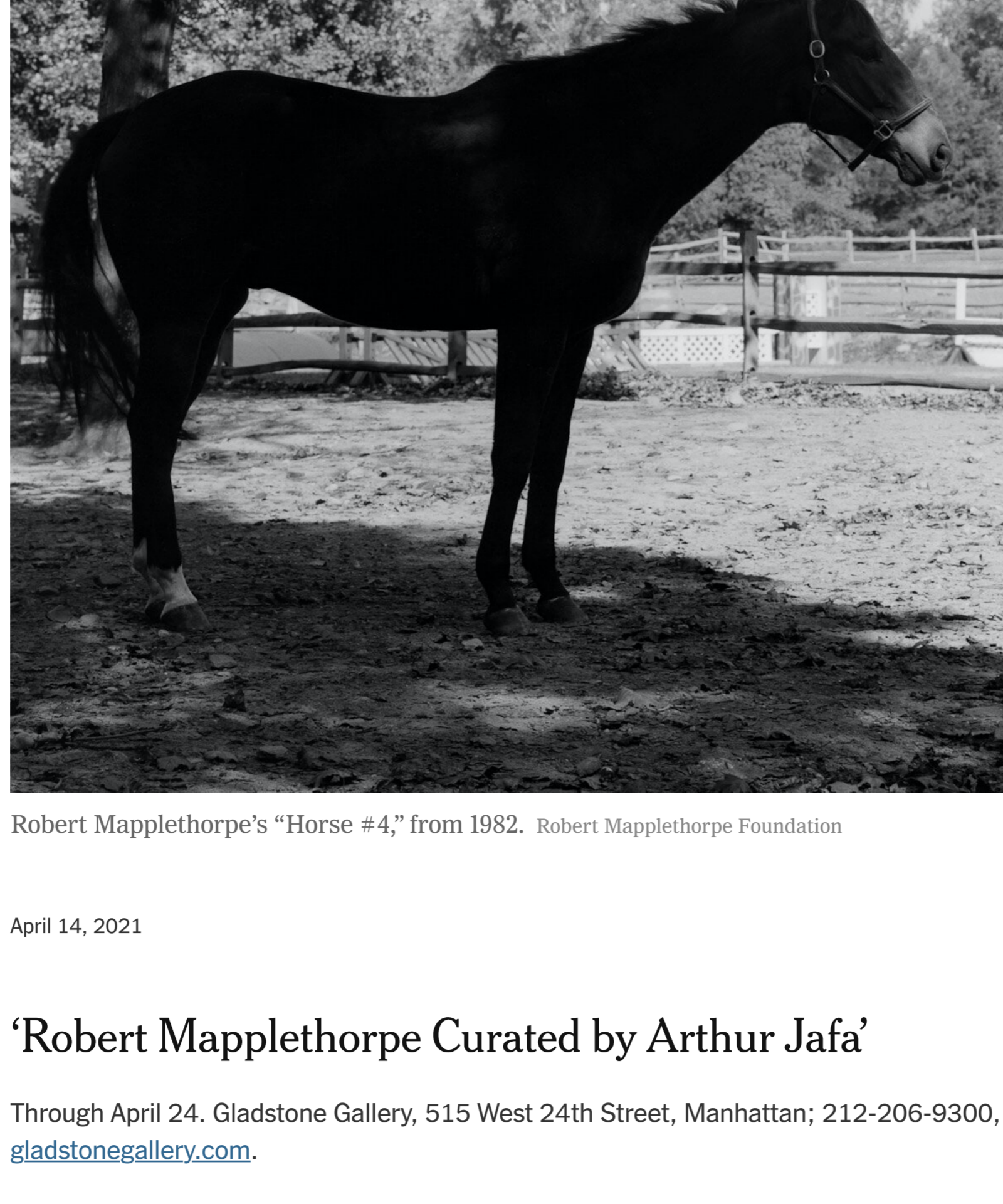


4 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Arthur Jafa remixes Robert Mapplethorpe; Sanou Oumar leaps forward; Ray Johnson makes connections; TR Ericsson processes grief.



