

Alison Jackson

Thu 3 Dec 2020 06:33 GMT



Interview

**Photographer Alison Jackson: 'I'm always almost getting arrested'**

Nadja Sayej



▲ I started shooting because I hate photography; I think it's deceitful, slimy and an untrustworthy medium that seduces you into believing it's real. Photograph: Natasha Cheek

**The controversial artist discusses her celebrity lookalike photos in a time when fake news is all around us and why she finds men's photography to be crude**

In 2016, British photographer Alison Jackson plowed through traffic in midtown Manhattan with a Donald Trump lookalike, heading to Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue. A mob followed behind them, as cops hollered over a megaphone: "Get off the road!"

The artist thought to herself: 'We're going to be in serious trouble.'

Upon reaching their destination, the doppelganger walked out in front as Jackson photographed him. It was around the time of the Access Hollywood tape so the artist had arranged a protest (women held up placards that read "Don't snatch my pussy" and "Not my President").

While some passersby knew this was a Trump lookalike, some were fooled by the spectacle (at least, until getting close up).

It taps into the grey area that has defined Jackson's photography for the past 25 years, 100 examples of which are now on show as part of a retrospective at NeueHouse Hollywood in an exhibition called *Truth Is Dead*.

Until 18 December, visitors can see various faux scenarios, from an orange-sprayed Trump, Jack Nicholson golfing, Mick Jagger doing yoga, Justin Bieber getting arrested with his pants down or the ultimate impossible - Kanye West singing a duet with Taylor Swift.

They all pose the question of "what if?" with lookalikes in compromising scenarios. "The very nature of photography is highly seductive and powerful, it's glossy," said Jackson over the phone from Los Angeles. "We're living in this artificial, constructed world where you can't tell what is real or fake. The crazy thing is, we don't care. It's just a swipeable, 24-hour news cycle of entertainment."



▲ Alison Jackson - Diana finger up. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

Other pictures in the exhibition include George Bush with a Rubik's cube and Bill Clinton getting a massage while watching his wife Hillary on TV.

"The fake is as good as the real," said Jackson. "People like Donald Trump and Kim Kardashian make it easy for us: they're half real, half cartoon."

The artist aims to capture what we suspect is true - like the Queen having breakfast in bed with her corgis or a viral photo of Trump in the Oval Office with Miss Mexico propped up on his desk, legs open. "I try to push to the edge always," said Jackson. "And when I get nervous, I know I am on to a good idea."

Jackson rose to fame in the 1990s, after completing her master's in photography at the Royal College of Art. Her photo of Princess Diana giving the middle finger in 1998 caused an uproar, soon eclipsed when she made a mock-up family portrait of Diana, Dodi al-Fayed and a mixed-race child.

"I started shooting because I hate photography; I think it's deceitful, slimy and an untrustworthy medium that seduces you into believing it's real," she said, "when there's no way it's real."

Over the phone from Hollywood, she asked: "That's really what Los Angeles is about, isn't it?"



▲ The Queen breakfasts with corgis. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

Indeed, it's ironic that her exhibition is taking place in the hotbed of celebrity culture. "The great thing about Los Angeles is that everything is artificial," said Jackson. "Everyone is an actor, trying to be someone else."

Each one of Jackson's photos feels like a well-kept secret. Lookalikes are revealed in over the shoulder shots, in windows and left-open doorways, with soft lighting and fuzzy corners. "It's all done with a trick of the imagery," said Jackson.

And it squarely fits the female gaze, as each photo is a critical statement from a feminist behind the lens. "I'm always trying to push the envelope with ideas and not be passive," she said. "I find men's photography to be crude. I hope I reveal more."

But the most iconic photos are of Trump, whether he's in bed with Stormy Daniels, partying with a group of Miss Universe contestants at the White House or playing golf with the Queen (while wearing a Scottish kilt). "Can I say one thing?" she asked. "Donald Trump is untouchable because he's a celebrity."

But doesn't she make him accountable through her photos? "Well," she said, "I would like to make him more accountable."

Probably her most controversial work is of Trump walking with the Ku Klux Klan, while standing before a burning cross. "It's a terrible photograph," she said.



▲ Trump and the KKK. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

It was inspired by the soon-to-be ex-president being influenced by his father Fred Trump (who was once detained at a KKK rally, though his motives remain unclear). In 2016, book publishers declined to publish the picture, and others, as part of her book *Private*, which she self-published.

Jackson has always battled censorship - from art galleries and museums declining to exhibit certain works, to TV shows refusing to air controversial pieces. "The narrative is also often censored and changed," she said.

Just recently, she was scheduled to exhibit her sculpture of Trump with his drawers down, holding the open legs of Miss Universe on a tabletop. All was fine until the presidential election heated up. "Suddenly, the museum didn't want it," said Jackson. "Other galleries kept telling me they didn't want anything Trump or politically related art." (Currently, the sculpture is on view at Soho Review gallery in London.)

"My aim is to get people to think in a different way about public figures, but most people don't want to take responsibility for that," she said.

Despite Biden's election win, Jackson doesn't think Trump will go away just yet.

"It's not the end of him, I can't wait to see the tell-all, post-White House," she said. "Trump says he's going to run again in 2024, what if he's up against Ivanka? It's terrifying, isn't it?"

Another target has been Kim Kardashian, who Jackson has shown giving birth, floating (bottom up) in a swimming pool and trying to fit into a pair of Spanx.

"With Kim, we're always looking at her bottom," Jackson said. "Who would have thought we would be a nation of people wanting to watch somebody's butt?"

Her all-time favorite public figure is Prince Harry, who she has shown with Meghan Markle on their honeymoon, introducing Markle to the Queen and researching baby names on a wipe board. "Meghan Markle must remind him of his mother, this black sheep of the family," she said.



▲ Kim Kardashian and Kanye West. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

Next up, Jackson wants to do a TV series about her work. And with celebrities in hiding during the pandemic, she's working on a new project about the lives of celebrities in quarantine.

"Celebrities raiding the fridge, packing on the pounds, hanging around, waiting for the phone to ring," said Jackson, "I think celebrities will be pining for that red carpet for many years to come, but Covid-19 is something we have to learn to live with."

As of late, she has been posting her latest work on Instagram, like Greta Thunberg explaining climate change to Trump. She's also planning to do a Zoom casting call, looking for the next Biden.

"America is a divided country that has been woken up, they have a voice now," she says. "I think there might be riots, a bit of trouble. But Biden is good at cooling everything down."

But even if things do cool down, Jackson has no plan to stop anytime soon. "I'm always trying to do things people haven't done and it's always getting me into trouble," she said. "I'm always almost getting arrested; I'm always being chased by the police. All I want is the best shot."

Jackson uses her motorbike as a getaway vehicle, like a bandit from an action film (this was at least the case with the Trump Tower mob from a few years ago). "I have driven off on my fast motorbike, so no one can catch me," she said.

She's already looking forward to her next shoot. "Do you know anyone who looks like Kamala Harris?" she asks. "Please point them in my direction."

● Truth Is Dead is showing at NeueHouse Hollywood in Los Angeles until 18 December