your heart feel bigger. – Interview by Erik Stein