

Alison Jackson: Is that you, Baby Cambridge?

Astonishment turns to disbelief on the set of Alison Jackson's latest creation

By Victoria Lambert

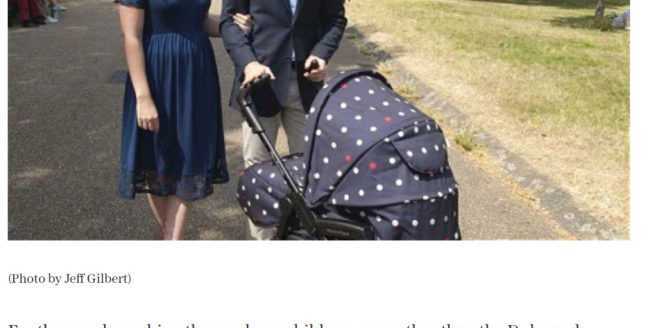


Tourists flock around 'the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge', aka lookalikes Simon Watkinson and Jodie Bredo, as they walk with a pram through Kensington Gardens | CREDIT: Photo: Jeff Gilbert

Here in Kensington Gardens on a sunny Sunday afternoon, I am enjoying a gentle stroll with two proud new parents, baby nicely shaded in the pram.

Suddenly the scorching July sunshine is bleached out with scores of flashbulbs popping, as word of our walk ripples across the Gardens, the Serpentine and eastwards into Hyde Park. People hurtle from every direction, as though scrambling for a Dambusters raid.

We are rabbits in the headlights, a gold strike in the Klondike, the centre of an England Lions scrum. Paparazzo-style cameras zoom in from everywhere, mobile phones are held aloft, mobs of screaming tourist girls in bikinis descend, dotting abaya-ed mummies prove unable to resist a peek, even large Swedish males with plaster casts rush towards the pram.



(Photo by Jeff Gilbert)

For the couple pushing the newborn child are none other than the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, and the baby is the new heir to the British throne.

Since before Henry VIII's time, even a whisper of seeing royalty at first hand has been known to turn hardened soldiers into goofy One Direction fans. What price a first look at the world's most anticipated baby?

We circle the wagon and prepare to make a stand, like Custer's men, as Kate twiddles nervously with her freshly coiffed curls and the Prince politely perspires. "Does this happen often?" I ask the Duchess, who seems more embarrassed than distressed.

"Well, you never know how people are going to react," she says, with a surprising Essex twang. "But we just do whatever we're asked."

And with that the couple trot off, rolling the pram and smiling at the shrieking crowd, as a German TV crew documents their every step and a slender, elegant woman in black calls out instructions.



(Photo by Jeff Gilbert)

As they move off, the wave of royal mania recedes as sharply as a turning spring tide (although the giggles intensify), the 100-plus fans suddenly realising that their eyes have deceived them. "Lookalike! Lookalike!" the cries go up. These lucky few have just been subject to a modern phenomenon, a walking, talking Madame Tussauds show: an Alison Jackson photoshoot.

How we have managed to fool strangers into believing the royal baby has not only been born, but that the royal couple are so laid back that they would potter outside Kensington Palace without so much as a bodyguard, is staggering – but not to Jackson, the director, who has been creating her famous faux celebrity shoots for 15 years.

"People see what they think they want to see," she explains. "There is a wall of myth around royals and A-list celebrities, and that makes us wonder what they are really like. We see them on magazine covers so often that we think we know them intimately, and we want to learn more. I like to burst that bubble a little."



(Photo by Jeff Gilbert)

Jackson's talent lies in creating and shooting believable, often edgy, tableaux starring carefully cast lookalikes, minutely directed, so that we suspend our disbelief at apparent paparazzo shots of George Bush struggling with a Rubik's Cube in the Oval Office, the Queen on the loo, and Prince Harry dancing suggestively with Pippa Middleton after the Royal wedding, and actively enjoy our voyeurism.

Jackson has long been fascinated by celebrity. Her career began in TV production but, driven by a desire to be a film director, she went to art school as a mature student. In 1999, at her last term at the Royal College of Art, she created an image of Diana, Princess of Wales, Dodi Fayed and "their" mixed-race baby.

It caused an overnight sensation. Since then, Jackson, now in her early fifties, has been unstoppable. She earned a Bafta for her BBC Two series *Double Take*, and her work sells for hundreds of thousands of pounds, and is exhibited everywhere from the Tate Modern to the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

With a prodigious appetite for work, she creates new images weekly, and hopes to launch a website offering daily, topical shots. She wants to make another film and a weekly TV show, a sort of real-life version of *Spitting Image*, using lookalikes.

"I'm not satirical in a traditional way," she explains. "What I do is more about creating caricatures and cartoons. I am commentating on the nature of how we live through photography, and how you can twist an angle to create a different perception of a person."

My perceptions have certainly been shifting since this morning. Arriving at the shoot, I bump into the Prince of Wales (Guy Ingle; a professional entertainer) and Prince William (Simon Watkinson; by day, a civil engineer), and we briefly share a cab. In mufti, though startlingly like their royal characters, they are still obviously "civilians".



(Photo by Jeff Gilbert)

Yet as they slip into costume and the shoot begins, the mental lines begin to blur. Perhaps my eyes are just so used to seeing a man in a blazer, fiddling with his cuffs, while his son's bright blue, doe-like eyes gaze sweetly around the room, that I cannot unhook the images from the associated identities.

There is also something about safety in numbers. The more "fake" royalty who show up on set, the less believable the scene should be. Yet the converse is true. Your brain becomes tricked into thinking this has to be real.

Our actual shoot at Kensington's Milestone Hotel, to celebrate the new baby's arrival, is straightforward and less edgy than some of Jackson's work. But the attention to detail is mind-blowing. Several babies have been cast, and they turn up with their mums to be cooed over by Prince Charles, Prince William, the Duchess of Cambridge (played by Jodie Bredo, formerly a PA, now a full-time lookalike model and actress) and the Queen herself (sprightly 80-year-old Mary Reynolds). Noah, Baby No 1, has both the Spencer blue eyes and the Windsor sticking-out ears.



Alison Jackson (Photo by Jeff Gilbert)

There is a priceless moment when the Royal nappy leaks a little on to Prince William's chinos. He cheerfully mops at the mark and carries on dandling the baby, while the Duchess ignores the crisis, smiles at the camera and gently strokes an errant curl back into place, while holding – but not drinking – a glass of champagne.

So convincing is the casting that the hotel staff who enter the room to bring props look confused, too.

Jackson retains her sangfroid. "Chin up Will; no smiling, Queen; Charles, fiddle with your cuffs; Kate – your hair! Baby, take your hands out of your mouth." Remarkably, the three-month-old child with sticking-out ears complies like a pro. But then, Jackson is quite regal herself once shooting starts.

Crouching behind the baby, an assistant places a pink crown on the baby's head. Is Jackson hoping for a girl? "Yes, of course. It would be great to have another female monarch." She adds: "I am very pro-royal. Britain without them would be a sadder place."

The Royal family may be Jackson's favourite subjects, but what do the Windsors think of her? "I believe they are known to have a good sense of humour," she says. "But I've not had any feedback."