

# Alison Jackson: They'll get their kit off for me in a flash

The photographer best known for faking scurrilous shots of celebrities with the aid of lookalikes says we are all fame-hungry divas



Jackson's favourite lookalike is Angelina Jolie, who comes from Newcastle (Francesco Guidicini)

Last time I saw Alison Jackson I was in my bra and pants and on my knees in a seedy hotel room — yes, again! — about to give Prince Harry a ... Okay, obviously it wasn't the real Prince Harry but he did look very like Prince Harry. It turned out he was a 22-year-old "exercise-mad" rock climber from Leeds who had come to the Quality Inn, or whatever, in Marble Arch, central London, to star in one of Jackson's fake celebrity photographs.

The plan had been to secretly capture "Prince Harry" — also, confusingly, called Harry — polishing his helmet in his army barracks alongside his girlfriend Chelsy, but two hours before the shoot Jackson found herself short of a blonde who looked "slutty and available from behind" (although it may have been "slutty and available, from behind"). So she telephoned me — we have known each other since 2004 and worked on several projects together — to see if I could think of anyone and obviously I said, "Fine, I'll do it." The resulting shoot is in *Alison Jackson: Confidential*, a book published by Taschen.

When she arrives to meet me at a London restaurant for dinner to talk about the satirical film clips she's making for the new Sunday Times website, I tell her I was amazed how quickly she got me to agree to strip to my knickers. It usually takes at least one gin and tonic. She laughs.

"People are generally incredibly happy to take their clothes off," she says. She is dressed, as usual, in media black, her hair puffy and blonde, legs muscly and tanned from a few days in Cannes. "I recently shot a naked version of the Last Supper. All the models turned up so I started directing them — but before I'd even got to the end of my sentence they turned around and were all naked. And *pleased*."

Although most of Jackson's shoots seem to begin with the words, "Take off your clothes and get on the floor", the truth is that she spends quite a lot of time persuading her subjects to pose in embarrassing or controversial setups. She has been producing her provocative trompe l'oeil paparazzi shots since the mid-1990s, including pictures of the Queen on the loo and Dodi Fayed and Princess Diana with a mixed-race child. Never mind what she won't do — is there anything *they* won't?

"Well, my Robbie Williams lookalike once ran away from a shoot just after I'd asked him to do some kind of terrible . . ." — she gives a squawk of laughter — "... male sex scene! It was around the time of the gay rumours and of course nothing ever gets acted out, but the next thing I know he's flattened my producer and run up the street at 100 miles an hour. I had to do a lot of persuading to get him back."

Mostly she finds the lookalikes through the internet, although occasionally she'll ask friends — Nicole Kidman, for example, and Carole Caplin. Tonight she is particularly pleased with pictures she has just been sent of a great Nick Clegg lookalike.

"Have a look," she says, showing me her phone. Is it David Cameron, I ask. "Ha-ha. No. It's Norman. He's fabulous." Norman *is* fabulous, uncannily like Clegg, right down to a shrewish little smile and the European haircut. He doesn't know it yet but tomorrow he'll be sitting on a tandem with the Cameron lookalike.

"I thought we could get them to argue about whether to go left or right," she says. Her Cameron ("Steve") is also "great", although "he's a bit, well, not quite the same". What does she mean? "He's just ... larger." She pauses. "Diet is always a problem for lookalikes. Celebrities are incredibly disciplined, skinny, don't eat anything. You can't be a fat celebrity!"

Anyway, the good news is that if Steve can't shed the pounds, she's got plenty of Camerons to choose from "because anyone who's good-looking and reasonably theatrical has tons of lookalikes", she says, which did not apply to Gordon Brown, of course. She took seven years finding a lookalike for the former prime minister "because nobody wanted to come forward. Too embarrassing, quite frankly. If you look like someone famous, you want a bit of them to rub off on you. No one wants Gordon Brown to rub off on them, do they?"

In the end she found Hugh, who was "great fun, actually probably too much fun: we had enormous difficulty getting him to be angry. All those stories came out [about Brown] and he couldn't be a nasty bastard".

Perhaps she should have gone with the man who emailed her to say he thought he looked like Brown and attached a picture of a rat. "You do get some strange correspondence," she says, and often the people she has to audition look nothing like the people they're meant to be representing. "You'll have someone saying, 'I think I look identical to Kate Moss', and then obviously they don't. Someone turned up to audition for Amy Winehouse" — she looks baffled — "and she was *Chinese*."

