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Memory and Photography: TR Ericsson's Crackle & Drag Posted by artbooks July 10, 2015

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warm, and moving guest post for us about her experience with the work of TR Ericsson, a 7 year acquaintance that has just culminated in an exhibition currently on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art and a book of the same title, TR Ericsson: Crackle & Drag.

Barbara Tannenbaum, Curator of Photography at the Cleveland Museum of Art, has written a smart,

TR Ericsson's Crackle & Drag has engaged my mind and emotions since 2008, when I first encountered his work within the same month at both a commercial gallery and a nonprofit art space,

future.

Barbara Tannenbaum-

both in Cleveland. Work on the project started fifteen years ago; each body of work that appeared over the ensuing years added another chapter to the saga of three generations of a Northeast Ohio family. At the heart of it all was the troubled life of the artist's mother, Susan B. Robinson Bielinski Ericsson O'Donnell, who committed suicide in 2003 at age 57. Photographs showed Susan as beguilingly alive and joyful, charming and engaging. I began to care about her life and to want to understand her choice of death. I longed not just for the next installment

in the story but also for a way to fit together all the pieces in two interlocking puzzles, one depicting

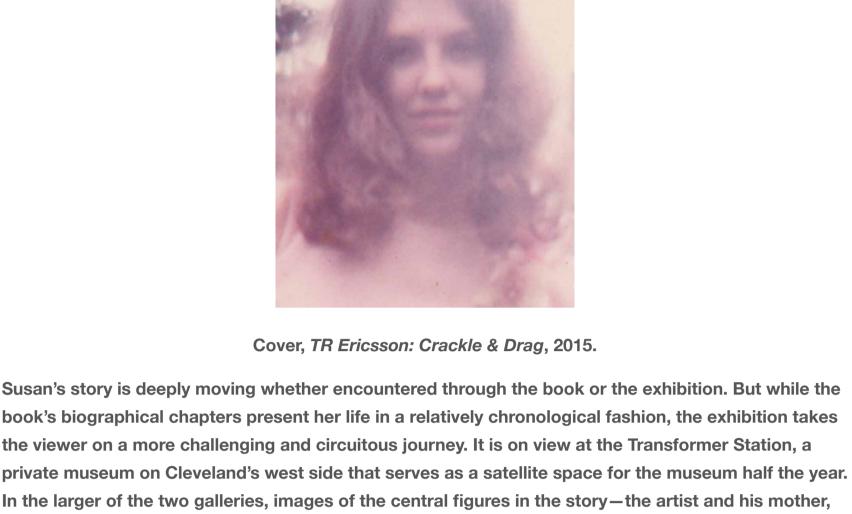
Ericsson's family history and the other crystallizing his sometimes frustratingly diverse artistic career.

Providing an overview for myself and for viewers was one of my hopes when I invited Tom Ericsson to show at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The book and exhibition, both entitled TR Ericsson: Crackle & Drag, supplied that and more. Crackle & Drag takes as its source and inspiration an archive of family artifacts, documents, and photographs. They are transformed and transmuted into a number of bodies of work that employ a wide range of media including photography, drawing, sculpture, artists' books, and cinema. The story they tell is not a linear narrative; it meanders and curves back on itself to explore the variability and

reliability of memory and photography, pondering their power to define the past as well as shape the

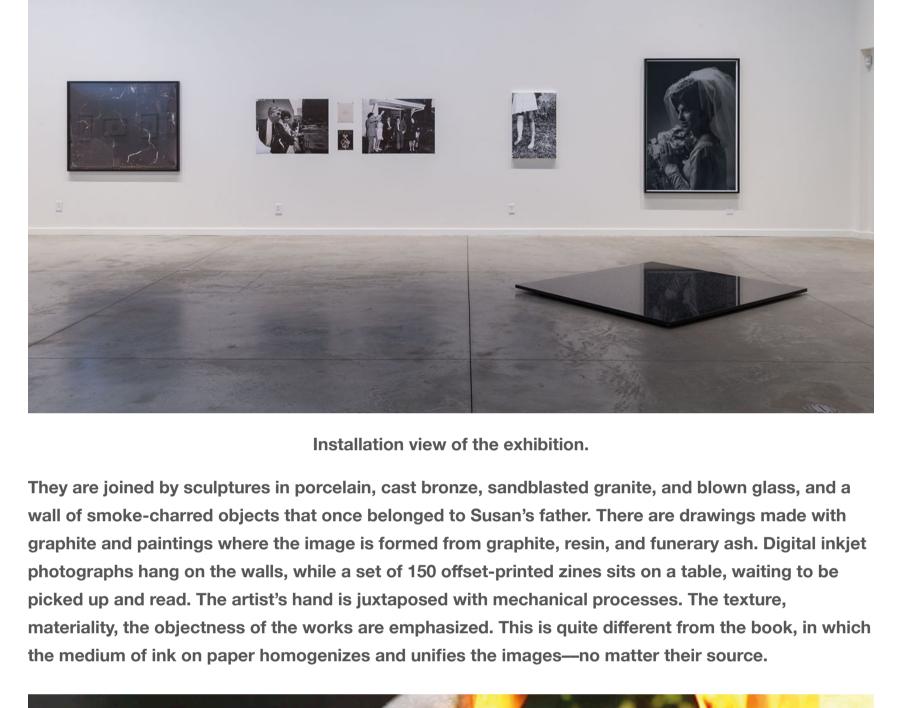
The book that accompanies the exhibition has both linear and nonlinear components; it functions

