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Alison Jackson on politics, power hair and why she wants to satirise Donald Trump

Watch out, Donald — irreverent ‘pap shot’ artist Alison Jackson is on the prowl for her next target, and she’s got the Republican in her sights



Faking it: Alison Jackson / Adrian Laurie

By Charlotte Edwardes | 25 May 2016



Alison Jackson is flicking through images of Donald Trump lookalikes for her latest satirical art project. “I just can’t find a good one,” she wails. “It’s a disaster. Basically he’s a fat Vladimir Putin. He’s got that Eastern European face. You know, with the little lips? We’ve had three casting agents on it: hundreds of Putins but no Trump. I’m meant to be shooting him already.”

I suggest that one looks quite good as she zips through. She stops and snaps: “No, he doesn’t. He looks terrible.”

She has a Jeremy Corbyn (“thank God. D’you know a lot of people fancy Corbyn?”) and a “brilliant” David Cameron (“looks just like him. Also an Etonian, I think. Very expensive”). Her Victoria Beckham is “probably the best at styling herself as Posh” because “she’s lost so much weight. She’s only about six or seven stone now.”

There’s also a Caitlyn Jenner, of whom she was going to take “a wonderful photograph of her holding her Woman of the Year award — but naked as a man”, because she felt aggrieved that “yet again a man takes something that should go to a woman”.

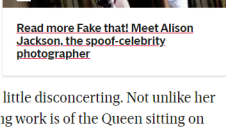
Jackson, 56, has no fear of causing offence. Actually it’s amazing she doesn’t do it more often. She’s the satirist behind staged grainy “pap shots” that portray the imagined lives of politicians, royals and celebrities. There’s Elton John having an enema. Robert de Niro surrounded by half-naked call girls. Angelina and Brad choosing their “rainbow family” from a row of tagged babies. Marilyn Monroe masturbating.

There’s Diana, Princess of Wales, flicking the bird, and a film of Simon Cowell and David Walliams sharing a bath and dissolving into giggles when a male assistant bends over. No one sues. “Yes, people are always intrigued by the legals,” she admits, “but I’ve never had a legal letter or been threatened. It’s a photo of Jenny Smith or whoever the actor is, not the real person. I don’t pretend otherwise.”

Some celebrities actually collect her work. “although I probably shouldn’t say that. I should probably say they can’t stand it.” Posh joked that she couldn’t remember one of them being taken.

Kate Moss is “not a fan”, however, “because she doesn’t have a sense of humour”, Jackson says. “I haven’t even done anything that terrible on her. And my shots are extremely dull compared to the real Kate Moss.”

We’re in the restaurant 34 in Mayfair. Jackson was late. When she does arrive it’s with a commanding air. She’s dressed like Catwoman, in black leggings and a biker jacket, hair stacked high, lipstick siren red. She has big eyes and the whitest hair and every now and then dips into her cleavage to retrieve a lip salve, which she applies briskly.



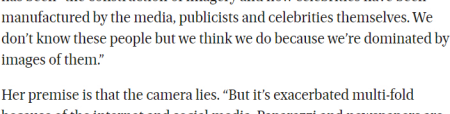
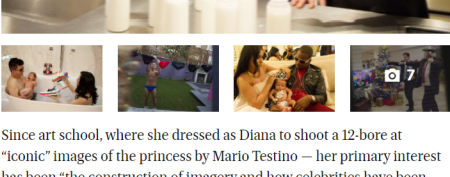
Read more Fake that! Meet Alison Jackson, the spoof-celebrity photographer

Everything about her is brittle and a little disconcerting. Not unlike her art. No one is immune: her bestselling work is of the Queen sitting on the loo reading a magazine about Corgis, lacy silk drawers around her ankles.

Well, I say no one. She’d like to do Islamic State, she tells me wrapping one slim leg around the other and ordering a coffee with almond milk, but it’s too dangerous. “When I left the Royal College of Art one of my first shows was about Osama bin Laden. There was an anti-terrorist squad looking after the gallery and my studio.”

She wouldn’t take the risk now — “not that I’m not interested, it’s really serious” — which is a shame, she says, “because it’s such an influence on our culture. The interesting moment is now because you can’t comment on it. The whole thing is too offensive — the imagery, everything.”

Alison Jackson photography



Since art school, where she dressed as Diana to shoot a 12-bore at “iconic” images of the princess by Mario Testino — her primary interest has been “the construction of imagery and how celebrities have been manufactured by the media, publicists and celebrities themselves. We don’t know these people but we think we do because we’re dominated by images of them.”

Her premise is that the camera lies. “But it’s exacerbated multi-fold because of the internet and social media. Paparazzi and newspapers are old media. We now have iPhones. Anyone can be a director, writer, star of the internet. It’s extraordinary.”



Alison Jackson

It should be said that as well as critiquing this world, she is very much enmeshed. She takes fabulous portraits of actors. We scroll through (“Come on, Andy,” she says to her assistant, “faster”). There’s a beautiful one of Eddie Redmayne at the piano — “such a nice guy, such a sweetie” — Gillian Anderson in bed and Benedict Cumberbatch with his nipples out. “He wanted to take his clothes off,” she assures me. “Everyone under 40 does... Oh, here he is at The Ivy. He said: ‘I want to piss in the soup vats’. So while they were trying to get the lunch out to a full restaurant, we went into the kitchen so that Ben could piss in the soup.”

