

Our Images Are Our Ghosts



The Carlyle, Lakewood, Ohio,
New Year's Day, 1972

It's simply a young woman sitting on a couch. Maybe one could imagine by her posture and expression that her lover is taking the photograph, maybe that she knows she's beautiful. . . . The thing that the reader would have to piece together, or I could tell them, but that only really pierces me emotionally, is that in that photograph she's newly pregnant with me. I am in the earliest stages of becoming something present in the world, but I remain invisible.

The speaker is TR Ericsson, also known as Tom. The woman is his mother, Susan B. Robinson Bielinski Ericsson O'Donnell. While Tom may be invisible in this family snapshot, his hand and his voice create the dialogue between past and present, mother and son that is *Crackle & Drag*. This epic artwork, which has occupied the artist for the past fifteen years, is a haunting, tragic story of maternal and filial love.

Crackle & Drag comprises a number of bodies of work that incorporate a wide variety of media and techniques. The project started in 2000 with the production of the first issue of Ericsson's offset magazine, *Thirst*, and continues to the present day in the form of this book, which is a hybrid of an artist's book and retrospective catalogue, first- and third-person viewpoints. This publication, along with the exhibition it accompanies, may turn out to be the project's final chapters—a turning point, a catharsis for Ericsson. Or not.

Sue died in 2003. *Crackle & Drag* became a significant part of Ericsson's grieving process, "an attempt to reclaim her life, and even my life after her death by way of art."¹ It has been an obsessive search for explanation, understanding, and acceptance. The cause of Sue's demise was initially mysterious, with

the coroner unsure at first whether to attribute it to foul play, accidental overdose, or suicide. In 2003, Sue and Tom were still reeling from the recent loss of her parents. Over the following two years, Sue's brother and his daughter died. Within a span of five years, Ericsson's maternal family, the side that had raised him, was mostly gone and the artist was still in his early thirties. Since the 2008 birth of his daughter, whose name is Susan, *Crackle & Drag* has taken on another function: providing her with insight into the family history and the woman for whom she was named.

The project's overarching title did not arrive until years into the series's creation. At first each exhibition or group of works seemed to Ericsson to be an individual undertaking. Over time, their unity and shared subject matter—the death of his mother—became gradually clearer until one day an epiphany occurred. Ericsson was lying on the couch in their house in Ohio when his wife put on some music: the song *Crackle and Drag* by Paul Westerberg of the alt-rock band The Replacements. It pays homage to poet Sylvia Plath and her poem *Edge*. "I couldn't understand the lyrics," said Ericsson. "I Googled on my phone what I thought he was saying and the Plath poem popped up."²

Edge, written shortly before the poet killed herself, is about suicide. Within a few weeks of Sue's death, the coroner and forensic pathologist completed an extensive examination and ruled it a suicide. Nonetheless, some doubt lingered in the back of Ericsson's mind. "It occurred to me one day, out of nowhere, that her hair had been dyed a dark brown in the casket at her service," he said. For years she had been dying her hair a reddish color. "I always chided her for that and told her to just make it brown like it was. It would have been just like her to dye her hair knowing that she would be on view at the funeral parlor. That's when I knew it had been a suicide."³ When Ericsson read Plath's poem he said, "I instantly knew I had found a way to contextualize all the things I was doing around my mother's death."⁴

Plath's poem ends with the lines "She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag." Westerberg's lyrics ask, "Can you hear her blacks crackle and drag?" Ericsson's approach to his mother's life and death remains more like Westerberg's than Plath's, a question rather than a declarative statement. Suicide is a full stop, but the living who ponder its causes and purposes remain mutable. Ericsson's *Crackle & Drag* does not follow a linear path of development but meanders, sometimes curving back upon itself as he revisits themes, incidents, and images. "A certain intuition, or dream logic is in play," says Ericsson.⁵ His understanding of the events, his family's dynamics, and himself continues to shift as he matures; he allows the doubt and his changing perceptions to show. He has come to feel that the works' incompleteness, inscrutability, and repetition echo the nature of grief.