Sometimes they look like a different celebrity: I remember sitting in on a casting for Britney Spears — and I think one of them ended up as Jackson's Christina Aguilera.

People want to be lookalikes "just to be involved in fame", she says, and certainly they often behave like celebrities.

I left with no education and not really inspired by what I was supposed to do next, which was get married and endure more gravy granules "They're all divas," she says. "Of course! It's such an opportunity. There's an element in everyone to behave badly." She recalls one particularly rabid weekend in New York working with her Richard Gere lookalike.

"He'd refused to do a hamster shot, so I said, 'Let's go and get something to eat.' We were with a Tibetan monk — not a real one, obviously — and wanted to do an eating-meat scene. So Gere and the Tibetan monk started to tuck in and I took some pictures. At which point the head waiter came over and said, 'You're harassing Mr Gere.' And I said, 'No, he's a friend of mine', but they still went and asked him if he was being harassed by me. He said, 'She's not a friend of mine — I've never seen her before.' So I was frogmarched out of the restaurant.

"Then later we went to a bar and this young girl came up and asked if he's Richard Gere. He's kicking me under the table, so I say, 'What do you think?' The next thing I know is that she's sitting on his lap, taken her top off and 20 of her friends have arrived. I remember this huge long tongue coming out of her mouth and licking the side of his face and some of the other girls getting on the phone to their friends saying, 'Come down quickly before Catherine has him!'"

The hilarious thing about Jackson is that even though she spends most of her time filming naked strippers or a faux Marilyn Monroe or the Simon Cowell lookalike having a back, sack and crack wax, she's quite prim and private. Definitely private: the day after our interview I discover she was 50 a week ago. It's typical of her not to have mentioned it.

Her full name is Alison Mowbray-Jackson and she grew up in Gloucestershire. As a girl she was sent away to "a very expensive boarding school for nice young ladies", she says, but as she was not quite the standard Caroline, the place was rather lost on her.

"I had a shit education. I learnt how to do needlework and home economics, learning to cook with custard powder and gravy granules. So I left with no education and not really inspired by what I was supposed to do next, which was get married and endure more gravy granules."

Instead, she escaped to London, where she discovered a flash creative set that suited her better. She got a place on the sculpture course at Chelsea College of Art, graduating in 1997, the year Diana died. Ironically, she had met Diana on the Sloane Ranger circuit many years earlier, "a quiet, country girl, nothing to say about her really", she shrugs, which is interesting because Jackson isn't turned on by the celebrities themselves: she's interested only in the projection of their image, and nobody projected her image better than Diana.

"She hit a moment," she says. "Her death was a mad phenomenon that involved the entire country." Jackson's Dodi and Diana photograph — a massive print of which hangs in her Chelsea home alongside, I think, pictures of Jackson posing as Diana herself — remains her best-known work. Someone told me Elton John bought a copy of it for £350,000: I don't know if this is true, but Jackson certainly commands a lot for her work, partly because of that and partly because in 2002 she won a Bafta for Doubletake, a BBC show of her film clips. On June 9 she'll be part of Rude Britannia, a show on satirical imagery, at Tate Britain.

Obviously Jackson's own Diana pictures are interesting. I wonder if she thinks she looks like anyone herself. "I don't know," she says. "I think I've got quite bland looks," although she maintains that going blonde "totally changed my life. You can be a real girl. I went from nearly black hair to being a real bimbo overnight".

Did her IQ actively drop? She titters: "Well, I knew something was right the moment I went to leave the salon and two guys leapt to open the door."

Meanwhile, the hunt for lookalikes continues apace. Jackson's current favourite is Angelina Jolie, who comes from Newcastle, "and we can only shoot from the back", which sounds a bit ridiculous to me but apparently that's par for the course with lookalikes. One of the best new faces is a Barack Obama who is — wait for it — Thai. "He's a shopkeeper in Bangkok," she says. "When he comes over, he has to have a translator." She recently thought she'd found a great Nicolas Cage lookalike "when I was in Capri. He walked past me and really stood out. I said to my friend, that guy looks exactly like Nic Cage. So I zoomed off and said, will you be in a photograph? He said something very, very rude.

"I was astonished, but later found out I was staying at the same hotel. At midnight, lo and behold, who's the only person in the bar, sitting next door to me? I turned my back, but he came over and said he was sorry. So I said, 'Up yours.' Only later did I realise it actually was Nicolas Cage."

*Alison Jackson's exclusive Fake Take video will appear each week on [thesundaytimes.co.uk](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk)*