

# Alison Jackson: double trouble

Alison Jackson uses lookalikes to explore the sins of celebrity. Now she's putting herself in the frame. But how far can she go before her art passes its sell-by date? Kathy Brewis reports.

Tall, blonde, thin - ideally; bulimic? Sloane and in need of a job? Then Alison Jackson needs you. That's the Alison Jackson who brought us Sven in his Union Jack boxer shorts, Camilla having a gin and tonic with the Queen, Becks trying on one of Posh's thongs. Not the real deals, obviously - we all know she uses lookalikes. Now she's on the hunt to find a convincing Princess Diana for a new project, possibly a feature film. "A bit like The Queen, but more interesting."

When we see one of her images, for a split second we think it's the shot every paparazzo dreams of. Then we realise it's faux. Jackson claims she's an artist exploring the grey area between reality and fantasy, but cynics say she's after a cheap laugh - and that it's not always funny. The tabloids love to hate her ("How low can art go?"), although recently they've been courting her too - rather like their relationship with the celebrities themselves.

Jackson takes celebrity gossip and makes it flesh. When Paris Hilton was sent to prison this July, other photographers swarmed like bees round the Californian jail while Jackson conjured up her own pictures of what might be going on inside. The public fixation with celebrity has obsessed Jackson for the best part of a decade. She has always divided opinion. She first made headlines in 1999 - two years after the real Princess Diana's death - for photographs that appeared to show Diana, her lover Dodi and their sweet little mixed-race love child.

The images didn't go down well in certain circles. The late Lord Blake, royal adviser: "Tasteless vulgarity... absolutely deplorable." Hugo Vickers, royal historian: "Utterly contemptible... one can only imagine the photographer is trying to make publicity for herself." Mohamed al-Fayed (on-side for once): "Sad and tasteless." But they are actually rather tender images, and Jackson was only depicting what we were all speculating about - rumours and headlines abound suggesting that Diana was pregnant when she died, and had perhaps been bumped off for that very reason.

For better or worse, the pictures made her name. The controversy they attracted helped propel her to commercial success. Her last book, *Private*, has sold nearly 50,000 copies to date. But the disapprobation pigeonholed her as a morally dubious attention-seeker. In 2000 she made what the tabloids called a "video nasty", a "sick sex film" featuring a Diana lookalike crossing and uncrossing her legs like Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*. Cue further condemnation, not least from Diana's brother, Earl Spencer. "I have not seen it and would not like to. I have been told what the content is and the more I am told, the more it seems like a cheap publicity stunt."

In 2002 Jackson won a Bafta for her BBC2 television series *Double Take*. But the critical reaction to her Tony Blair retrospective, *Blaired Vision*, which aired in June, was mixed.

The Sunday Times's A A Gill called it "hideously malevolent and preciously delightful" - even, in fact especially, the part where Cherie Blair was given an enemy by Carole Caplin. Other reviewers were less impressed. One said: "Feeble title, feeble programme. Apart from a couple of good gags, this looked like an idea whose time has been and gone."

So, Has Alison Jackson peaked? Is the clock ticking on her own 15 minutes of fame?

Her Wikipedia entry states that she is "first and foremost an Artist and not a photographer and is not best pleased to be referred to as such". Note the capital A, an ominous sign. I've also heard it muttered that she's a nightmare to work for.

"I can be a tyrant," Jackson confesses later. "Sometimes you have to be, with 40 people on set. I try not to lose my temper but I can be..." she searches for the right euphemism. "Firm."

Today she's polite, amenable, professional. But there's a touch of St Trinian's about her, as she reclines sensually and smirks naughtily in a black blazer and knee-length skirt that rides up slender legs ending in spiky Dolce & Gabbana heels. As she orders earl grey tea with honey it's easy to see how she gets her own way with a lethal combination of charm and authority.

She went to art school as a mature student, in her late twenties, and at times her earnest explanations of her work are reminiscent of those long student discussions that stretch into the early hours of the night. It really matters to her that people understand what she is trying to do, and you can't blame her for banging on when she has been so reviled.

"Sometimes people are confused because they're expecting to meet someone rude and arsey," she says. "I'm trying to raise questions about photography and celebrity; I'm less interested in being a girl with attitude. I'm

not interested in being gratuitous. I like to be thought-provoking, but I'm not interested in shock value." Really?

"My work is incredibly improper because we are improper, as a public. We are insatiably voyeuristic, in the style of pornography. That's what I'm investigating. And as the public gets ruder, I have to be more improper than them. We can't get enough of the private lives of the celebrities who we feel we own. Celebrity is wanted. Gordon Brown is so disappointing because he's not a celebrity. Everyone's relieved to have someone normal after Blair, but we're still waiting for his character to be revealed."

If I were the real Elton John, I'd probably not be delighted at seeing her photo of someone

who looked very much like me having his backside waxed. But she claims she isn't really invading his privacy. She's just portraying what we think we know already. "People want to believe their imagination rather than dealing with gritty reality," she says. "Because reality

is incredibly disappointing!"