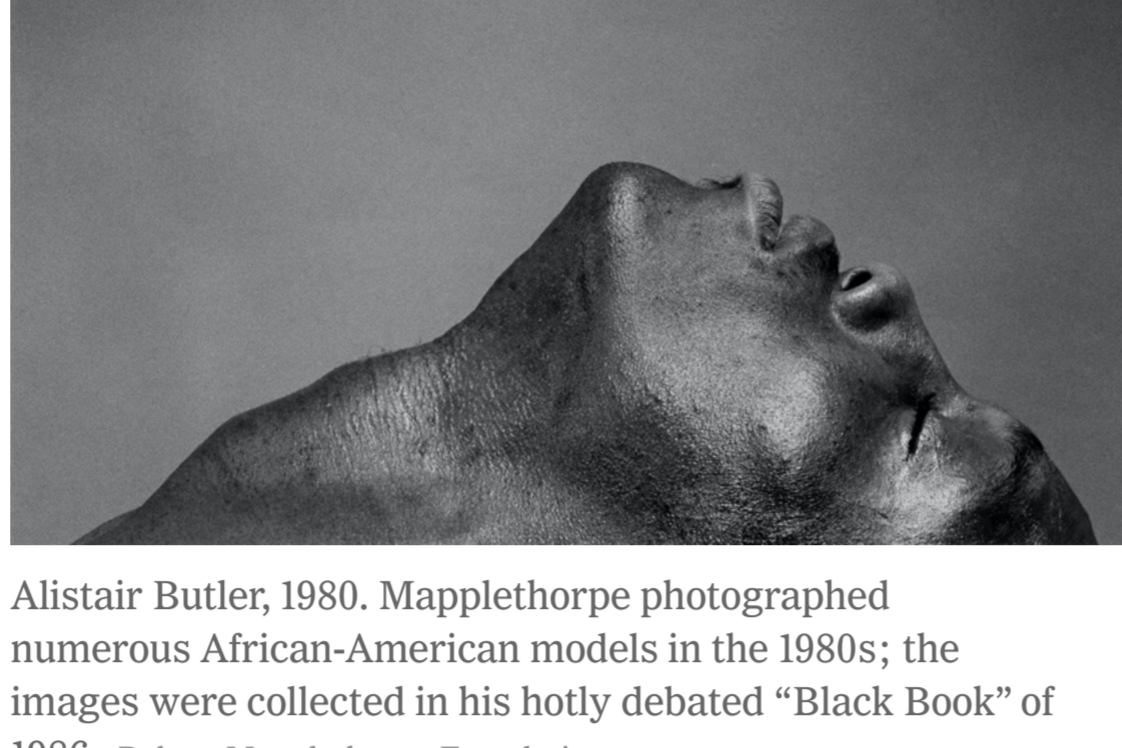
Robert Mapplethorpe's "Horse #4," from 1982. Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

April 14, 2021

‘Robert Mapplethorpe Curated by Arthur Jafa’

Through April 24. Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-206-9300. gladstonegallery.com.

Arthur Jafa’s most conspicuous skill is for editing; the force of his [videos](#) (such as “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” on view at the New Museum in the show “[Grief and Grievance](#)”) comes from a jagged, poetic soldering of high- and low-resolution found footage. Those smash-cut techniques persist here, at Gladstone, where he has arranged in breezy counterpoint 108 icy photographs of flowers and fornicators by Robert Mapplethorpe. He freely mixes Mapplethorpe’s portraiture, still lifes, nudes and sadomasochistic pictures; omits many well-known images (none of the bodybuilder Lisa Lyon); and accentuates his early color Polaroids, such as three shots from 1972 of Mapplethorpe’s lover, Sam Wagstaff, hard at work.



Alistair Butler, 1980. Mapplethorpe photographed numerous African-American models in the 1980s; the images were collected in his hotly debated “Black Book” of 1986. Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

