

Taylor-Wood's five seconds of fame

PETER GODDARD
VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

MONTREAL—This has been a defining year for photography. Anyone still dithering about whether or not it's art should pull the covers over their head and snooze on.

Many of the old warhorses were trotted out for one more go-around. Yousuf Karsh's *Heroes Of Light And Shadow*, a fat coffee-table book, was still on the shelves from 2001. And there were two Metropolitan Museum shows earlier this year given over to a pair of American photo stars, Irving Penn and Richard Avedon. How badly all three have worn. Karsh's stark Olympian style now seems hollow and bombastic. Penn's nudes are prudish. Avedon's portraits go no further than skin deep.

In contrast, the newer, younger work is full of idiosyncratic quirks, touch-me sexuality, and risk taking that will only take on resonance and relevance in the future.

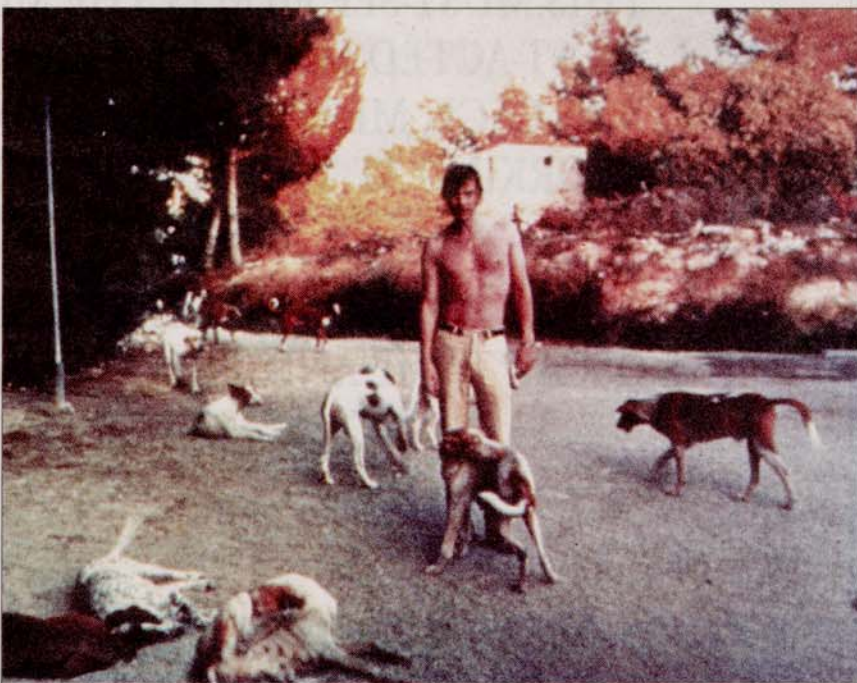
Lynne Cohen's show at Olga Korper Gallery or Eldon Garnet's show at Christopher Cutts, both in Toronto, chilled you with their immediacy, leaving you thinking, "How did they know it should be like that?" And this is not to forget so many others, like Dave Kemp with his sexy pinhole body-portraits.

But the photo power-show of them all is "Sam Taylor-Wood" at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, a retrospective (to Jan. 12) of the young British photographer's work from the early '90s when she was photographing herself a lot, until more recently with her *Five Revolutionary Seconds* (1995-2000) taken with a camera that pans 360 degrees during a five-second exposure.

Taylor-Wood, 35, comes about two artistic generations after Penn, Avedon et al. But she actually seems to be from a different century. This would be the 18th, when English portraiture was all about money, power and status, and the rank amorality by which all three were gained.

In fact, Taylor-Wood often uses Thomas Gainsborough to point to an antecedent who used the rich and famous as models, the way she has used the actor Ray Winstone in *Third Party* (1999). Actually, she goes Gainsborough one better. His portraits were often life-size, backed by lush, made-up landscapes. Taylor-Wood's portraits — like *Soliloquy VII* (1999), a gorgeously chilly foot-to-head shot of the slumbering male nude — are larger than life and in some ways closer to death.

True to her own generation, Taylor-Wood has gone where Gainsborough could not, and shot video for Elton John, who's become a big supporter, and The Pet Shop Boys. She's quite right in not making a distinction be-



British photographer Sam Taylor-Wood's impressive body of work, including *Soliloquy II* (1998), above, gets a retrospective in Montreal.

tween them and her gallery pieces, which, while not commercial like an MTV video, are informed by an awareness of commercial pop culture. The muscular, good-looking guys she shoots could have just walked out of a Gap ad. Her sex-scene panoramas could have come from some Playboy mansion shoot.

Taylor-Wood's subjects all seem to have been pushing it too far. The partying in *Third Party*, a huge multi-section piece that comes at you from all four walls in one room, seems to have been going on way too long. The woman dancing in one panel called *Ray And Pauline* (1999) looks to be doing one of those post-binge shake-all-overs. The guy, watching her with only half interest, has had a zillion cigarettes and a few more glasses of Bordeaux.

Mostly, the characters seem isolated from one another. The pumped-up stud exercising in white shorts in *Noli Me Tangere* (1998) is shown in video-disc installation running at such a slow pace it could be another still portrait. Even more isolated, is the muscular nude dancing figure in *Brontosaurus* (1995), a video projection that feels like a death dance as his penis bobs to the silky melancholy of Samuel Barber's *Adagio For Strings*.

These people are the life of the party, but there's the chill of death as Taylor-Wood tells their tale. Their party will soon be over. Yet there's no moralizing here, no pointing out that this is what happens when there's too much money, power and status. Taylor-Wood — whose *Self Portrait In A Single Breasted*

Suit With Hare (2001), came after her own treatment for cancer— doesn't want to lead your eyes anywhere.

"A lot of my film works are more about making up your own mind about the situation you're looking at, how you place yourself within that and who you identify with," she's said. It applies equally to her photography.

pgoddard@thestar.ca

CINESPHERE
35MM FILM SHOWTIMES

THE WILD THORNBERRYS MOVIE (F)
December 20th to January 5th

Tickets available at TicketMaster 416-870-8000
Info: 416-314-9900 www.ontarioplace.com
For Group Discounts (10+): 416-314-9933

ontario place
An agency of the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation