

DIRECTIONS

Sam Taylor-Wood

July 15–October 17, 1999



Noli Me Tangere, 1998, two-screen laser-disk projection, originally filmed in 16 mm, with sound; 4 minutes 24 seconds. Collection Anthony T. Podesta, Washington, D.C. Installation view, Fondazione Prada, Milan, 1998. Photo by Attilio Maranzano.

Since the mid-1990s, Sam Taylor-Wood has distinguished herself among a generation of emerging British artists for her photographic projects and multiprojection video and film installations. Inspired by the visual syntax of film, the poignancy found in opera and the theater, and the immediacy of everyday life, Taylor-Wood creates complex and often ambiguous narratives that focus at once on human resolve and vulnerability. Past works, including *Travesty of a Mockery*, 1995, and *Atlantic*, 1997 (fig. 2), have explored the tension in failing personal relationships, while *Hysteria*, 1997, and *Pent-Up*, 1996 (fig. 4), have considered the internal psychologies of conflicted individuals. For the artist the lines between fiction and reality, attraction and repulsion, anger and humor, sanity and insanity, and the material and the spiritual are extremely fine, and she mines these opposing forces for their poetry as well as the insight they provide into the human spirit.

For her exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, Taylor-Wood has conceived an installation no less riddled by tension. *Noli Me Tangere*, 1998 (cover), which translates from the Latin as "Don't touch me," is an environment created by two laser-disk projections. Displayed on two sides of a freestanding wall, the work features a man who appears to hold the ceiling of the gallery in place. Recalling the mythical Atlas of antiquity, who supports either the globe or the pillars between heaven and earth, *Noli Me Tangere* was inspired by the mystical moment captured throughout the history of painting in which Jesus Christ warns Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not" (John 20:17), for he is no longer of the physical world. As the narrative of Taylor-Wood's projection unfolds, we discover—as we do in most of her installations—that the subject's position, as well as physical and mental state, is not quite what it seems. The following text is excerpted from an interview with the artist in April 1999. —*Olga M. Viso, Associate Curator*

OV: Your work has been characterized as an "art-film hybrid." How would you describe it?

ST-W: My answer is ... it is just art. Other than people who work primarily

in film or photography, artists generally are not described in terms of their materials. Yes, I use film, but I also make photographs.... I make art. I am often referred to as a "video" artist,



Fig. 1. *Five Revolutionary Seconds XIII*, 1998, unique color photograph on vinyl, with sound, each 44 3/4 x 304 1/2 in. (113.7 x 775 cm). Installation view, Tate Gallery, London, 1998.

which frustrates me, since almost all of my work is shot on film—all on 16 millimeter. With the exception of some early pieces, a video process is never involved.

OV: You seem to move fluidly between making photographic series and room-size projected environments. How important is the relationship between film and photography?

ST-W: For me, film and photography entail similar ways of working: finding the right actors and technicians, locating an appropriate location in which to shoot, then choreographing the subjects' actions before the camera. So much of the work is caught up in organization. The film and photographic pieces also have a sense of their own speed. When you look at "Five Revolutionary Seconds" [fig. 1], a series of twenty-five-foot-long panoramic photographs, you cannot actually see the individual images in one go. You have to travel along each photograph, which gives you a sense of time. Slowly you start to edit a piece to try to make a story. This is similar to how the films work. In all my projects, I try to leave the story line open-ended so that many interpretations are possible.

OV: Your installations often involve characters engaged in complex psychological dramas. In *Travesty of a Mockery* a domestic argument between a man and a woman escalates. In *Atlantic* a couple seated in a noisy restaurant bring their relationship to a painful end. In *Pent-Up* five lonely people share their private yet parallel fears and obsessions. How do you develop the characters? Do your subjects represent general "types," or were they inspired by people you know?

ST-W: It is a mixture, really. The subject of the film *Hysteria* is a woman whose laughs are virtually indistinguishable from her cries. Her character was

inspired by a person who had lost someone close to her due to cancer. In spending time with the woman, I noticed how she was extremely jovial during the day but consumed by a flood of tears at night. Her grief manifested itself as two sets of extremes that ran close together, and sometimes even simultaneously. Although I did not realize the connection until I began making the piece several years later, that experience led somehow to the work. Other things I make are not so closely tied to personal experience and are more generalized.

OV: How important is the participation of the viewer? Are we silent participants, or voyeurs?

ST-W: I try to prevent the audience from feeling alienated by motivating them to move along a photograph or a space and become involved in what is taking place. At the same time, the subject matter I deal with, although not quite hostile, is often alienating. The viewer becomes involved but is also held at a distance.

OV: Is your own position similarly intimate yet removed?

ST-W: The physical nature of the production determines my position. As the camera usually sits in the middle of the room, my location is typically pivotal to the scene.

OV: Yet you are positioned within a different viewing space, looking through the camera rather than participating actively in the narrative. This is true in the films and the photographs. How much of the conceptualization of your projects happens beforehand, and how much do you leave to chance and the dynamic of the actors on the set?

ST-W: Each work varies. For *Noli Me Tangere* it was clear how I wanted the final installation. What was difficult



Fig. 2. *Atlantic*, 1997, three-screen laser-disk projection, originally filmed in 16 mm, with sound; 10 minutes. Edition of 3. Installation view, Tate Gallery, London, 1998. Photo by Stephen White.

was finding the right person to execute the handstand. It is physically extremely challenging to hold this position for five minutes. Everything had to be well-planned and rehearsed so as not to overexert the actor. I do not always work this way. In *Atlantic*, I gave the actors characterizations and parameters but allowed them to improvise.

OV: In the past you have worked with a combination of actors and amateurs.

