

ELLE MACPHERSON

OH ELLE

That's probably what the female cast of Friends muttered under their breath when Ms Macpherson sashayed into rehearsals for the first time. Philip Watson watches as The Body does The Business. Photographs by Marc Hom

I met Elle Macpherson once at a party in London. It wasn't exactly the most profound of exchanges – just a few fleeting pleasantries at a gallery launch – and she was very much attached at that time to the British millionaire art-dealer Tim Jefferies (who is now engaged to Claudia Schiffer), but it was long enough for me to weigh up her stock as a supermodel.

She had that kind of groomed luminosity that many of her modelling cohorts possess, an athletic glow that was hard to miss – especially as she is six foot tall in her stockings feet. But she also had that curious aura of disproportion that is common to those women who assemble themselves so effectively in front of a fashion camera. She seemed slimmer than in photographs, and somehow smaller-framed. Like Claudia Schiffer, Naomi Campbell and, more recently, Wonderbra girl Adriana Sklenarikova, her legs were unfeasibly elongated and her head somehow just a little too small.

If Elle Macpherson more than fits the supermodel stereotype physically, there is another vital statistics that very much sets her apart. She is worth, according to



various business reports, somewhere between £20 million and £25 million—a financial figure that makes her the richest of the celebrity models who emerged in the Eighties. These days Elle's more The Business than The Body.

While many of her catwalk contemporaries have diversified (with varying degrees of success) into such areas as acting, beauty products and, in Naomi Campbell's case, trashy novels, Macpherson has quietly built her own financial empire. Her business portfolio stretches from a hugely profitable mail-order lingerie business, Elle Mac-

'The regular female Friends are nauseous at the thought of competing for the spotlight'



Elle's teeth Joey and his new flatmate find plenty to grin about

pherson Intimates (which is now the most recognised lingerie brand in Australia), to advertising and endorsement work (she was recently paid around £1 million to appear in commercials promoting tourism in Western Australia), to television and film work that includes a lucrative "multi-tiered" contract with Miramax.

Slightly older than other supermodels (she is 36 this month) and probably brighter, she was the first model to realise that, as well as the ubiquitous swimsuit calendar, there was an untapped market in exercise videos. She was also canny enough to use her face, profile and financial backers to very efficiently promote the product; it reached number one in 10 countries and further inflated her income.

"I have managed to make a good living out of the way I look," she says. "I realise that there's something there – the six-foot height, the proportions of my body, the hair, the smile, the face – and I know it and capitalise on it."

While it's true that the ill-fated Fashion Café chain that she backed with Claudia Schiffer, Christy Turlington and Naomi Campbell has not been successful (and not just because diners were offered a menu that

included "Elle's Shrimp on the Barbie"), Macpherson has surrounded herself with enough talented investment advisers and corporate managers to make Elle Macpherson Incorporated one of the most profitable businesses to emerge from Australia in recent years.

Yet her ambition and acumen also comes from her character and background. The eldest of four children brought up in a well-to-do suburb of Sydney, Elle had an entrepreneurial father who founded a chain of hi-fi stores and owned a local rugby team.

Born Eleanor Gow, she adopted the surname Macpherson when she was 15 after her parents divorced and her mother remarried. Her stepfather, a leading barrister, encouraged her academically and she did well.

"It didn't come naturally, and I had to work really hard, but in my final exams I came in the top three per cent of the country," she says. "I'm proud of being Australian and I

think this is nine-tenths of my success in terms of being grounded and curious."

Enrolling on a law course at Sydney University, she cut short her studies after being approached, aged 18, by an American model scout while on holiday in Aspen, Colorado. She quickly sensed that she could use her natural assets and her determination to succeed to build a modelling career. Meeting French photographer Gilles Bensimon, 20 years her senior, on a swimwear shoot in Tahiti, she began an affair with him that would lead to her appearing in every issue of *American Elle* for six years (Bensimon was the magazine's house photographer), to her making her name as a model (for three consecutive years she fronted the legendary *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue) and to marriage at 21. She also worked hard at keeping herself in shape – reportedly, her daily regime included 500 press-ups, a five-mile bike ride and a workout in the gym.

Her real challenge came after she split with Bensimon in 1989, as she initially found it hard to get work on other magazines. Yet, like many high achievers before her, she worked out single-mindedly what she needed

to do and aggressively pursued it – she made her body her business. She won other contracts and gained general work as a model.

In 1994, she made her film debut in the rather-less-than-critically-successful *Sirens*, playing an artist's muse, who, more memorably, cavorts naked in a pond. "I'm not good at acting in the slightest, but I think that, if you work hard enough at something, you can become good at it," she confessed shortly after the film's release.

Since then she has studied for six months with a teacher from the Actors' Studio in New York and procured parts – none of them exactly stellar – alongside Jeff Bridges in *The Mirror Has Two Faces* and William Hurt in Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre*. She has also appeared as the love interest of both Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin in *The Edge* (written by David Mamet) and of the Caped Crusader himself in *Batman & Robin*.

This month, she makes her most notable screen appearance to date in the sixth series of *Friends*. After Chandler (Matthew Perry) decides to move across the hall to live with Monica (Courteney Cox Arquette) an Australian dancer, played by Elle, arrives to become the new flatmate for Joey (Matt LeBlanc). Over six episodes (for which she is said to be earning £56,000 a time), sexual sparks inevitably fly – so much so that, in reports of TV sitcom imitating celebrity life, there have been rumours of female frictions between Elle and the regular trio. "They're nauseous at the thought of competing for the spotlight with a supermodel," Hollywood gossip columnist Janet Charol has said. "They want Elle and her famous curves covered up."

Advance tapes weren't available as *Esquire* went to press, but the word from America is that, whatever the truth of the rumours, and however far she obviously has to go in the well-trodden path from mannequin to thespian, the *Friends* girls did not succeed – Elle is as sexy as ever in the series, and a surprising hit with audiences. Despite reports of her collapsing on set last month (the rigours of long hours filming and looking after her two-year-old son Flynn were apparently proving to be a strain), there is a sense in Hollywood that she could become a permanent member of the *Friends* cast. Is she planning a return, I ask. "I don't know, but my character isn't dead, put it that way," she replies. ☺

Friends is on Sky One at 9pm on Thursdays; the "Elle Episodes" begin on 24 February. The series will also be shown on Channel 4 in the summer