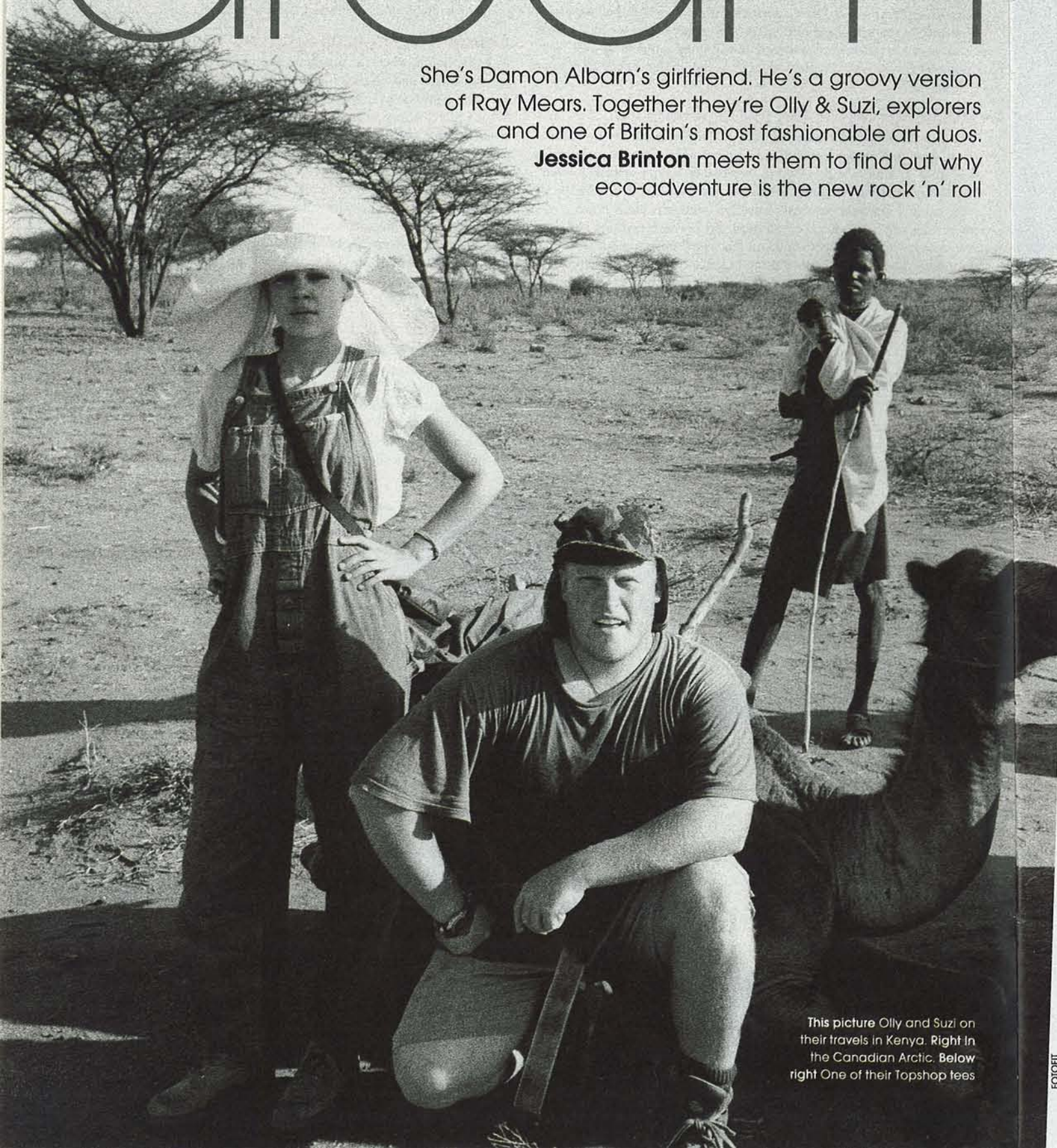


Living the dream

She's Damon Albarn's girlfriend. He's a groovy version of Ray Mears. Together they're Olly & Suzi, explorers and one of Britain's most fashionable art duos. **Jessica Brinton** meets them to find out why eco-adventure is the new rock 'n' roll



This picture Olly and Suzi on their travels in Kenya. Right in the Canadian Arctic. Below right One of their Topshop tees

Tonight, as the nation rings in the New Year, would you rather be, a) in the VIP room of a West End club spraying Veuve Clicquot at three blonde Chantelle lookalikes and a D-list soap star, or b) tucked up in a log cabin 160 miles north of the Arctic Circle, taking saunas, rolling in the snow and sipping local moonshine vodka?

