

GET THE



LOOK

Alongside making videos for Duran Duran and exhibiting her work all over the world, photographer *Alison Jackson* has a passion for her community photography competition. Absolutely meets her

By **PENDLE HARTE**



When Alison Jackson suggests meeting at the Chelsea Theatre, she doesn't mention that she's a trustee of the charity that's recently completed a huge renovation project on the venue. There's no mistaking her, in her glamorous all-black with platform heels and bright blonde hair, as the BAFTA and multi-award winning actress is striding towards me in this Chelsea community centre, where a mother and toddler group is assembling. She's an energetic and charismatic presence – and perhaps surprisingly for someone who reportedly used to fly to LA to get her hair done, she has an enormous passion for community and education. All re-opening fanfare for the Chelsea Theatre was sadly derailed by Covid, but Jackson proudly shows me around the impressive new space which incorporates a professional theatre, several dance/rehearsal studios and a new bar with a large roof terrace.

It's a brilliant revival for the venue, built in the 70s as part of a utopian vision for the World's End Estate and subject to a patchy trajectory since then. Now there are ambitious plans for everything from community groups to professional productions; the current programme includes Mark Rylance's involvement in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. As part of Jackson's commitment to community and education, she runs a photography competition, *A Day in Your Life*, that's open to anyone of age nine and up. There are various categories, including one specifically about Chelsea, and prizes include special youth photography courses at the University of the Arts as well as cameras. Winning entries are currently on display at the Chelsea Theatre, but when we meet she is yet to judge it – though she's already seen enough of them to be incredibly impressed by the young people's photographic literacy. "With camera phones, kids learn composition innately. I wasn't nearly so good or so consistent at that age," she says. Jackson is known all over the world for her lookalike celebrity portraits, which she presents as the work of someone who 'hates' photography. "It's a slimy, deceitful

medium," she insists, grinning – and she's not in the slightest interested in celebrities either. What does interest her is the idea of celebrity, the constructed image, and the interplay between the image and truth. "Photography doesn't tell the whole truth. You could be photographed looking sad one minute and then you could be running across the street naked a minute later. You can exist for one nanosecond in a photograph, and that hook makes us believe a whole story – even though we know we can't. We don't care that we're being misled." This is the thought behind her lookalike portraits, which don't pretend to be true but still feed into the obsession with celebrity that runs through our media and culture. The celebrity lookalikes started with Princess Diana. Jackson was studying photography at the Royal College of Art – reluctantly, because she had wanted to do sculpture – and set out to make a body of work about hating photography. "The construct of Diana was an amazing roll-out; the stories about her went on and on. She was my first lookalike and it was amazing how when people met her they would bow down at her feet and ask for autographs. Even when she said she wasn't

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Diana, they still wanted the autograph. It was extraordinary. It made me think - we're living in a world of make-believe; we know we are and yet we don't care." "The images are clever; they make us think about the absurdity of celebrity and the nature of voyeurism, as well as issues of truth and reality." "Fake news has been going on for years," she pronounces. "It's not about attacking the celebrity or anything like that, it's about our obsession with them and why are we caught up with these constructed stories by the media and then hooked in by photography (that deceitful medium). I'm saying to the viewer, look at this, you're getting seduced by this and it's voyeuristic. That's what really fascinates me. I think it's a belief system, celebrities are like mini-saints - they all represent something, and that has sort of overtaken any other belief system." "She's come a long way since Diana. Jackson's lookalikes have included The Queen and all the Royals, Trump, the Kardashians, Elton John, Marilyn Monroe and pretty much everyone you can think

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of a recent project was the video for Duran Duran's *Anniversary*, which was an enormous shoot in an 11th century castle involving more than 200 lookalikes, among them young versions of Simon Le Bon and the band. Literally everyone is there: Daniel Craig, JLo, Kim Kardashian, Greta Thunberg, Madonna, The Queen (plus corgis), Lady Gaga, George Clooney, Brad Pitt, the Beckhams, Stormzy, Vladimir Putin, Billie Eilish and countless others. Did she enjoy working with so many of them at once? "It was hilarious. Nothing like a normal shoot, because normal actors come in and they know the script and they're ready, whereas lookalikes come in looking like you and me, but as they transform they get into character. So suddenly these quiet nobodies become divas - and then you've got 100 divas, which of course you want - but it's chaos." "The Queen has received a lot of attention, lookalike-wise, from Jackson over the years: we have seen her at the betting shop, corgis in tow; we've seen her on the loo with her (large) pants around her ankles; we've seen her changing a grandchild's nappy, taking a selfie, and having her hair done, and there's always quite an affectionate feel



to the images. Has Jackson ever crossed the line with the queen? "Remember I'm very pro-royalist," she says. "I was anti Tony Blair trying to get rid of them. I think they make Britain unique, and the tourism and the revenue that brings in is so important. Also - they look great, don't they? The horses, and the guards - on Remembrance Sunday they were wearing gold outfits with ER written on them - I'd never seen those before and it was a visual delight for me." Of all her images, the Queen ones are perhaps the most comical. "I've got two queens and one I've just started to work with - she's an absolute delight, about 85 years old and she'll do anything." Finding the lookalikes is another of Jackson's interests. Not only has she got three casting directors working on likeness but she's always acosting people on the street. "I supply the agencies! I discover people and transform them, then they go to the agencies and come back to me, charging the agency fee." She's currently got three Donald Trumps. And she's particularly interested in Kim Kardashian - "she seems to have single-handedly changed the shape of the female landscape from skinny to big arse; I find it fascinating how that can happen" - and Putin, as well as Boris Johnson. "Boris has created images that look like private images - he had a photo on the front cover

of the Mirror where he was painting on an easel, shot through bushes. It could have been one of my images. He'd probably been studying them. I always shoot through door cracks or window frames, because the less you show the better." For all Jackson's claims that fake news has always been around and that photography has always been unreliable, there's no denying that our relationship with images has changed over the past couple of decades. The shift from print to digital, cameraphones, instagram and the rise of the selfie have all created a new visual world, and all of this amplifies her original thesis. "Photography is our first language now, we can't get away from it. Look at selfies. People used to have the mirror, but looking at your reflection too much was frowned upon.

Now people are constantly taking selfies and I think it's very dangerous for people's personalities, it develops a part of your brain that isn't necessarily positive." Asked about future plans, Jackson has one very clear one. "I want to make a film about primogeniture," she says. This is the tradition whereby male children inherit everything and daughters nothing - something close to her heart. "My father favoured my brother over me and left everything to him and nothing to me. I find it extraordinary." But before that, she's heading to Athens tomorrow for an exhibition, and then back to Chelsea to open her photography competition show. For Jackson, it's a nonstop celebrity lifestyle, whatever her views on celebrity. All images reproduced courtesy of alison-jackson.co.uk



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