

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR LOS ANGELES TIMES SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2007 F11

PHOTOGRAPHY



TOMKAT: Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes look-alikes flip through a children's book with a double for daughter Suri. The image is typical of those published in "Alison Jackson: Confidential."

Surveillance camera is on

Take a closer look at these gotcha shots. Alison Jackson is toying with celebrity worship and our collective desire to embroider the facts.

By LYNNEL GEORGE
Times Staff Writer

HAVE you seen the photo of Paris Hilton in an orange lock-up jumpsuit, pushing a mop under the jeering gazes of cellmates? Or that shot of President Bush in what appears to be a private Oval Office moment, struggling over a Rubik's Cube? Or better yet, that snap of Queen Elizabeth catching up on her reading — how can we say this most delicately — in the loo?

One might be tempted to say that Alison Jackson, the photographer who "bagged" these marquee names in their in-the-margin moments, has an uncanny sense of "right place / right time." But what she's after is much sharper, more refreshing and ultimately more subversive than simple surveillance.

Look closely and you'll discern that "Paris" or "President Bush" or "Her Royal Highness" aren't quite whom they appear to be. They're meticulously costumed and styled look-alikes, set up in unexpected and, at turns, discomfiting situations — Mick Jagger submitting to collagen injections, Bill Gates working on a Mac, Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes reading to daughter Suri from "Scientology for Babies." The photos are Jackson's clever attempt to force us, as viewers/consumers, to stop to question what we're looking at. They also work as provocations, forcing us to pay closer attention to that innate impulse to embroider imagined narratives onto celebrity myth. "If you get the right composition," says Jackson, "you can tell a whole other fantasy story that exists in the public imagination which is totally different from the truth — and that's what photography does."

Jackson's new book, "Alison Jackson: Confidential," published this month by Taschen, is a parade of provocative images conjuring the A-list actors, musicians, politicians and 15-minutes-of-fame celebrities who seem, whether we like it or not, to knock around in our consciousness. The images feel "real" enough to make you look more than twice. Their jittery focus and seemingly rushed, imprecise framing make them that much more "authentic," as though they were caught on the fly or procured through a peephole. Some think of Jackson's images as satirical — and there is something shocking/embarassing about seeing someone with her skirt up, both literally and metaphorically, that can inspire a nervous or knowing chuckle. But Jackson isn't simply playing pranks. She sees the work as commentary. "I'm trying to raise questions about photography,"

she says. "The very nature of photography. I question it — media imagery — as deceitful," adds Jackson, who recently touched down in L.A. on business — mostly TV and publisher meetings and to prepare for an upcoming gallery show. "So you think you're looking at the queen, but in fact you're looking at Jane Smith. I'm proving that you can't rely on your perception when it comes to photography. The camera does lie."

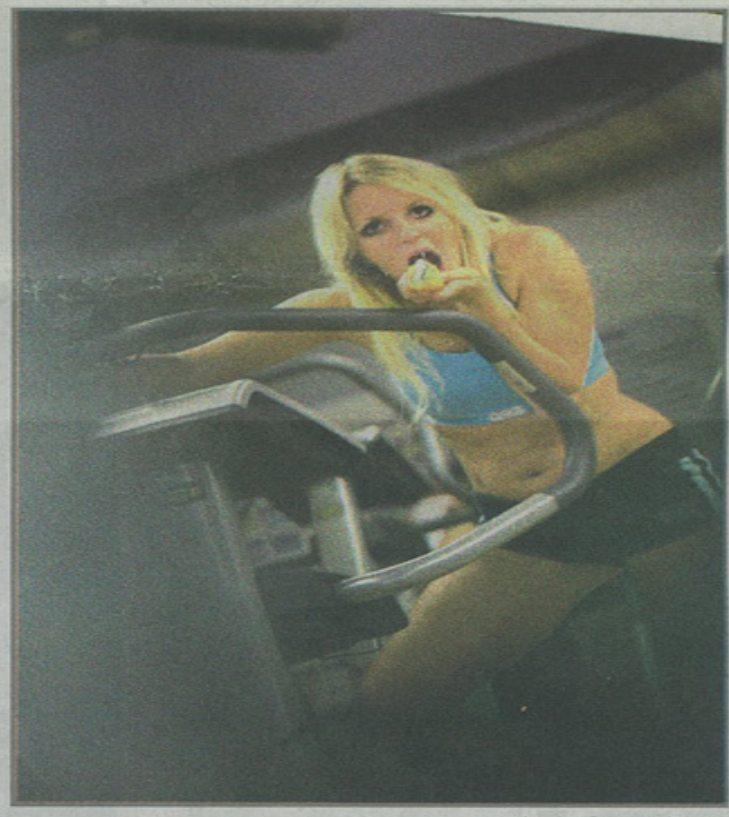
These lies multiply, take on multiple meanings and ultimately, they become mirrors, writes Will Self in an essay that accompanies the work in "Confidential." "By being jolted into seeing the Gods as exactly the same sort of barnyard fowl as ourselves . . . Jackson drives us to contemplate the very ordinary weal of common humanity: our neuroses, our domesticity, our bodily functions, our births and our deaths."