I do a double take. “Not really pissing,” she tutts.

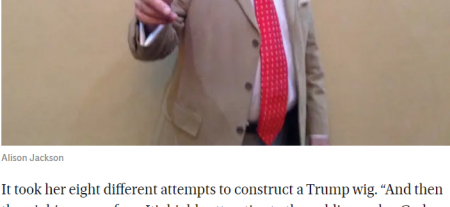
Her research for lookalike images is in-depth. She studies her subject, reads their biographies and press coverage. “I try to get under the skin and understand why the public are so fascinated.”

She has a few theories, including the formula for the iconic shot, such as Warhol’s Marilyn or Testino’s Diana. “They are always taken nearly straight on, three-quarter view, pretty much eye level, not getting anyone under the chin. Cecil Beaton did white in the background so the light goes from the person into the background and into infinity.”

The appeal of politicians, she believes, is down to how much the public thinks they are trying and how human they appear. “It’s that discrepancy between trying and failing,” she says.

There’s also “big hair” — the higher or odder the better. “JFK had crazy hair,” she says, getting out a recent photograph she worked on which had 1.3 billion hits on the internet. “It was like a cage on top of his head.”

Similarly, Trump “spends hours doing his hair in his own salon. There’s a weave underneath the quiff, it comes from the back, it rolls over. There’s a bit of dye underneath, on top it’s white.”



Alison Jackson

It took her eight different attempts to construct a Trump wig. “And then there’s his orange face. It’s highly attractive to the public psyche. God knows why.”

Hillary Clinton looks pretty terrible, she says. She has “lumps” all over her face and, “I’m slightly horrified because I think a future president could pick a better surgen.”

Jackson “sort of” wishes she’d worked in politics herself but “it’s probably too late now”. Also she’s all too aware of the damning effect of an inflated political ego. “Once in a motorcade you can never go back. It’s just too fabulous, everyone just being butted out of the way as you zoom down the busiest road in town.”

Although she loathed Tony Blair (she tries to imagine him in bed with Wendi Deng at one point, but stops herself. “God! What a horrifying thought. He has awful teeth, dirty teeth. One is black and they are all scraggly”), she quite likes David Cameron. “He used to be very grand, but he’s rather appealing now.”

The funny thing is that Jackson is also very grand. She was born Alison Mowbray-Jackson, daughter of landowner George Hulbert Mowbray-Jackson, who was fabulously rich but came from a family with appalling stories of dysfunction. Alison and her brother Julian, now 59, tumbled around in sprawling piles first in Hampshire then Gloucestershire, with their “reclusive” father, who knew how to throw a party, and a mother who “never spoke but was a lovely woman. Quiet. Irish. Very straight” — the perfect counterpoint to her “very emotional” father.

“Benedict Cumberbatch wanted to take his clothes off — we went into the kitchen at the Ivy so he could piss in the soup vats”

George Mowbray-Jackson’s difficulties were in part due to his own childhood, she says, at the hands of a “very controlling” grandmother whom she refers to as “The Woman”.

“My father inherited a lot of money [believed to be £14 million]. They didn’t agree with the woman inheriting so they waited until my father was born and left all the money to him. His mother had the power to determine how much money he needed. She probably wanted to spend it so she locked him in a room and wouldn’t let him out or engage or socialise.”

Because he may have developed a form of Stockholm Syndrome “because he was utterly obsessed with her, as you would be”. It was during a brief three-week boat trip away from home that he met and quickly married Jackson’s mother.

Her own childhood sounds chaotic. She went to a succession of boarding schools — she’s sketchy about naming them — one in Dorset and one “that formed because the headmaster kept screwing the sixth formers and got a few of them pregnant. Basically I had no education — my father didn’t know the value of it. I was supposed to marry the rich person in the next-door big house as soon as I was able and thought: ‘I can’t cope with this’. So I ran away to London and got a job as a receptionist in a film company.”

She’d like to write a script about it — especially the issue of primogeniture — and has been to the High Court to contest the divvying up of their trust. Will her brother mind? “God no,” she says. Julian has a son but Alison never married and has no children.

“I’m interested in adoption because I think that if I’m in a position to help any child then that’s a lovely way forward. I would adopt a baby, or even possibly someone much older. Having your own child is one thing, potentially helping somebody... Even a mentoring role would be nice.”

The conversation returns to politics. I ask who she’d bet on succeeding Cameron based on image. She dismisses Michael Gove out of hand: “too ugly”. And George Osborne? “Looks like Nero. He’s also too awkward; not a social animal.”

Her advice for Corbyn is to “ditch the miner’s hat” in the same way that he ditched the matching donkey jacket. “I’d be very careful about wearing that myself but he’s not going to neatening up his style. It’s a Leftie look: unkempt, I-don’t-care-about-my-image style.”

What about Boris Johnson? “Boris would be great!” she cackles. “Well, he’d be a disaster but he’d be great for me. He’s so fantastically fat for a politician and he looks as if he has nits.”

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