Ironically, Jackson is guarded about her own personal life. She owns an impressive collection of sunglasses to hide behind.

"I'm always trying to conceal what I'm really like," she laughs. What is she really like? "Oh, God... Very focused. Loyal. Fairly real, actually..." She sighs, and presses on determinedly with her main theme: "I'm only controversial if it's worth it. I'm not just going to cause a noise for the sake of being noisy. Celebrity has become our folk religion, celebrities have become saints. More people are interested in celebrity than in Jesus."

She denies that she's attacking the celebs themselves. But one wonders if she's on

the same page as the rest of us. Of the images

of Diana, Dodi and baby, she says, "I was

sensitive to the fact that William and Harry

had just lost a mother. I didn't want to

hurt their feelings." Some would say that hurt feelings were inevitable.

Jackson left school at 18 and worked in television production for several years. "It was a wonderful training in how to sell something instantly. My photographs now are designed as a fast read, based on what I learnt back then." Why did she quit? "I was very young, I didn't do my job well and I wanted to be more creative. I'd never been to university. So I decided to stuff it all and go to college. So I did my BA, and my MA. It was a big shock, actually."

Suddenly, she had no salary and no structure. Just a bunch of 18-year-old fellow students and tutors who gave her a completely free rein.

"That blew my mind. It was freaky, frightening. Exhausting. But it totally changed my life."

Her house is a converted artist's studio in Chelsea, which she renovated from a derelict state and has adorned with a selection of her own photographs, blown up to life-size or larger.

The living area is wonderfully airy, bright and extremely tasteful (cream walls, pale wooden floor). Although... there is a huge photograph

of a masturbating Marilyn Monroe above the grand piano. The only other adornment of note is her Bafta statue, which takes pride of place above her fireplace. As a whole, the place is an elegant temple to herself.

She had a rarefied upbringing, her time split between her parents' stately home and boarding schools. The subject makes her prickly.

"It's so irrelevant to my life," she protests.

"It's so far removed from 'Come and look at my

pile'. I'm just not part of that at all. I've always been uncomfortable because some people might say that I've had advantages - that I've

had a privileged education. Well, I have not.

I had a paid-for education that was appalling.

I learnt to cook, darn socks and get out of

Ferraris elegantly. I was trained to be a wife. It was 100% useless. And later I thought, my life is headed towards being 100% useless. So that's when I took myself off to art college. I needed

to carve out something different for myself. I hope I use my brain a bit."

She learnt self-reliance the hard way, packed off to boarding school at the age of seven.

"It's cruel, disciplined, cold, claustrophobic. Absolutely ghastly. It's a bit like putting a dog in kennels, isn't it? I just remember crying and crying." She does her best, though, to put a positive spin on her childhood. "It was very beautiful. My father was a very eccentric man, very amusing, and my mother had this extreme interest, this focus on breeding horses. We children were left very much to do what we wanted to do. We got up to all sorts of mischief."

Did her mother love the horses more than her? "No... well, there's always that very English thing, you're second to the animals..." She's laughing gaily as she says this, her best defence. "She made sure we had everything we wanted, in the best way she could." But she wasn't affectionate? Jackson sets her jaw firmly and speaks slowly. "She was a very quiet woman.

Very quiet." Her parents are both dead now.

She says she expressed her unhappiness to them, but what follows suggests she was unable to. "We had letter-writing classes..." Dear Mummy and Daddy, I played tennis today, that sort of thing.

I wouldn't dream of blaming my parents for anything. It just is my life. I'm thankful for the way I was brought up, however difficult it was. I got through it. It must have its advantages. It must make you able to focus, to concentrate on work because there's nothing else to do."

She was a shy child, and hasn't shaken it off; it can come across as diffidence. "Terribly, incredibly shy. Shyness really isn't helpful, if you're a doer and you're trying to get stuff done. It's a very difficult thing to break out of. A real handicap." It hasn't held her back.

We flick through the book. There's J.Lo having her famous bottom toned. There's Brangelina, with their baby. And Paris Hilton.

"I love that Paris-in-the-prison-shower photograph," she says, barely repressing her mirth. "It must have been terrible for her..."

But is she a one-trick pony nearing her sell-by date? The faces may change, but how many more celebrity lookalikes reconstructing what we imagine we know about the intimate lives of the rich and famous can we enjoy, before familiarity with the idea leads to contempt?

"I will be doing lots of other things, but I don't think I've finished with this yet. I hope I can change enough for it not to be boring," she says, hopefully. It's not that it's the only thing that I want to do; it's just right for now."

Forthcoming projects include a hush-hush television series, which sounds fun, and a new body of pictures, to do with fantasies of fear. Interesting. She admits that she can be terrified of exposure. "I'm anxious when I know people are going to disapprove. The anxiety is usually a predictor of whether a piece of work is worth doing. I don't get a lot of approval."

