

INTERVIEWS

Artist Snapshot: TR Ericsson

Twenty-five questions exploring the mind and habits of an artist.

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHANIE CASSIDY

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TR Ericsson, 92nd Street Y, New York City, c. 1992

At what age did you decide to become an artist?

I never had a thought to be anything else. Even though I grew up in the suburbs of Northeast Ohio in more or less working class neighborhoods I was surrounded by art, it was in my home and in my family on both sides. My father made paintings and drawings, and so did his father. My maternal grandfather collected and sold books and antiques. There wasn't a moment of decision for me like that; I simply flowed into it, and with each passing year as I matured, so did my understanding of art and what I might do with it.

How did your parents react when you told them you wanted to be an artist?

I had a tremendous amount of support, especially from my mother. By the time I was in my junior and senior years of high school, I was up painting on school nights some days until two or three in the morning. I used to wake her up on nights like that and want her to come see what I was doing. She had to get up early for work in those years, but without complaint, she'd get up and come to my room to see my painting and talk about it with me. She was amazingly present for me in that way, always was.

Who are your favorite artists?

At the moment I'm thinking about Marceles: Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Broodthaers, Marcel Proust. Edvard Munch, Jasper Johns, and Arshile Gorky are a little on my mind. I return to R.B. Kitaj often enough, Giacometti, Dieter Roth, Hannah Wilke, Louise Bourgeois. The same favorite artists (and I'm leaving out others I'm sure) seem to revolve around me. I let go of some of them for a little while and the most influential to me come back, or return to mind over and over. Bas Jan Ader, the Flemish primitives, dada...

Who is your favorite artist whose work is unlike your own?

Probably [R.B. Kitaj](#). I admire how he lived and how he thought as an artist. I wrote to him in my twenties; his generous and kind reply was significant then and still means a lot to me now.

Art book you cannot live without?

I could live without art books. But a book I never get tired of or that always resonates? There are a few, but if I had to choose one, maybe Yves Bonnefoy's *Giacometti*.

What is the quality you most admire in an artist?

I think to know yourself and, in that Socratic sense, to know what you don't know.

Do you keep a sketchbook?

No. I have on a few occasions, when I was younger, but it never really worked for me.

What's your favorite museum in all the world?

There are two and they're two of the best museums in the world. [The Cleveland Museum of Art](#), in my hometown, a truly encyclopedic museum that rightly prides itself as being a museum of masterpieces, and [The Metropolitan](#) here in my adopted home of New York. The works in both places are so familiar and formative to me that, when I see them, I feel like parts of my life and being are contained there. That's a little dramatic, but anyone that loves places like these would know what I mean.

What's the best exhibition you have ever attended?

I can't say with any finality what the best exhibition I've ever seen is. At different points in my career, I have seen many significant exhibitions, and, of course, living in NYC, you see so much. But more recently an exhibition at the now no longer Met Breuer comes to mind: [Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed](#). It was an incredible selection of paintings I'd never seen in person but always admired in books, especially the self-portraits: [Self Portrait with Cigarette](#), [Self Portrait in Hell](#), and, of course, his masterpiece, [Between the Clock and the Bed](#). There was also the moody and haunting [Moonlight](#) painting from 1893. I usually know it while it's happening, the experience of certain exhibitions will never leave me and whether I'm always aware of it, or

not, its influence will be there for years to come. That was recently one of those exhibitions.

If you were not an artist, what would you be?

I could only imagine being another kind of artist. I would write fiction, which for some reason is virtually impossible for me.

Did you have an artistic cohort that influenced your early creative development?

I don't know. I was a bit of a loner, early on, creatively at least. Actually, many of my friends during my younger years weren't visual artists, they were musicians, and I got a lot out of that. As a teenager punk culture really grabbed me, and that attitude is still with me, a certain sense of unbelonging, going your own way, some restless angstiness, a raw often DIY approach, letting your emotions out. That's all stuck with me all these years and blended into everything else.

What is one thing you didn't learn in art school that you wish you had?

I learned what I learned, and it worked. Even what I didn't learn, it mattered to not learn that.

What work of art have you looked at most and why?