The inclusion of a wide variety of media and genres contributes to the sense of exploration and is part of Ericsson's process of self-discovery as an artist. Awarded a full scholarship to the Cleveland Institute of Art, he dropped out before the end of his first semester and took off to New York to pursue academic training in traditional figurative drawing, painting, and printmaking at The Art Students League of New York and the National Academy School. This type of curriculum was an unusual choice, far from the norm for art students in the postmodernist 1990s. Ericsson achieved some success as a portrait painter, but after a few years "fashioning a likeness out of paint became a very tired and irrelevant notion to me."⁶ He recognized that he was at heart a conceptual artist, albeit one addicted to the creation of objects and images.

A process polyglot, Ericsson produces many of the works himself in his studios in Brooklyn, New York, and Concord Township, Ohio. Others are fabricated to his specifications by industrial manufacturers or made in collaboration with artisans. His sculptures and installations employ porcelain, cast bronze, blown glass, sandblasted granite and onyx, found objects, and alcoholic cocktails. Works on paper utilize commercial and fine-art printing techniques such as offset, digital printing, and Xerox transfer. Ericsson has had self-destroying acetate disks produced with recordings of his mother's voice. And for his Cleveland Museum of Art show, he has used video technology.

But the medium most central to *Crackle & Drag* is photography. Some of the works are purely photographic. Ericsson has exhibited enormous digital prints and more intimately scaled chromogenic and gelatin silver prints as independent works and utilized them in installations. *Thirst* magazine, the 150 zines, and the film are photography-based products. Photography was also an important tool in the production of many other individual works in *Crackle & Drag*. *Everyday Is Like Sunday* is a porcelain axe covered with a toile pattern taken from a shower curtain that once hung in Sue's house. The curtain was scanned (a digital photographic process), all colors but cyan were removed using Photoshop, and a transfer was printed and fired onto the porcelain.

The relationships between photography, painting, drawing, and printmaking in Ericsson's nicotine and graphite drawings and ash paintings are far more complex and quite intriguing. Those works all begin as photographs—either scans of archival images or files taken directly from the digital camera. They are made into film positives (transparencies) that are exposed onto a fine mesh fabric coated with light-sensitive materials that transfers the image to the fabric to create an ink-blocking stencil commonly called a screen or silkscreen. In a traditional screenprint, ink is forced through the screens onto paper, cloth, or other substrates to yield multiple, usually identical impressions of an image, design, or text. The process excels at presenting broad areas of flat color that do not reveal the artist's hand, which makes it perfect for commercial applications such as T-shirts and posters and for fine art styles such as Op and Pop art.

Ericsson's use of screenprinting contravenes the characteristics traditionally considered the technique's strengths. From the start he intends to create just one unique work from each screen, which is good, because

the physicality of his "printing" processes destroys the fabric matrices. The heat and smoke from the cigarettes that produce his nicotine drawings damage the screens. To make the ash paintings, Ericsson presses the screen flat against the wood panel and squeegees a mixture of graphite, ash, and resin back and forth to force the mixture through the screen. Pressure and sharp fragments in the ash abrade the silk and the panel beneath it. In making the graphite drawings, the vigor with which he rubs graphite into the screens with foam sponges generates enough heat and friction to destroy the image on the screen.