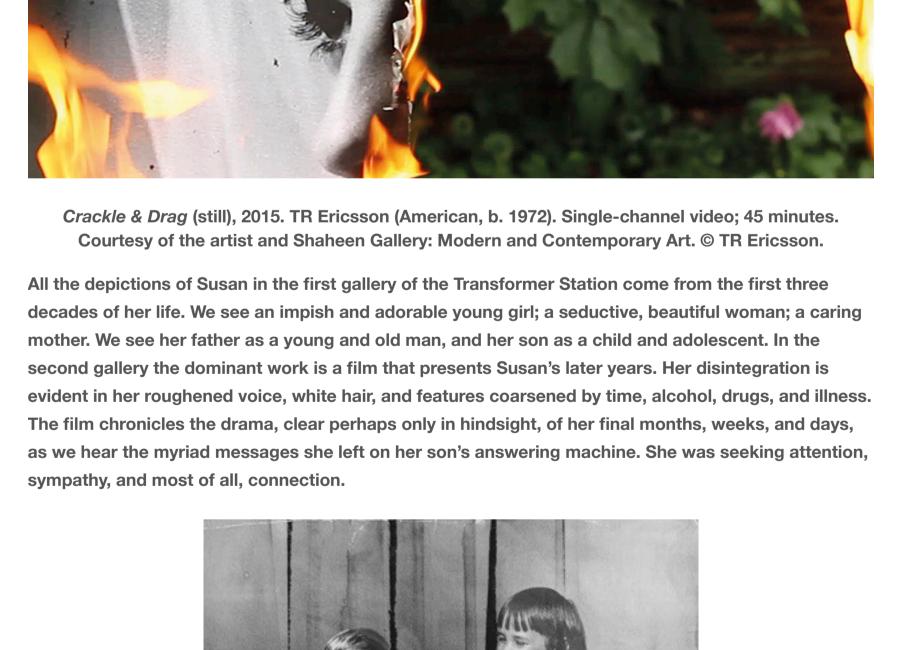
asboth a traditional monograph and as an artist's book. Analytical essays by art historian Arnaud Gerspacher and me bracket the extensive artist-created content, which alternates chapters of biography and archival materials with Ericsson's own explications of individual bodies of his work. The volume's design is the result of close collaboration between Ericsson and Thomas H. Barnard III, senior designer at the Cleveland Museum of Art.



along with her abusive, controlling father and the second of her three husbands, who is Ericsson's

father—intertwine and interact, jumping through and over decades.





American Greetings, 2013. TR Ericsson (American, b. 1972). Graphite, resin, and funerary ash on panel; 48 x 60 in. Collection of Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell. © TR Ericsson.

grieving for his mother—"an attempt to reclaim her life, and even my life after her death by way of art."

Making the art that comprises Crackle & Drag became a significant part of Ericsson's process of

The title for this haunting, tragic story of maternal and filial love comes from the final line of Sylvia

Plath's poem "Edge," written shortly before her suicide: "Staring from her hood of bone. // She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag." Crackle & Drag provides highs and lows. We fall in love with Susan, are angered by some of the circumstances of her life, and frustrated by her flaws. But even though it awakens our empathy, we cannot bring her back nor can we lessen the suffering of those she left behind. Ericsson takes us on a deeply moving journey as he digs down into these lives to uncover the whys and why nots, but Crackle & Drag also reminds us that there are no simple answers. A life is not a jigsaw puzzle. There is

no single missing clue that will snap into place and complete the picture. History, whether of an era or

a family or an individual, is not finite and fixed but fathomless, messy, and constantly rewritten.

Pink & Yellow, c. 1980, Greenville, Tennessee, 2014. TR Ericsson (American, b. 1972). Chromogenic

print; 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shaheen Gallery: Modern and Contemporary Art. © TR Ericsson.