I mostly don't consider a single work of art for any length of time. I spend more time considering an artist's entire life's work. The narrative arc from first to last work is often more interesting to contemplate than a single art work. In this way I've looked longest at the collected works of Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers. I'm sure there are others if I thought about it more. Hannah Wilke is incredible in this way, Bas Jan Ader, Philip Guston.

I bought a book at Rizzoli on Fifty-seventh Street in the early 90s, [a monograph on the Spanish artist Antonio López García](#). The works were all arranged in chronological order. In his younger years his figurative realism was more abstracted, even a little "magic realism" crept in, but

over time he became more and more seduced by reality. In his later work there were these [drawings of a quince tree](#). He would alter and correct the drawing as the fruit ripened and grew and the branch bent lower. The slow developing arc toward that later work was fascinating for me to see and contemplate even then.

What is your secret visual pleasure outside of art?

A not-at-all secret love of books, also most anything filmic or photographic.

Do you listen to music in your studio?

Almost never.

What is the last gallery you visited?

I was at [TOTAH Gallery](#) the other night here in NYC for the opening of a [Wallace Berman exhibition](#). It's an absolutely remarkable selection of over forty works, including an important film by Berman. Berman's son Tosh was there opening night; the mood was electric, people were really excited to be there. The show is up through October 30.

Who is an underrated artist people should be looking at?

I'm not sure I believe in the concept of an underrated artist. It's a tricky thought. I can certainly think of some overrated artists. But if underrated means lesser known, and lesser appreciated, maybe that's okay. Maybe that means something, maybe that fueled them somehow, maybe their time is coming, or maybe their audience will always be smaller, and should be smaller, more intimate. Some artists require more time and thought from a dedicated minority. Although it is an exciting time right now to see lesser known, or "underrated" artists, coming forward. I've been enjoying that. For instance, I keep seeing paintings at galleries and museums by [Beauford Delaney](#). Certainly he never had his due, no where near the level of his white contemporaries, and like many of them, he also studied at the Art Students League. Delaney studied alongside

Jackson Pollack with Thomas Hart Benton in the 1930s, I think he also studied with John Sloan in those years.

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I am having a hard time with this typewriter. It doesn't have a correction key and I always used that key more than any other, I hate to say.

Do you still see your old buddies, Ron Scherr, Harvey and Mary Beth? Do you even have any teachers this year? I wish you would make friends with someone up there so you wouldn't be so lonely. I don't know what kind of Christmas we are going to have. I don't think there will be any money for presents with these kids here. They cost a fortune to feed and they are still taking the same kind of child support out of Bill's check even though we have the kids. We just can't afford to file the papers to get it adjusted. It costs \$100.00 and we are never going to have that. It might as well be \$1,000.00.

Basically, I am losing weight because there is not money for food for me and Bill. Only for the kids so there isn't anything to eat. Between that and the no drinking I should be quite thin pretty soon. I would give anything for a big bottle of Gatorade. You and Bill and I will be hungry together. We will both look like you when you get home, so that is not all bad.

How do you think you are getting home for Christmas. I really don't want you to take a plane. Greyhound is advertising 50% off. You might want to check into that. I am glad Valerie is going up at the end of the month so you will have some company. I haven't heard from Rosie for about a week so I don't know if she has another job yet or not. Twiggy is still cleaning houses and Rick is working in a nursing home part time in the kitchen as you probably know.

Let me see something when you become a member up there so I can put it in your scrap book. I have to keep it up to date--it is my main project.

NOW GET HIS LONG SHORT STORY. THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FALT BY BRET HARTE. GRANDMA ALSO HAS A SUGGESTION--SPECIFICALLY A SHORT STORY BY EVELYN WAUGH CALLED A HANDFUL OF DUST. IT IS PRETTY LONG, TOO. IN FACT ANYTHING BY HIM WOULD BE WORTH READING.

Well, that is enough for now. Write soon and fill me in. We are really doing good with the phone but I miss the longer more frequent conversations. BE CAREFUL UP THERE IN THAT ENORMOUS CAVERNOUSE JUNGLE.

All my love always, your mom

A letter to the artist from his mother written in 1993.

What art materials can you not live without?

I mostly dislike art materials. I use them but dislike discussing them, and I'm happier when I make something with non-art materials. To me traditional art materials are burdensome: they point to themselves or other points in history. I like to use a material that tells a different story and has a different history, often outside of art. Or if it is a traditional material, I want it to transcend itself and again point elsewhere. A photographer friend of mine, [Christian Patterson](#), once told me he liked materials and processes that were "low to the ground." I like how he put that.