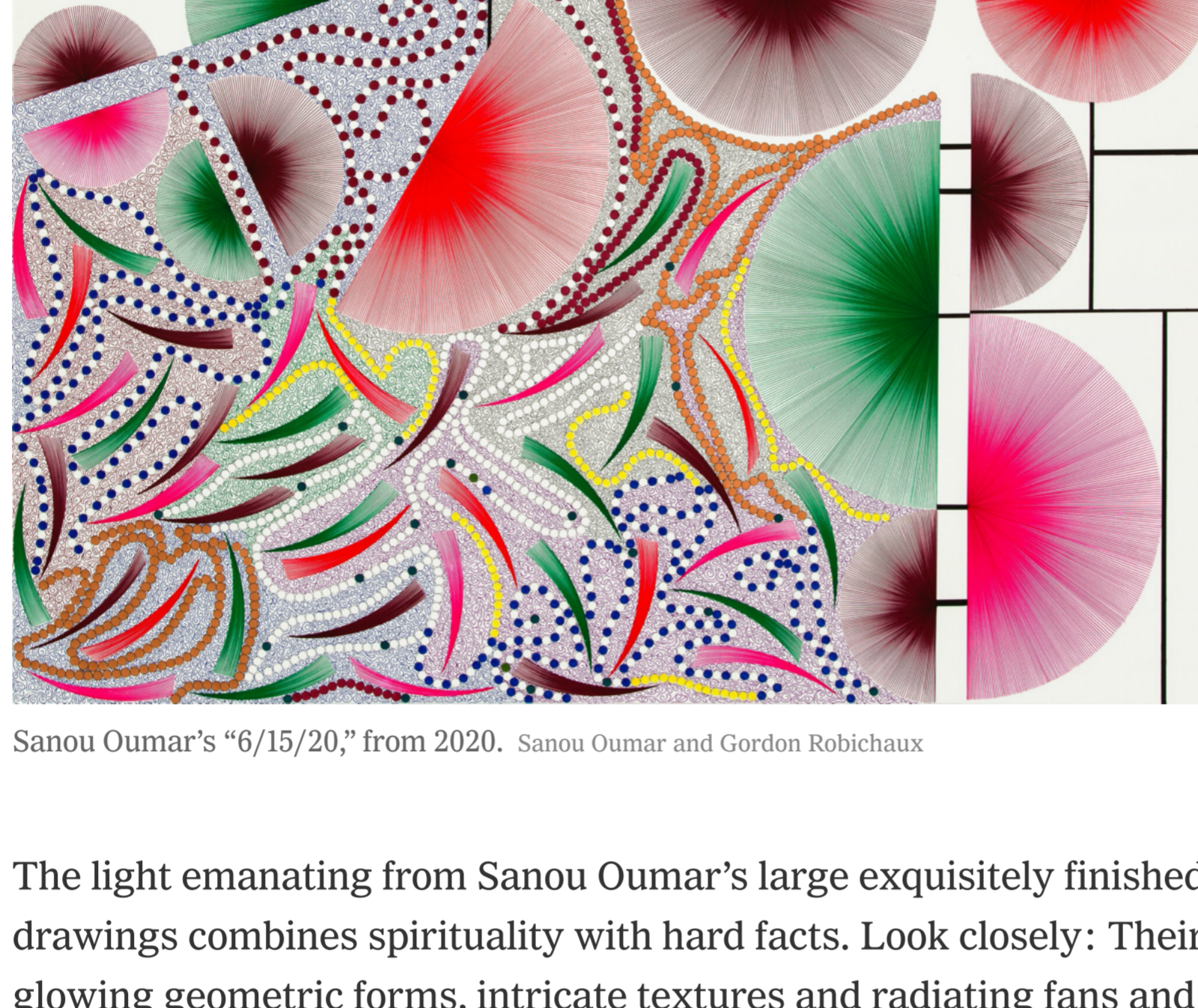
Jafa’s nonhierarchical presentation brings out Mapplethorpe’s campy side, and the Wildean absurdity of contemplating men’s tumescent or dilated parts with the same tranquil gaze you’d cast on a tiger lily. Some juxtapositions offer a bit of decadent fun, as when Jafa interrupts a run of Mapplethorpe’s blunt black-and-whites with a rare color portrait of, hard to believe, the archbishop of Canterbury. He intermixes Mapplethorpe’s nudes of Black models with admirable neutrality, though placing one model’s erect sex organ next to a black horse facing the same direction is really a schoolboy joke.

But can we even see Mapplethorpe today the way we did when the Kitchen debuted his roughest pictures in 1977, or when an [obscenity trial in 1990](#) made them a [flash point of the culture wars](#)? His stringent composition and cold eye retain a small power, but the relationship of sex to photography has changed a great deal. Let me try to put this decorously: A certain number of visitors to this show will later look at dozens more explicit, square-format photographs — and even send one or two — on smartphone apps that facilitate encounters not unlike those Mapplethorpe pictured. Once the shock was how he objectified nude bodies; now it’s we who objectify ourselves, every day in our pictures and profiles, just for one moment of human contact.

JASON FARAGO

Sanou Oumar

Through April 25. Gordon Robichaux, 41 Union Square West, Manhattan, 646-678-5532. gordonrobichaux.com.