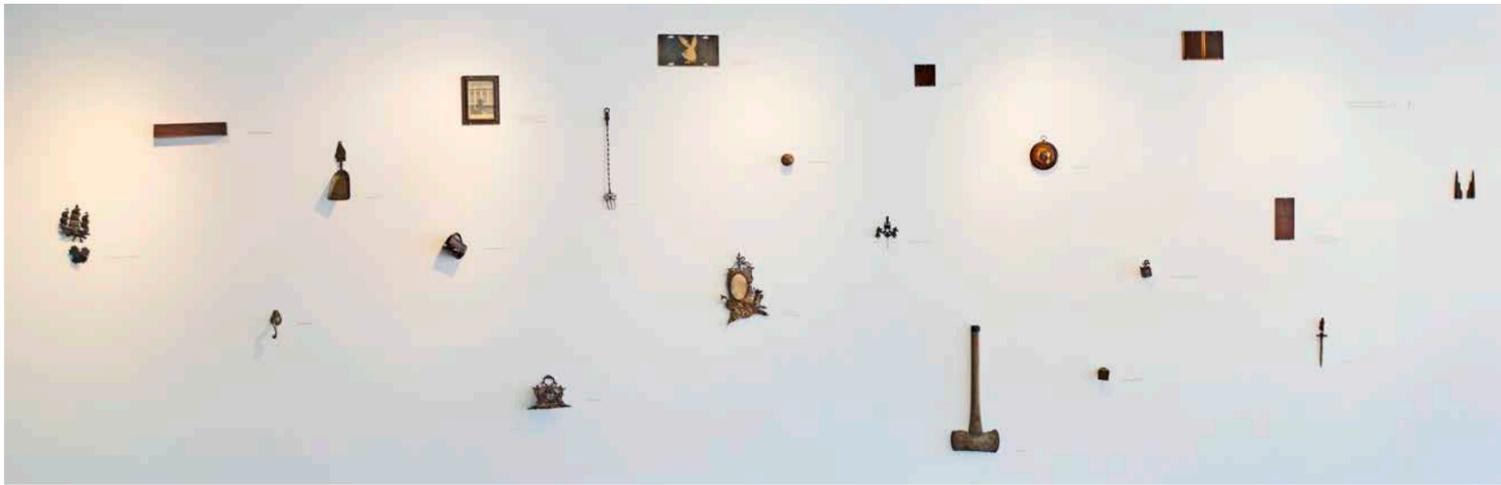
His techniques inject individuality and spontaneity into what is conventionally a consistent, completely replicable procedure. The pressure applied by the artist's hand, or the length of time, number of cigarettes, and their distance from the paper creates lighter or darker values. Once Ericsson lifts up the screen, he continues to refine the impression through erasure, scraping, and sometimes even the application of suction from a vacuum cleaner. The resulting image is a highly mediated interpretation, quite far from the original photograph and the image on the screen. It has been inflected by gesture and by an intuitive, spontaneous response to the materials and experience of art making. A blend of Ericsson's current interest in new media with his training in Old Master techniques, his process for these works is an odd hybrid of the mechanical and the handmade combining photography and printmaking with painting and drawing.

Photography's most important and complex role in *Crackle & Drag* is not as technique but as content. Between his mother's, grandfather's, and uncle's houses, Ericsson inherited a staggering number of family photographs. These pictures, mostly family snapshots but also some that he took, are sources of inspiration, imagery, and evidence. The artist is well versed in the theories of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Susan Sontag about photography's impact and meaning and may have been influenced by them, but at the core, his relationship to photography is personal and emotional. For Ericsson, his family images are both artifacts and relics.

The photographs provide a means of time travel, a conduit to his family history, whether lived or before his birth. They serve as confirmation—or counterweight—to the powerful, yet fragile, subjective truths that are memory, autobiography, and biography. As physical objects handled and treasured by deceased family members and perhaps also by his younger self,



Portraits Inc., Mother's Day, public art installation on Park Avenue, New York, 2004. Photo: TR Ericsson



Crackle & Drag: Film Index (detail), installation view. Burlington City Arts, Burlington, Vermont, 2014. Photo: RL Photo

they exert a tug on his emotions and retain an aura of presence, whether their subjects and creators were saints or sinners. “Our images are our ghosts,” he has written.⁷

Starting in 2004, Ericsson began including archival photographs, along with objects owned by his mother, grandfather, and uncle, in exhibitions. The artist as archivist is a trend in contemporary art practice. For some artists, the artifacts (whether photograph or object) become Duchampian readymades; for others they serve as raw art-making materials to be organized and restructured until they provide new meanings. They can be used as documentation or provocation, depending on their recontextualization.