Do you paint/sculpt/create art every day?

I do something toward realizing my work everyday, but I'm not always making things. I write. I read. I try to get out and live a little.

What is the longest time you went without creating art?

There was a period of months, maybe more than a year, where my personal life overwhelmed me, and I didn't make a thing. I was thirty years old, and my mother had died; it was sudden, she took her own life. The adjustment to a world without her was slow and painful. I felt a tremendous amount of guilt. Art seemed like it was part of some cruel narcissism I had been lost in. Maybe I still feel that way, or I think I still have that concern. I'm doing a work now, a bookwork, a collection of my mother's letters and voice recordings. Some of her most outrageous letters were sent to me at the 92nd Street Y, which is where I lived during the time I was studying art at the League in the early 90s. It's an eight volume set of books titled *All My Love Always No Matter What*. I'm making aesthetic decisions, of course, but the idea is to simply present her as herself, not in any way interpreted by me, or transformed, just as herself.

What do you do when you are feeling uninspired?

I never really feel uninspired. I have a train of thought going, and I just need to hop on it, and I'm moving along with it. It wasn't always like that, but it is now, and I'm grateful for that. There's a beautiful quote by

Kierkegaard that sort of pertains to inspiration in a complex way: “To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.” I think if you get in the habit of risking things and get used to the uncertainty involved in that, it becomes perpetually inspiring because what you’re discovering is always this buried self and all that it means to discover that, and it’s always shifting, always moving through time.

What are the questions that drive your work?

Authenticity, maybe just that, intimacy, details, not missing the essential thing about what it is I’m putting out there. I guess those aren’t questions really. Maybe I’m not driven by questions. I mean, you have to question everything you do every step of the way. Self-critique is essential in completing a work, but I think I’m driven more by experiences; lately I feel a deepening awareness of passing time. I’ll be fifty next year, and time feels like this giant thing in front of me that I have a hard time seeing around. I figure I might as well stare into it just like I’ve stared into the other abysses.

What is the most important quality in an artist?

I used to think it was a blend of attentiveness and imagination. I guess I still think that. But adaptability, determination, energy, those things go a long way too. Objectivity is critical for an artist. Self love and the ego that goes with it, I don’t think it makes very good work. Maybe sometimes it does; anything can work in art. But you have to be able to objectify yourself and be open to what others see lacking or working well with what you do. You have to be able to receive and consider all the noise around you while still moving forward with what you’re doing.

What is something you haven’t yet achieved in art?

I’m in love with the idea, as terrifying as it is, of completion, and you really can’t be around for it, that’s the troubling part. I think you do what you do, and it’s all filled with possibility. Every decision is another slight fork in the road; new things open up. When all that stops, there is a completion, an end. I think it’s a very beautiful thing. New work begins without its author, time takes over, others have hands in it all. Most of

what you did may vanish, or all but a few things, or it all might be forgotten completely, but the final shape, whether hardly anything is left or far more than that, that final shape is an attractive thought. It's not an achievement, which is a dubious thing anyway, it's an inevitability. All that you did is shaped into a singularity, the fragments and open ends meet and meld together. What's done is done and won't ever be added to again, not by its author.

What is the best thing about art in the era of social media?

That's hard to say considering the most obvious failure, which exists at the intersection of art and social media, is that what we are seeing is often not the art. But that aside, I like the network it attempts to be: it's fraught and perilous in all sorts of ways, but there is a community alive inside of it all. It's so easy to quickly register what's happening, at least in brief, to get some idea of what's happening and who's doing what and where and when. It's all there and so easily accessed.

TR ERICSSON received the Art Students League's Lloyd Sherwood Grant and Edward G. McDowell Travel Grant. His upcoming solo show at [Harlan Levey Projects](#), in Brussels, scheduled for 2022, will combine recent works with a selection of early paintings reconceived to complement his epic mixed-media project "[Crackle & Drag.](#)" Ericsson's well-crafted and rigorously conceptual work is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Everson Museum, and many other public and private collections. His books and zines can be found in numerous library collections, including the Yale University Arts Library, the Museum of Modern Art Library, and the Smithsonian Institution Libraries.