Sanou Oumar’s “6/15/20,” from 2020. Sanou Oumar and Gordon Robichaux

The light emanating from Sanou Oumar’s large exquisitely finished drawings combines spirituality with hard facts. Look closely: Their glowing geometric forms, intricate textures and radiating fans and bars of color suggest 21st-century mandalas, but their elements can all be broken down to individual marks and lines of vibrantly colored inks. The cultural references are high, low and global — hard-edge painting, textile and graphic design, M.C. Escher’s imaginary spaces, Mondrian’s black scaffolding, elevations and floor plans, the patterns of security envelopes and Islamic tile, the manic architectural maquettes of Bodys Isek Kingelez. The prevailing sense of geometry (and perfection) is relieved by multipurpose freehand doodles or areas of minute stabs from a sharp pencil.

Oumar was born in 1986 in Burkina Faso and majored in English literature at the University of Ouagadougou. He immigrated to the United States in 2015 and his drawings became a consuming meditative ritual. Each is made in a single day and titled with the date: “6/15/20,” “8/26/20.” Many of his motifs are tracings of small found objects — from smoke alarm casings to the little wood spoons used at ice cream parlors — which contribute to their mysterious familiarity.

The drawings in a book published in 2018, the year of Oumar’s New York debut in a two-person exhibition (with Matt Paweski) at Gordon Robichaux, are more symmetrical and less colorful than these new efforts. Made mostly last summer, the latest works represent an impressive leap forward. The latest, “9/13/20,” is completely freehand. It is not as robust as the others, but it opens onto thrilling new territory.

ROBERTA SMITH

‘Ray Johnson: What a Dump’

Through May 22. David Zwirner, 525 West 19th Street, Manhattan, 212-727-2070. davidzwirner.com.



“Untitled (Rimbaud)” circa 1971, an example of mail art exchanged between Ray Johnson and John Dowd, a notable figure in Johnson’s social circle. Ray Johnson Estate

The [Ray Johnson](#) show now at David Zwirner — one of the largest such surveys in recent years — includes more than 50 of the trademark collages Johnson made between the 1950s and his suicide in 1995. They are lovely little things, heir to the 1920s collages of Hannah Höch and Max Ernst but with more whimsy and nostalgia — they often nod to stars from Hollywood’s Golden Age. (“What a dump,” in this show’s title, is a favorite quote of Johnson’s from a Bette Davis movie.) Almost all the collages are meticulously signed and dated in Johnson’s tiny script, as though to proclaim, “Here be art.”

By the standards of the art being made around them — Pop appropriation, minimalist sculpture, object-free conceptualism — these collages can seem backward-looking. But to criticize their aesthetics, or even to adore them, misses what matters most about these works, and the point that the curator, Jarrett Earnest, makes in this exhibition.

Johnson sent out many collages, or at least photocopies of them, to friends and acquaintances around the world, in the classic example of what is known as mail art. The true medium of Johnson’s best work may not be the paper and glue of his collages but the human connections his mailings let him forge: He often invited people to rework his images and return them, or to pass them along to others. This exhibition is as much about those connections as about any objects that sparked them.

