



English model and actress
Rosie Huntington-Whiteley;
facing page: English actress
Talulah Riley, both shot for
Esquire magazine.

Alisa Connan shoots sensual images of women that they love just as much as men do. Eleanor O'Kane finds out how she does it.

what she wants

During our conversation, Alisa Connan gives several clues to how she achieves her sexy, soft images of women. She laughs frequently during the interview, a throaty roar that is genuine and spontaneous; she chooses the word 'personality' to describe what other portrait photographers might call their subjects; and I lose count of the number of times she uses the word 'enjoy' when talking about her work.

Born in Melbourne, Alisa now divides her time between London and New York; she says her accent changes as she moves around. Shooting for both advertising and editorial clients, she describes herself first and foremost as a portrait photographer and is rapidly building a portfolio containing the kind of sexy images of women that other women actually want to look at: soft, empathetic and genuine.

There is sensuality in Alisa's lingerie pictures, that's undeniable, but rather than the raw sexuality of the images found in lads' mags, this is more subtle, more elegant. The subjects in her lingerie images are sexy but, actually, they are having a good time too. Not too much flash, not too much flesh, Alisa's images are free of the naff qualities of the soft-lighting-and-polyester-basque genre of glamour photography and in complete contrast to the slick, one-dimensional Guy Bourdin-inspired fashion images that leave most women feeling as vacant as the models in the pictures.

I tell Alisa about how so many of the images of airbrushed, expressionless women on all fours or with their legs in the air leave me cold. "Oh, no, no, no!" erupts Alisa with a huge laugh, tinged with exasperation, her Australian accent suddenly appearing. "I hate them!" I ask Alisa if she thinks that, in contrast, her images, commissioned by magazines such as *Esquire*, appeal to women. "I hope so," she says brightly. "I shoot images I'd like to look at. I think there's a certain intimacy



TALULAH RILEY BY ALISA CONNAN



on shoots when you're shooting women. It's all about how they feel and if they feel sexy, then that's sexy to me. Sex isn't always about not having many clothes on or being on all fours."

Early in her career, Alisa shot portraits of both men and women but finds working with women particularly enjoyable. I comment that on her website she has put her images into three categories: lingerie, women and portraits. Is she deliberately building a career around shooting women? "I find women fascinating, how they feel about themselves and how they are perceived in the media," she says. "I've been told by some of the women who've also been photographed by men that being photographed by me is a very different process. I do what I love and that inspires me, I get commissions for that and then your book grows."

Some initial portrait assignments for *Esquire* ("I think the first was Carla Bruni, she was great, a real pro") have led to her shooting several of the magazine's *Women We Love* features, where famous, attractive women get to be themselves in front of the camera with not many clothes on. "Sometimes you meet art directors and they get a sense of you and your aesthetic, and you figure out that you might be able to work together, so you start with a small shoot before you get to do more fashion shoots." Alisa then corrects her use of 'fashion shoots', telling me the *Esquire* shoots are about the women themselves, and not the clothes. "They are one of my favourite editorial clients; they are very open in terms of the creative brief, which is simply to get the best out of the women." This is where Alisa, with her big laugh, relaxed attitude and desire to show more of her subjects than their bodies, comes into her own.

From Victoria's Secret models to pop stars and a pensive French President's wife, Alisa's subjects (or 'personalities' as she refers to the non-models) are captured looking like real people doing real things; they just happen to be frozen in time. This cinematic style is something Alisa strives for. "I think people want to look at images that feel like a moment rather than something that is set up, both in editorial and commercial images. In preparation I have always heavily referenced stills, films and anything I was inspired by, and that has turned into storyboarding my shoots." She has shot a few short films as well, working with a director of photography. "It feels like a natural progression to go to video. It's been a really enjoyable experience just experimenting



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French President Sarkozy's wife Carla Bruni; top and facing page: Actress Talulah Riley, both shot for *Esquire*.

and doing things I think look good and I love doing. I enjoy working with people."