Tomorrow morning, as the nation wakes up to its collective stinking hangover, would you rather be, a) emptying your pockets looking for the wad of cash you vaguely remember taking out of the cashpoint at 5am, or b) surveying a pristine white wilderness as you calculate how many hours you have in hand for reindeer-spotting?

If you answered mostly "a", then hooray, because that's exactly what you can do if you want. If you answered "b", you'll need to be Olly Williams, half of one of Britain's most fashionable art duos, Olly & Suzi. Olly – a larger, blonder, softer version of Ray Mears – is, this very minute, resident in the cabin he owns in Swedish Lapland, with his wife, Lisa, and two kids, Bear and Kora.

He and Suzi (Winstanley, who has a daughter, Milly, with her boyfriend Damon Albarn of Blur and Gorillaz) call such adventures "tuning in". "All you think about is eating, keeping warm, sleeping," he says. "Mobiles are off."

Twenty years since they began travelling to some of the world's most inhospitable places – Siberia, the North Pole, the African deserts, the Amazon jungle – to paint polar bears, grizzlies, lions, wolves, crocodiles, tarantulas and giant ants, Olly and Suzi find themselves at the epicentre of trendiness. City boys, who once would have considered pictures of pretty butterflies too under-the-radar for their tastes, are buying the paintings by the armful. Even Damien Hirst has bought a piece. As Olly and Suzi obsess over the polar bear and the African wild dog – two of the most endangered species on a planet full of endangered species – the world is starting to understand what they've been on about.

On the back of their studio door in wild west London, there's a sign: "We didn't get rich or famous, but we got action." Despite their stellar rock 'n' roll connections, the pair are at odds with celebrity, preferring to go and do something more interesting instead. (Suzi and Albarn have also kept a low profile since they met – she particularly hates having her photo taken.) "Olly and I are artists, not celebrities," she says. "There are plenty of people who want fame. God knows why. Having lived with Damon all these years ... He courted it when he was younger, but he doesn't want it any more."

Nobody properly chic wants to be famous these days. The movement away from mindless hedonism is gathering momentum, replaced by a more imaginative kind of rock 'n' roll, often involving the Great Outdoors. Never your typical Groucho-loving YBAs, Olly and Suzi were camping in rainforests while Tracey, Jake, Dinos and chums were running riot on Dean Street – a little too Sting'n'Trudie to be cool. It's a gentle irony that since everyone got older, got money, got kids – and the environment became such a sexy subject – they've all

signed up: Albarn's old Blur bandmate Alex James is a farming correspondent on Radio 4; Damien Hirst is restoring a stately home. Everyone's turning into a big softie – and it isn't just the sensitive, arty types.

Recent reports suggest that the super-rich are tiring of spending their cash on the trappings of wealth. They're still buying yachts – of course they are – but they're also greedy for a different sort of kick. The concierge company Quintessentially had 15 requests for Toyota Prius hybrid and G-Whiz electric cars this Christmas; one client even asked for a herd of goats to be sent to Namibia for his girlfriend. The seriously eco-minded are buying tracts of rainforest to protect in perpetuity, while art collectors are lining up impatiently for the launch of David de Rothschild's new gallery-cum-eco-educational project, Adventure Ecology.

Olly and Suzi have set up an expedition company drawing on a network of explorers, biologists, guides and conservationists they have met along the way – an unofficial global members' club of nature lovers. Captains of industry visit Inupiat chiefs; advertising honchos traverse Kenya on foot with their children.

What about the tricky issue of carbon footprints? There's the rub. Olly and Suzi don't want to be poster children for the environmental movement. If you are, you're expected to lead a life of unimpeachable eco-purity, and are first in the firing line for any transgressions. The pair would rather let their art do the talking

than stand on a soapbox. "We don't have the answers," says Suzi. Indeed, who does? "The trips aren't for wimps," says Olly, who carries two knives at all times when he's in the wild.

"Do a tracking course in South Africa – learn how to recognise berries, trees, grass and shrubs – and afterwards, you could track someone across Hyde Park."

If you can't afford a trip to see the lions, Olly and Suzi have collaborated with Topshop to produce a range of T-shirts with some of their images of threatened species printed on.

"Live for the moment – who wouldn't want to?" says Suzi. "Stockbrokers tell us all the time that [wilderness] is what they crave more than anything. But you have to prioritise, be able to step out of what you know. I say, do it now, don't save it up. At this rate, it won't be there much longer." □



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STYLE SPECIAL OFFER

A limited-edition silk-screen Lioness print (29cm x 33cm), by Olly & Suzi, is available for £145 (RRP £175), including p&p (UK only), to the first 75 readers who apply. See www.elevenfineart.com/styleoffer