In Ericsson’s exhibitions, the archival objects and photographs have so far served as correlatives: artifacts intended to be seen in conjunction with artworks. They verify things that might otherwise be unbelievable, add information and atmosphere for the viewer, provide context for the artworks, and bear the aura of relics. The archival photographs in this volume function in a similar way.

How does Ericsson spin the straw of those mundane vignettes of his family’s daily life into art? How does he generate a personal association from what, for the viewer, is a “found” photograph?

Found or vernacular photographs carry an innate allure. Orphans without context or personal connection to the viewer, they are empty vessels into which we feel compelled to pour a story. Family photographs are especially potent because they tend to follow

prescribed formats such as the reunion group shot, the holiday dinner, the Christmas tree, or blowing out the birthday candles. Such scenes are clichés; they ring true because most of us have experienced similar moments. Thus those images prod us to reminisce and analyze our own history and experiences. Found images, including Ericsson’s, serve as correlatives to our own experiences.

Ericsson was lucky to receive an archive of photographs of higher quality than the average family album. The sheer volume of images confirms the value and importance that photography held for his family. The men, who most often were the picture takers, also possessed heightened visual awareness. His grandfather had an antique and book business on the side and his father was a professional artist who worked for American Greetings.

Most significantly, Ericsson’s mother proved to be an exceptionally expressive model, even from an early age. Sue was able to convey not just her beauty and flirtatiousness but also her complexity and volatility. Images of her seduce the viewer into engaging with her, even before anything is known about her life. Direct encounters with her actual visage in archival photographs and other places in *Crackle & Drag* serve as primary or direct evidence, allowing the viewer to feel involved in the process of evaluating her life and her death.

This book and the *Crackle & Drag* zines include positive scenes of normal family life (whatever that is), such as the relaxed gaiety of Sue’s 1969 wedding to

Mike Ericsson (pp. 61–65). Letters as well as images demonstrate Sue’s creativity and her love for her son. But a surprising number of their family snapshots undercut the clichés of serene family life. *These* are the images that the artist selects as the basis for his prints, paintings, and photo enlargements, the ones that are subtly out of kilter from that norm.

They whisper of disparities and discomforts: Tom encased within a jack-o’-lantern-headed scarecrow costume (p. 91) or the waxy stillness of Sue’s formal bridal portrait from her fleeting, disastrous marriage to Julian Bielinski (p. 46). Even a simple still life can cast a portentous mood when the vase that is supposed to beautify the home is cracked (p. 151). These often hermetic clues require that viewers invest time and emotional energy to begin to understand the back story, or to make up their own versions. The impact of the clues is cumulative. As various chapters of the family history are addressed in different bodies of work within *Crackle & Drag*, the extent of the family’s dysfunction and the seriousness of Sue’s mental, emotional, and physical problems are revealed.

Ericsson transforms rather than transcribes these found images. His alterations direct the viewer’s response in a purposeful manner quite distinct from the occasional emotional success of vernacular photography. The artist’s discerning editorial eye and background in representational art play critical roles in his ability to instill the suggestion of narrative into them. In the zines, he literally places them into a narrative so that the knowledge gained from context—the other photographs and their sequencing—colors our interpretations of each individual image.

When Ericsson vastly enlarges snapshots, the images remain unchanged but the viewer’s perspective is radically altered. What should be an intimate, casual experience becomes weighty, monumental, intimidating, echoing the artist’s own loaded experience of these images. When photographs are rendered in nicotine or ash—he uses the human remains of his mother and grandfather—the deadly significance of the materials infects even the innocent image of a child’s birthday party (pp. 148–49). That particular work becomes an even more potent symbol of a scorched past should one learn that the image shows not Tom’s real birthday but a scene staged for an American Greetings campaign where he plays the birthday boy. The vertical lines that seem to bar or cancel the image, which are the result of Ericsson’s process, also supply another cautionary note about the work’s representation of reality.