Does that bother her? "Yah. Of course it does. But there's nothing I can do about it." Is it painful when people say that an image just doesn't

look like the person? "I have to just say, 'Shit,

I didn't get it right that time.' I hope it doesn't happen too often. You have to take criticism."

For a lot of people, her work is just amusing, or else not very; they never go that step further that she wants them to take. That bothers her. "I want people to see the other layers - how you want to believe a photograph, how you get seduced by it into believing it's something that could be real."

Next time we meet, she has given some thought to the question of what makes her tick. "All my mother's side of my family are powerful women. My grandmother was one of the very first female doctors, an incredible woman.

She also spent time in Africa investigating Chinese slavery. Absolutely incredible. My mother was also an extremely strong woman. She had a hugely privileged life, and yet

she had to fight health difficulties because

she was operating out of a wheelchair."

She was? Suddenly I have a little more sympathy for this chilly woman. "She was out riding, her horse fell down a rabbit hole and she broke her neck. I used to ride but I didn't want to after that. A C1-C2 break is a Christopher Reeve situation, and she was one of the first C1-C2s to survive. She was a success story. But really tough - you have to have an absolute will to live. Seeing that makes me probably able to deal with things. And I think my grandmother was motivated to become one of the first women doctors because she saw her brother die of pneumonia. She couldn't save his life. So I think a near-death situation can be a motivator."

Wow! When she opens up she is likable and unusual. Her autonomy is important to her.

"As soon as you rely on someone else's money, you lose your freedom." She's not just talking about her work. She consciously chose

not to be a society wife. Her description of the relationship she's in is evasive. "He's reasonably long-term... he's just another element..."

Even her pioneering grandmother gave up her career and property once she married. Jackson would never follow suit. "I want to do things that I want to do, rather than be dependent on someone and do what they want. I want to earn my own money, spend it on what I want, and buy the house I want to live in."

Many women yearn to be taken care of materially. "I don't," she states emphatically.

"I love male company and I love being looked after, but there's a limit. Once you are living under somebody else's roof, with somebody else's finances looking after you, it's quite difficult to get out of that. Particularly if you have children. So if you are a free spirit, you're stuck. Some marriages are fantastic, aren't they, where one person helps the other, but they're few and far between."

Besides, she's having enormous fun since she went blonde. "It's unbelievable: you get your own way more, everyone smiles, people are so much nicer. They rush up and give me their umbrella. I'm blonde and vulnerable. It's a fantastic diversion from serious life." She says she cries easily, is "extremely sensitive" to how people treat her, but she's also able to summon up a thick skin if necessary. "I'm a worrier, but I channel it into doing something."

In her house there is a very funny head shot of Jackson herself as a grumpy Diana, whom she actually met socially in her late teens, when she was just Diana Spencer. Now, though, Jackson is only interested in the persona, the myth. Getting in character was a challenge, she says - not least keeping her eyes open as wide as Diana did to maintain that surely rehearsed poor-me expression. "It's very hard work to get the white under the irises, I don't know how she did it all the time. The Diana lookalike had to give it up, she found it too much."

The lookalikes suffer the same emotional highs and lows as the celebrities themselves, apparently. "Celebrity propels you onto an adrenaline level which removes you - it's almost an out-of-body experience. People rush up to you, kiss you, curtsy, tell you all sorts of things." Then filming comes to an end and the lookalikes don't know what to do with themselves - Jackson likens it to rock stars coming off stage. Members of the public don't seem to care

if they're getting the real thing or not. Her Richard Gere was mobbed by young women who sat on his lap and got their tops off. Even though they knew it wasn't really Gere at all.

Often overlooked is the fact that many of her portraits, especially of the royals, are very affectionate. "I love doing the Queen. She's got the top job, she does it very well. She's a woman, and she's fabulous - focused, disciplined. In my mind she lives quite a normal life, probably feeds her dogs. It didn't surprise me at all when all those Tupperware stories came out. I love the idea that she might fill her own hot-water bottle. I think they're such a wonderful family."

Can Jackson really claim to be an Artist? She was accepted onto the MA sculpture course at the Royal Academy, which is an accolade; only three people a year are invited. She turned it down, opting instead for the Royal College of Art, where, she says, there was more dialogue, more criticism. She's nothing if not brave.

Here's a clue to her talent - one giant photograph in her house that stands out from the others. It has never been published or

shown publicly. The lighting might have been done by El Greco - you can just make out the head and hand of a figure emerging from the darkness around him. It's subtle, painterly, extraordinary. She shows me another, a naked female Christ on the cross. As she says herself, it sounds crass, but it's a curiously quiet, still, beautiful image. And these early works suggest that Jackson will surprise us yet s

Confidential, by Alison Jackson, is published by Taschen on September 28, at £24.99. It is

available at the BooksFirst price of £22.50, including postage and packing. Tel: 0870 165 8585