ST-W: In *Travesty of a Mockery*, in which I staged an argument between a man and woman, the coupling of a professional actress and a friend kept the piece from becoming too stilted. While the actress's lines were for the most part determined and rehearsed, the man had to draw on his own resources, his own natural, instinctual reactions to the situation.

OV: Who is the man in *Noli Me Tangere*?

ST-W: A professional circus acrobat I hired for several hours.

OV: There are a number of art historical references in *Noli Me Tangere*. Resembling that of an ancient colossus, the solitary figure's weight-bearing

stance also suggests an atlantid or caryatid, a sculpted figure used as a supporting column or pilaster in Classical and Medieval architecture [fig. 3].

ST-W: The work really draws on all these references. The title, however, is specific to the history of painting and to a number of Renaissance pictures titled *Noli Me Tangere*—by Fra Angelico, Correggio, and Titian, for example—that depict a critical moment following Christ's resurrection. Acknowledging that he is caught between mortality and immortality, *Noli Me Tangere* suggests that to be touched would threaten Jesus' transitional state. In this work, I wanted to achieve the same threat—of having the man standing there in a vulnerable state, so that touching him might totally shatter him.



OV: I was interested that you made sculptures when you were studying at Goldsmith's College, the London art

Fig. 3. Atlantid figure, Duomo, Piacenza, Italy, 12th century. Photo by Gian Berto Vanni/Art Resource, New York.

school where many of your British colleagues also studied.

ST-W: When I was at Goldsmith's, I made sculpture as a way of hiding. At the time, Goldsmith's was a hotbed of talent and nonstop debate. I arrived there midway as a transfer student. At Goldsmith's, I invented my own neurotic sculptures—hard-edge, minimal wood boxes—so I could quietly observe from behind them.

OV: How did you gravitate to photography and moving images?

ST-W: It was a process that took several years after completing my degree. By going out and finding a job, and facing the real world outside of an academic institution, I was able to step back and assess how my mind was working. I held some peculiar jobs, one at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden and one at a nightclub. Those experiences were the first that informed me visually, and I started to have ideas that I could only express photographically or in film. I was never trained in photography, film, or film history. It just grew from an interest.

OV: Many writers have commented on

your attraction to the cinema, citing films by John Cassavetes, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese, and in particular, Abel Ferrara's 1992 film *Bad Lieutenant* as important influences. What is the impact of such films on your vision?

ST-W: Sometimes it is a specific scene in a film, a moment, or how something is filmed. What captures my imagination varies. I go to the cinema at least two or three times a week. Our culture is totally filled with received images from television, video, film, magazines, books. Everything around me, as well as the reality that is taking place on the street, informs me. Today I think that artists look to all possible avenues of inspiration, in film, photography, the theater, the arts in general. For me, influences come from a hybrid of things—from Caravaggio and Diego Velázquez to a Harold Pinter play or the way someone walks down the street. It is the wealth of the crossovers that interests me.

The exhibition has been supported by the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation and Lannan Foundation. Projectors and technical assistance courtesy BARCO Projection Systems.



Fig. 4. *Pent-Up*, 1996, five-screen laser-disk projection, originally filmed in 16 mm, with sound, 10 minutes, 30 seconds. Edition of 3. Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 1996. Photo courtesy Chisenhale Gallery, London.



Sam Taylor-Wood, 1997. Photo by Johnnie Shand-Kydd.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in London, 1967. Attended North East Polytechnic, 1987–88. Received B.A., Goldsmith's College, London, 1990. Received the Illy Café Prize for Most Promising Young Artist, Venice Biennale, 1997. Lives and works in London.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1994 "Sam Taylor-Wood: Killing Time," The Showroom, London. Exhibition catalog.
- 1995 "Sam Taylor-Wood," Galleri Andreas Brändström, Stockholm; "Travesty of a Mockery," Jay Jopling/White Cube, London.
- 1996 "16mm," Ridinghouse Editions, London; "Sam Taylor-Wood," Chisenhale Gallery, London, and tour. Exhibition catalog.
- 1997 "Sam Taylor-Wood: Five Revolutionary Seconds," Fundació "la Caixa," Sala Montcada, Barcelona. Exhibition catalog; "Sam Taylor-Wood," Kunsthalle Zürich. Exhibition catalog; "Sustaining the Crisis," Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- 1998 "Sam Taylor-Wood," Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark. Exhibition catalog; "Sam Taylor-Wood," Donald Young Gallery, Seattle; "Sam Taylor-Wood," Fondazione Prada, Milan. Exhibition catalog.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1992 "Group Show (Sam Taylor-Wood, Dinos Chapman, Jake Chapman, James White)," Clove Two Gallery, London. Exhibition catalog.
- 1993 "Close Up," Times Square, New York; "Wonderful Life," Lisson Gallery, London.
- 1995 "Young British Artists," Project for General Release, Venice Biennale. Exhibition catalog; "Brilliant! New Art from London," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and tour. Exhibition catalog.
- 1996 "Prospect 96," Frankfurter Kunstverein. Exhibition catalog; "Manifesta 1," Museum Boymans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Exhibition catalog; "Life/Live," Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, and tour. Exhibition catalog.
- 1997 "Future, Present, Past," Venice Biennale. Exhibition catalog; "Truce: Echoes of Art in an Age of Endless Conclusions," Site Santa Fe, New Mexico. Exhibition catalog; "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection," Royal Academy of Arts, London, and tour. Exhibition catalog; "On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties," Istanbul Biennial. Exhibition catalog; "Trade Routes: History and Geography," Johannesburg Biennial. Exhibition catalog.
- 1998 "Real Life: New British Art," The British Council, tour to Japan. Exhibition catalog; "The Turner Prize," Tate Gallery, London.

Researched by curatorial interns Laura Roulet and Heather Ruth. Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs are courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London.

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