

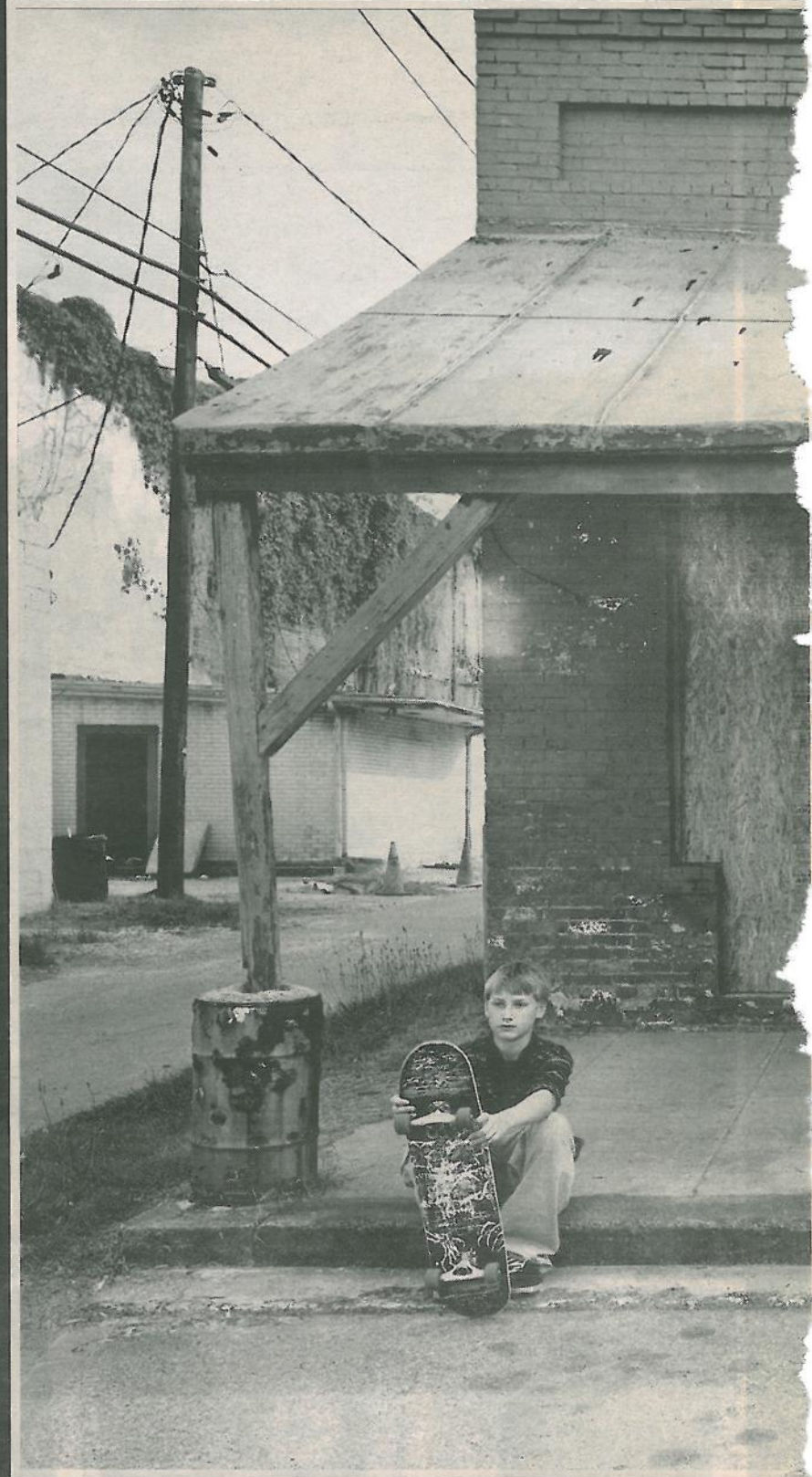
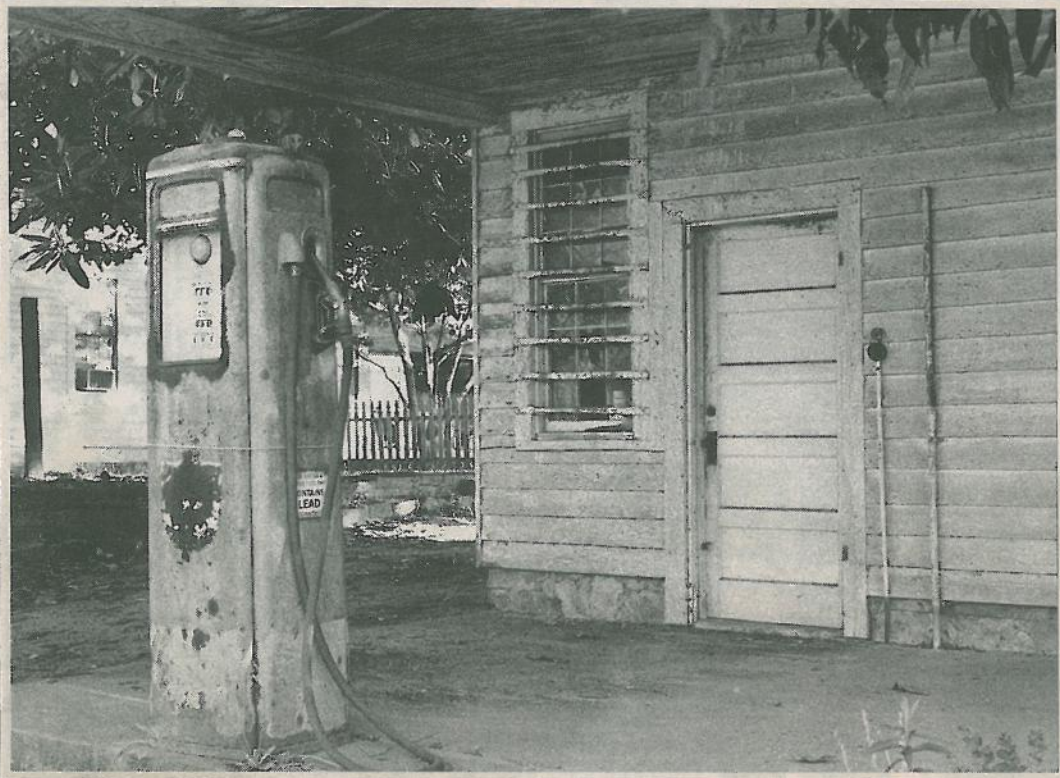
Eerie. Haunting. Surreal. **Sam Taylor-Wood's** portfolio of images from an epic road trip across the Deep South reveal how little the modern world has touched America's rural underbelly. She went in search of the heart of a nation – and found its soul