Jackson, 47, has turned this approach into a veritable brand. She has had a U.K. bestseller, "Private," and is the director of the BBC TV series "Double Take" and a series of films (more mockumentaries) that have grown out of her work on this path, and she's sparked a flurry of conversation based less on her aesthetics than on her power to provoke. With "Confidential," she's spreading the word stateside. "The cult of celebrity has changed and developed," she says. "Celebrities themselves attempt to break their own celebrity bubble and set of myths about them. For example, Britney does outrageous things in front of the camera, wears no knickers." That evolution of the story keeps Jackson shooting.

The role of media images

YET initially, "I despised photography," she says. As a student at the Royal College of Art, she studied sculpture but became fascinated with the prominent role of media images and the myths they help create, particularly after Princess Diana died in a car crash in 1997. "Every- one started to mourn her death, and what struck me was that nobody knew her," says Jackson. "People were crying over her death as if it were more important than one of their family members dying. I just thought: This is just so odd — there is just this gap between the fantasy of someone created through photography and the reality of the person."

Jackson decided to experiment. How far, she wondered, could you spin the story? She began making photographs using a Princess Diana look-alike, "crafting her" and putting her in improbable situations. The most attention-getting: a shot with "Dodi Al-Fayed" and "Diana" posed with a baby. "I wanted to see if people really cared whether she was real or not. So I set of depleted this as a fantasy that existed in the public mind at the time — which is really powerful. . . . We were all thinking: Is Diana in love with Dodi? Does she want to marry Dodi? Was she pregnant with Dodi's baby? . . . Would the monarchy have tolerated that?"



MULTI-TASKING BRIT: No, this isn't the real Britney Spears pigging out in the midst of exercising. But what if?



HAMBURGER? Working with doubles, Jackson envisions actor-activist Richard Gere tempting the Dalai Lama.



I'm proving that you can't rely on your perception when it comes to photography. The camera does lie.

— ALISON JACKSON
Photographer, left, about her faux-candid celebrity shots

'Alison Jackson: Confidential'

Where: M+B Gallery, 612 N. Almont Drive, Los Angeles
When: Dec. 15-Jan. 26. Opening reception, Dec. 15, 7 p.m.-9 p.m.
Price: Free
Contact: (310) 550-0050

The intention, she says, was not to upset the royal family. "But I was compelled to make work about this enormous phenomenon. It was so clear, a construction of an icon."

Who and what we see

THAT was the seed of her multimedia enterprise. Today, drawing from current political and celebrity news, both here in the States and at home in England, Jackson chooses her subjects by paying close attention to who and what we are seeing plenty of, and why. The photographs are narratives, fueled by the public's imagination, that sink the viewer into a scene, mid-moment, and they're perfectly portioned for our shortened attention spans: George Bush and Tony Blair in an impromptu hootenanny in the sauna, Britney Spears pigging out at the gym. Jackson's photos fill in blanks at the same time that they raise questions. They're images that can satisfy our speculations so precisely that they seem inevitable.

When I started, the States were slightly behind. Princess Diana in England really started that kind of tabloid magazine celebrity frenzy and the growth of magazine TV shows," says Jackson. "Now it is celebrity as new folk religion — they are kind of like little saints, aren't they? We pick which one we want to identify with for that moment and we just switch to another one. So they really are a supporting structure for our belief systems."

As she works, Jackson is collecting her own set of back stories. It can be risky business. While she finds most of her look-alikes through agencies and casting calls (imagine a room full of "Osama bin Ladens"), she's always envisioning what passers-by might look like with a wig or a prosthetic nose. "But try to go up to people and say, 'Well, you look like Linda Tripp.' People are very insulted."

She's also getting a glimpse of what it's like to be on the other side of the gaze. Not so long ago, on a trip with the "Posh and Becks" look-alikes, she and her crew were mobbed in a Japanese department store and later dressed down by its management for creating a ruckus. It's not quite the trajectory she'd planned when she set out as a sculpture student.

"I still hate photography," she says. "But, I think I mind it less. I'm just actually beginning to appreciate photography, but I'm not interested in the document. I prefer constructions. One foot in truth, one foot in fantasy — and photography sort of bridges that. We're very much in a time when the public imagination is important — or maybe more important than real news. And I depict what already exists in the public imagination."

lynne.george@latimes.com