

Alison Jackson interview: ‘My work shows what a slimy, deceitful medium photography is’

The artist famous for her celebrity fakes reveals why she enjoys messing with reality

By Alex Preston

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'Fake' photographer Alison Jackson | CREDIT: Francesco Guidicini

Alison Jackson's images of celebrities are drawn from a deep well of communal desire. When you first see them – [Simon Cowell](#) getting his bum waxed; the Duke of Sussex kissing [Pippa Middleton](#); the Duchess of Cornwall, G&T in hand, sitting on the throne in her negligée – there's a momentary splutter of disbelief, a sense of seeing something deeply taboo, a shiver of voyeurism. It's the possibility that these photographs, posed by celebrity lookalikes, might be real, or could feasibly reflect something close to reality, that makes them so incendiary.

Jackson, 61, who has won a Bafta and a host of other prizes for her work, almost didn't make it as an artist. In 1999, she was threatened with expulsion while a student at the Royal College of Art for a photograph of [Diana, Princess of Wales](#) and Dodi al-Fayed doubles, looking proudly at their biracial baby.

The Duke of Edinburgh withdrew from opening the college's exhibition that year, and posters of Jackson's work were torn down. She has been arrested several times for carrying out stunts and provocations, and was told that she might be sued by Donald Trump for staging pictures of a lookalike in compromising positions in the White House.

There's still the same rebel spirit in Jackson today, perhaps because, she confesses, she doesn't really like the medium in which she works. "I'm not a photographer," she says. "I was a sculptor to begin with and used to photograph my sculptures, but when I came to do my Master's they told me that I was a photographer and put me in the photography department. I hate photography because it's a slimy, deceitful medium, and I've made a whole body of work showing what a slimy, deceitful medium it is."

Jackson is speaking to me over Zoom from her London home, sitting at a desk wearing a severe black suit and a slash of red lipstick. She looks slightly frightening, but her voice is warm and throaty, punctuated by an infectious laugh.



Harry, Meghan and The Queen opening Champagne by Alison Jackson (detail) | CREDIT: Alison Jackson

Her latest project is *A Day in Your Life*, an award she set up three years ago to identify undiscovered photographic talent. Her enthusiasm for this year's competition is palpable. "People, especially young talent, so often don't get encouraged, and perhaps don't even know that they're talented. We want people who have something unique in the way they see the world, something really special."

Of course, we're all photographers now, curating our public-facing lives in a way that would have seemed extraordinary to previous generations. *A Day in Your Life* seeks to help people recognise that taking pictures and posting them on social media is actually an artform. "People think it's easy to create good images, and it's really not," says Jackson. "[To be successful] you have to find your own unique look, or vision, or eye."

The pictures from last year's competition are particularly powerful – showing the strange, circumscribed lives of city-dwellers during the pandemic. There are lonely figures in unpeopled streets, faces behind windows, brief moments of connection.

What's striking about many of the images is that they have the same voyeuristic, almost intrusive atmosphere that we see in Jackson's own work. "It does really appeal to me because that's exactly what I've been shooting for years," Jackson says. "Through door-frames and cracked windows. Now we're all living through that. What it's doing to us as a society, I find really interesting."

Jackson herself had an immensely privileged upbringing. The daughter of a landowner and classic-car enthusiast, she grew up on a country estate in Hampshire inherited from the Hulbert family by her father, George Hulbert Mowbray-Jackson, then she moved to another grand home in Gloucestershire. She has spoken in the past about the vast number of staff employed by her parents, including people to maintain her father's own private petrol-pump.

After boarding school, she worked as a receptionist at a Soho film-production company before starting 10 years of study: night courses, short courses, a BA in sculpture at the Chelsea College of Art, and an MA in her "hated" medium, photography.



Di, Dodi and Baby by Alison Jackson (detail) | CREDIT: Alison Jackson

I ask her about the Diana and Dodi image that made her name. "I made that photograph because it was an image that existed in the collective mind at the time of Princess Diana's death," she says. "People wondered whether Diana loved Dodi. Was she pregnant? Was she murdered because she was pregnant with a mixed-race child? England wanted forgiveness for Princess Diana, but it was also a very cultured place.

"So when she found happiness with Dodi, the joke on us was that it was someone of another race. With Harry and Meghan, it feels like we're living it all over again. Of course, the outrage is not the same, because things have moved on. But it does still exist."

Would she make such an image again? "I would absolutely make another piece like that," she says. "[And] if you find it outrageous, you need to look in your own mind."

Alongside her work with lookalikes, Jackson, whose estranged brother inherited the family fortune, has taken portrait photos of real celebrities including [Elton John](#), Simon Cowell and [Liza Minnelli](#). I ask her whether her interaction with these truly famous people changed the way she thought about celebrity. Did it give her a perspective on life inside the world she'd been satirising?

"Interestingly, none of them seemed celebrity-like when I was photographing them," she says. "I was expecting everyone to let me know exactly what they wanted and for me to shut up and make them look good. But, funny enough, they didn't. I remember photographing Elton John with the Queen lookalike. He came in and said 'OK, what do you want?' And I said I thought it would be nice if he played the piano with a lookalike of the Queen. He wasn't concerned about which angle I shot him from.

"It was a learning curve for me, as I'd spent all my time making the Queen lookalike look exactly like the Queen – because the resemblance is only that, not a total likeness. But when I got the photographs back, because I hadn't spent time on Elton John, the pictures I'd taken didn't really look like Elton John. I hardly recognised him."

For more information about *A Day in Your Life*, visit dayinyourlife.co.uk