Not long ago, when her ideas had dried up, Sam Taylor-Wood decided to go to Georgia in the United States to take photographs. She would drive for many days, her only companion a large LAPD sergeant whose usual beat was Ramparts, the scarier end of South Central LA. They drove, often for 12-14 hours a day. They ate in waffle houses, which got fewer and further apart and slept in "disgusting cockroach-ridden motels with crusty sheets".

"I was looking for a way of freeing myself up from the constraints of making the work I was making," says Sam. "And trying to see if I could use my camera and see things in a completely new light. And to go to a place where all the great photographers had been and travelled through all of that wild and wilderness and open land. And see what was left of it. See if there was anything left for the modern photographer."

The shocking revelation was that all of it was left. Rural Georgia is so poor that nothing is ever replaced and nothing disposed of. The Forties and Fifties were still rotting, with later rot piled on top and what modern life there is about to topple gradually into the hole. "I hadn't seen rural poverty and I was shocked," says Sam. "You drive through and it gets poorer and poorer and there's nowhere to eat at all and that's the most disturbing because with





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▶ urban poverty there's always a chance of finding food, work, whatever. Here you just have this sense of nothingness, of nothing to pull resources from. Towns utterly derelict and wiped out, mainly because shopping malls had been built 15 or 20 miles away.

"But it's also this weird sense of desolation, and you go through town after town after town boarded up, but people are still living there. One little boy called Cameron had wandered into a town called Inadilla. He told me that his father had been killed, his mother was in prison, he'd run off from his stepfather and he didn't know where he was."

Sam produced from this journey some of her best, most immediate work to date. She photographed what the malls had left standing, the last of the country stores

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boarded up, little terraces of empty shops, one- and two-pump gas stations, bleached-out Coke signs from before the Vietnam War. She photographed dirt-scrub dwellings that I could hardly distinguish from those of Soweto in the days of apartheid. She photographed a man fishing apparently in a gasoline-and-bucket swamp from the highway bridge. And always the lonesome railway tracks going from nowhere to nowhere beside wooden churches.

A poignant and desolate photograph is of a double-fronted shop in an abandoned brick terrace, one window containing a tricycle and a stool, the other two chairs, some licence plates and a crate of empty Cokes. In both of them hung the American flag. The last residents used the shop windows as their front room, live mannequins for the observation of ghosts.

The odyssey, and Sam's telling of it, is in some ways as good as the pictures she took. Her

unconscious style is to get off her chair when a story is coming, and shuffle her feet for balance, like a stand-up comic, then launch into the tale.

Jeff Weninger, the LAPD cop, who she had acquired through the rock'n'roll security grapevine, was "a Heath Ledger character" (as in *Brokeback Mountain*), a repressed man of few words. Sam and the cop sang or fought along the road. At least two days were taken up in instruction on the rules of ice hockey.

"There were a couple of times where we didn't speak for about 24 hours," says Sam. "Totally because we'd argued." She was for Johnny Cash; he for Kenny Chesney (briefly married to Renée Zellweger in 2005), one of the cheesiest country and western singers ever recorded. "And in the end he won," says Sam. "Johnny Cash was far too dark for him. I wasn't allowed to play him..."

"And I'd say 'Come on, tell me some of your police stories from LA', and he'd go 'Oh not much to tell really'. So I said, 'Just tell me one thing, one story. What happened last Thursday?' And he'd say, 'Oh, last Thursday I broke down the door to some crack den. I found this child in the corner that was totally starving and had been beaten and I picked up the child and it died, and I had to take it outside... that was Thursday.' And it was 'I told you so.' I thought I could hear these stories but I'd regret having such images planted in my head for the next 24 hours."

Rural Georgia is a leveler, too. One day in a very remote town they sat down in a diner of four tables. Weninger ordered some fries and a Coke. "The guy who was flipping burgers comes over to me," says Sam, "and says 'Scuse me ma'am?' 'Yes?' 'Are you Sam Taylor-Wood?' Like that. In the middle of nowhere and Jeff looks up at him and looks at me like: 'I didn't know you were that famous.' I say 'Yeah' and the cook goes 'You left your purse in the bathroom.'"

James Fox

Sam Taylor-Wood's *Still Lives* exhibition is at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, until 3 September. It is accompanied by the Steidl publication "Sam Taylor-Wood *Still Lives*" (www.steidlville.com; 020-7405 8899)