A love of working with others, sharing ideas and letting things happen comes through again and again when talking to Alisa. I ask if she has to work hard to achieve this relaxed, effortless style that runs through her work. "I don't think I do consciously; it has just evolved that way. I find the process [of shooting] quite organic, I like to work on instinct really so I always pick teams that I collaborate well with. I don't think the final result is just my image, it belongs to everyone I've worked with in the build-up to getting the final result.

"I like working with people who have the same end goal, such as hairdressers who not only do the hair but will come up with ideas with me. When you get a good team dynamic it helps everything to fall into place. I don't like to plan too much in the shoots and if there's a feeling of spontaneity in the images that could be one of the reasons."

Compared with the often cold and hard nature of fashion images, where women are painted, posed and poised until you actually forget they were ever human, Alisa's images feel warm and real, which is why they appeal as much to women as to men. When she says she wants her subjects to have a good time on her shoots I believe her. We talk about Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, whom Alisa shot for *Esquire* last year, and when she explains the model/actress/Next Big Thing is on the cusp of becoming a huge star, it's with an almost parental mix of pride and fondness.

Letting her subjects' personalities come through is key to getting the right results. "I really like people to enjoy the experience and sometimes that comes across as sexy, it just depends on various things such as who the client is and what the subject is like. I never go into a shoot with a definitive end goal. I go in with an idea of the style that the personality might suit but then I leave certain amounts open. Sometimes you meet the person and from that everything changes; other times I'm spot on and it runs just how I thought it would."

David McKendrick, art director of *Esquire*, confirms that it is Alisa's ability to connect with



her subjects that gets the great images he needs. "She sets the women at ease. Her images are really sexy, but also classy, not too brash, which suits us." He thinks *Esquire*'s not insubstantial female readership responds well to Alisa's images: "We do have more female readers than some other men's magazines and I think they appreciate the artistry and beauty of her images."

Alisa says: "It's much sexier for both men and women to look at pictures of women who are empowered by their own bodies. Empowered by what they are wearing and doing rather than being objectified by how much skin they're showing or what clothes they aren't wearing."

I broach the subject of retouching. "I don't think that's really needed. I don't like to over-retouch, I like to keep the images as natural as possible. There's a difference between being raw and being natural. I like to see the flaws in people's skin and for the image to look like it's in a real moment and not something fabricated."

She describes the current backlash against overly-retouched images as the latest wave in taste. "There will always be trends in retouching and post production in images. I do see retouching being pulled back both commercially and editorially, but I'm sure it will return. When there's a lot of media attention, people start to rethink and that's a good thing."

While Alisa's images are more natural and organic than some you'll find in a lot of men's magazines, let's not forget that many of her subjects, be they actresses, models or pop stars, are life's Beautiful People and still not quite like The Rest of Us. It's something she acknowledges, but says she is always more inspired by the human spirit than the human body. "There are beautiful people out there but we should be showing a wide range of people. That's why

I love working with actresses, they are real people, they are not size 'whatever'."

She doesn't see herself in the fashion world where 'size whatever' belongs. "I love working with personalities and I think I will always continue to take pictures of personalities, whether they are models or not."

One of her current personal projects is a series of portraits of models (those Beautiful People again) but the emphasis is on who they are rather than what they look like. "It is fascinating because it's about bringing them out of the poses and getting a sense of what they are about as people rather than what they are told to do. It's more challenging than the actress shoots."

Relaxed. Enjoyable. Organic. These are all words that Alisa uses again and again when describing her work, her shoots, her aesthetic. She doesn't offer over-complicated theories for how she gets her pictures but there's a definite style and process that she sums up quite simply: "I like to create images that I like to look at. I don't particularly like looking at an image where women don't seem as if they want to be doing what they are doing. And I want them to walk out of my shoot having had a great day."

"Most women would love to have a day where they look at images of themselves and they like them – that's what we want, isn't it?" **PP**

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Alisa Connan

Actress Talulah Riley, for *Esquire*; facing page: Irish actress Katie McGrath (left), for the *Sunday Times Style* magazine, and English actress Rosamund Pike, for *Esquire*.