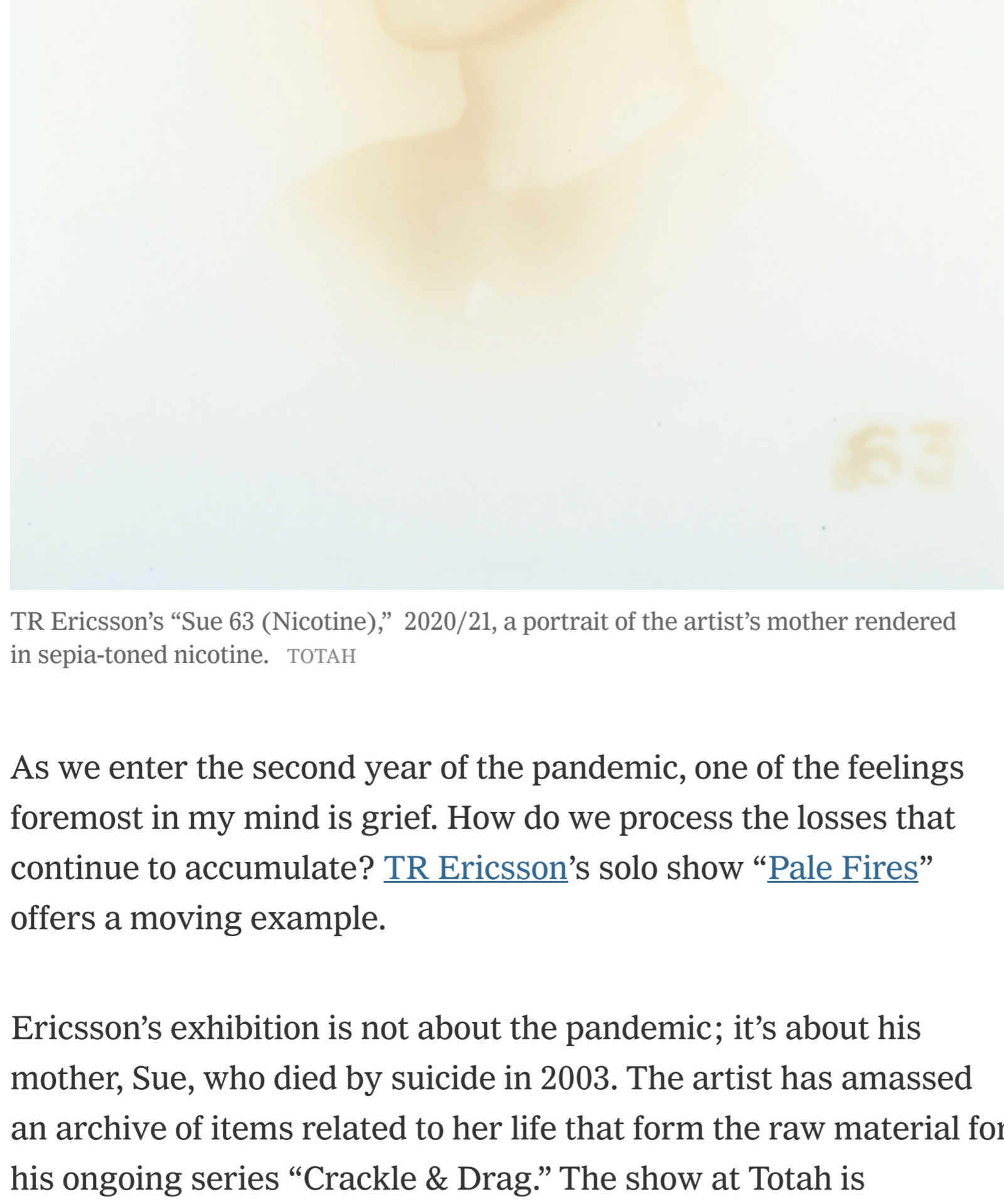
Once you received a Johnson, you could count yourself a member of his New York Correspondance School (his spelling), which became a kind of virtual clubhouse for creators who didn’t find an easy fit in the art world — often because, like Johnson, they were gay. The three partners in General Idea, the queer art collective, were eager members of the Johnson “club,” as was the gay poet John Giorno. This show includes work by them and other correspondents. (An unaffiliated exhibition at [Off Paradise](#) gallery on Walker Street presents more artists of a “Johnsonian turn of mind.”)

I like to think of Johnson’s lovely collages as the secret objects kids craft in their club houses, to affirm their membership. The care that goes into making those objects is a sign of how much that membership matters.

BLAKE GOPNIK

TR Ericsson

Through April 25. Totah, 183 Stanton Street, Manhattan; 212-582-6111. davidtotah.com.



TR Ericsson’s “Sue 63 (Nicotine),” 2020/21, a portrait of the artist’s mother rendered in sepia-toned nicotine. TOTAH

As we enter the second year of the pandemic, one of the feelings foremost in my mind is grief. How do we process the losses that continue to accumulate? [TR Ericsson](#)’s solo show “[Pale Fires](#)” offers a moving example.

Ericsson’s exhibition is not about the pandemic; it’s about his mother, Sue, who died by suicide in 2003. The artist has amassed an archive of items related to her life that form the raw material for his ongoing series “Crackle & Drag.” The show at Totah is composed entirely of these works, the gallery freighted with absence and loss.

Ericsson often reproduces family photographs and documents in silk-screen, but personalizes the process by mixing in unusual, symbolic materials — like his mother’s funerary ashes or alcohol — with more conventional ones like ink. “[Sue 63 \(Nicotine\)](#)” (2020/21) is a portrait of her as a poised young woman, rendered in ghostly, sepia-toned nicotine. Many of the images are hazy or blurred, as if they were memories just out of reach.

“[Letter \(March 3, 1994\)](#)” blows up a three-page missive from Sue, and in doing so provides a glimpse of the drama of her existence, as well as her voice — which forms the soundtrack of the film “[Crackle & Drag](#),” via recorded conversations and voice mail messages left for her son. It’s unfortunate that the film, which is screening only once a week or by appointment, isn’t better integrated into the exhibition, because it resonates with an emotional complexity that breaks through the cool conceptualism of the project. Portraying Sue both intimately and from a distance, it is a harrowing elegy.

JILLIAN STEINHAUER