Crackle & Drag: Film Index (detail), installation view. Burlington City Arts, Burlington, Vermont, 2014. Photo: RL Photo

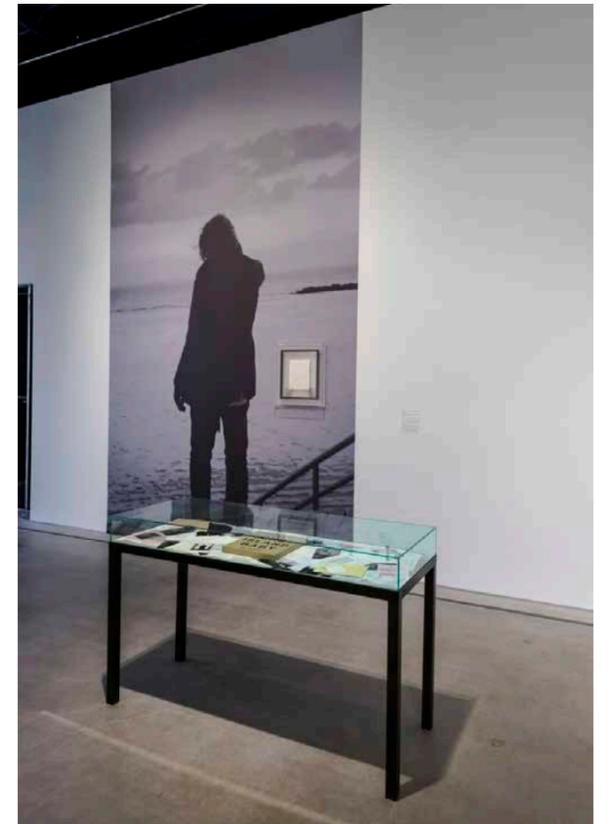


Photographs, Paintings and Objects for a Film, 2013, installation view. Shaheen Modern & Contemporary Art, Cleveland, 2013

The birthday party and many other photography-based works by Ericsson faithfully reproduce the creases, streaks, stains, and losses borne by the original archival photographs. These scars of age, wear, and neglect identify the images as found rather than created, as symbols of time elapsed and time past. Time enters the nicotine prints in yet another dimension. Ericsson created them by placing lit cigarettes in a box topped with a silkscreen; the rising smoke transferred the image to paper pressed atop the screen. The material references the yellowed walls of his mother's living room, stained by years of incessant cigarette smoking. Hazy and diffuse, the nicotine prints dematerialize along the edges, which lends them a dreamlike quality that repudiates their photographic origins. Already challenging to read, they have faded since their production in 2008 and will continue to fade, like memories, over the coming years.

Art may not be able to confer immortality, but *Crackle & Drag* is Ericsson's way of keeping those memories and emotions alive a little longer. It is totally subjective: a loving commemoration but also an expression of puzzlement, anger, guilt, and grief. His mother's suicide disrupted Ericsson's life and interrupted the course of his art. It set him on a different course from most of his contemporaries who produce Postmodern and Conceptual art. He foregoes the irony endemic to our time and in its place presents sincere, raw, messy emotion.

Ericsson is compelled, whether by his disposition or the tragedies he has experienced, to address "that existential stuff that most people shy away from because they fear it's a black hole or an abyss of wasted time and energy that leads nowhere. It is a humbling thing to face the abyss of our lives or another life, like my mother's, and just what it is to be a human being. But this humbling has in it the potential for a kind of salvation," which for Ericsson comes in the form of compassion, understanding, and connectedness.⁸ Ericsson believes, like Nietzsche, that if you "stare into the abyss long enough, it will stare back at you."



Coney Island Baby, 2014. Mixed media installation, vinyl wall graphic with framed letter, 2 vitrines containing photographs, 7-inch records, printed books, CD, and ashes. Installation view from *DIRGE: Reflections on [Life and] Death*, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 2014. Courtesy of MOCA Cleveland. Photo: Tim Safranek Photographics

Epigraph. E-mail to the author, November 6, 2014.

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. E-mail to the author, December 27, 2014.

7. See p. 146.

8. E-mail to the author, November 6, 2014.