



DRIVING FORCES

Meet Artist TR Ericsson

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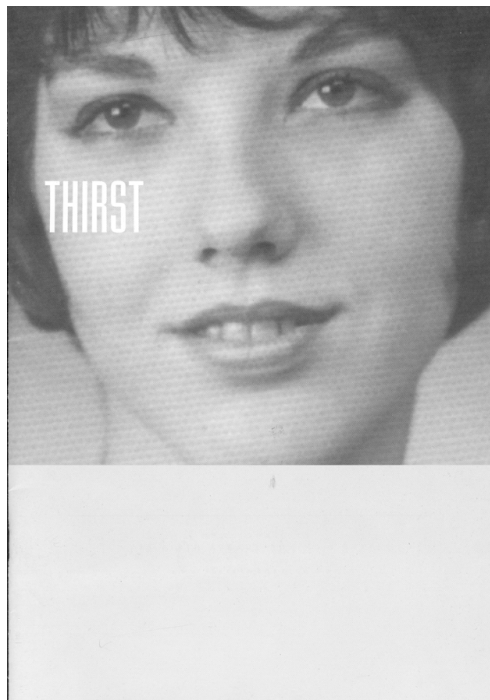
TR ERICSSON, CALIFORNIA SKY (1963), 2020/21, VODKA, RESIN AND METALLIC SILKSCREEN INK ON CRADLED GESSOED PANEL, 60 X 84 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

TR Ericsson (*1972, Ohio) creates a deeply personal narrative through his art, utilizing mixed mediums that include painting, photography, sculpture, installations, audio, video, and text. His works explore his complex relationship with his mother, including her life, her struggles, and her suicide. Ericsson's distinctive printing techniques incorporate materials such as nicotine, alcoholic cocktails and funerary ashes, lending a raw, visceral quality to his creations.

YOUR SERIES 'CRACKLE & DRAG' IS INCREDIBLY PERSONAL AND TOUCHES ON THEMES OF LOVE, INTIMACY, AND LOSS, ESPECIALLY FOLLOWING YOUR MOTHER'S SUICIDE IN 2003. COULD YOU SHARE HOW YOU NAVIGATE THE EMOTIONAL AND CREATIVE CHALLENGES IN TURNING SUCH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES INTO ART?



The work was never challenging for me to make, not emotionally challenging, its been a comfort to me. Although it has been a complex and lengthy process, evolving for now over twenty years. Before I started working the way I do now I was a painter, painting mostly from life. Nothing about what I was doing then was personal other than the fact that it was me doing it. The paintings I made were descriptive more than expressive. The idea was to approach a subject and paint it as well as I could. Nothing more. I was living in New York after art school and I soon discovered contemporary art and began to see how artists did make personal work, or socially concerned work, or art about art, it seemed like anything was possible, which was an exciting new realization. But while my understanding of art was expanding there were more troubling developments unfolding back home in Ohio, the place I'd left. People I loved were aging, getting sicker, dying. There was a growing disconnect between my work and my personal life. I was becoming dissatisfied, even disgusted with painting. The weight of history, the objective and abstract approach to making a painting, the technical complexity and pursuit of a singular style all felt like a private struggle that had nothing to do with what was going on in my life. It all felt wrong. While grieving, at first, the loss of my grandmother, I started looking at old snapshots of her and became increasingly bewitched by photography. I started painting from the photographs and then stopped painting all together. The photographs by themselves seemed more interesting to me than the paintings I did. I turned my attention to making these small, fragile, relevant only to me, snapshots into works of art and I started doing that by self-publishing a magazine. I titled it Thirst Magazine, a bi-annual publication of desire. The magazine was a container, a place to put things and explore new ideas. I put an image of my mother on the cover of the first issue and filled the magazine with whatever I was reading or thinking or feeling. I was beginning to establish a deeply personal and existential approach to art. After I printed the fifth issue my mother died suddenly and unexpectedly and for a moment everything stopped.





TR ERICSSON, STUDIO PORTRAIT BY FIELD STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY, 2022, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

I grew up in Ohio and started listening to Paul Westerberg when he was still playing with the band The Replacements. The Replacements came out of Minneapolis, in the deeper midwest, but the sensibility was as much Ohio as Minnesota. The Replacements were unpredictable. Some of their songs were emotional and moving and some were as raucous and belligerent as any hard core punk band. People who loved the band loved that unevenness. The same high school girlfriend who introduced me to Sylvia Plath also loved Paul Westerberg and The Replacements, she had an emotional depth and angst to her that Westerberg's songs created a platform for, the same way Sylvia Plath's poems did. Before Westerberg wrote Crackle and Drag, the song about Plath, he wrote a chilling song called "The Ledge". The song was controversial because the "boy" in the song commits suicide and remains, "unapologetic and unredeemed." A lot of people, narrowly and shallowly understood the song to be pro suicide, it was not. The song doesn't solve the problem of the kid's suicide, it gives the kid space and expresses what it's like to be at the edge like that and even go over the edge. That's what's remarkable about the song, Paul Westerberg got it, he accepts the kid for who he is and where he is on that ledge and in doing that the song becomes a love song, a deeply compassionate, love song. Getting with and grasping the suffering, depression and anxiety embedded in our lives and other peoples lives is where the real hope and healing begins. Punk music and punk culture was a great discovery for my friends and I growing up, you could just be dissatisfied, and pissed off and nothing more, you could express non belonging and leave it at that. But we all brought a certain sophistication to it too, mainly through reading. There were a lot of old used bookstores around then. My grandfather had a bookstore he ran out of his house. I'd escape into the upstairs rooms where most of the books were and lose myself in stories and poems and art, it was amazing to have had that.

GIVEN YOUR WORK'S DEEPLY PERSONAL NATURE AND ITS REFLECTION ON MEMORY AND LOSS, HOW DO YOU MANAGE THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC EXPRESSION? WHAT GUIDES YOUR DECISIONS ON WHAT TO REVEAL OR CONCEAL?

At first I was reticent. I think I was trying to soften the heavier truths I was skirting around. I give my wife Rose a lot of credit for pressing me to go further and reveal more. We got together just as I was beginning to put things out there more and her input was crucial. She's a nurse and sees people in their lives at their



resonates for others.



TR ERICSSON, 57 YEARS, 2024 (ON GOING), OIL ON LINEN, EACH 10 X 8 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

YOUR EXPLORATION OF LOSS INTERTWINES WITH A UNIQUE APPROACH TO THE MATERIALITY OF MEMORIES. CAN YOU DISCUSS THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE MATERIAL AND MEMORY IN YOUR CREATIONS, AND HOW THIS SHAPES THE SELECTION OF MEDIUMS?

I wanted the works to not only visualize the personal narratives, but for the medium to bring forth and carry the story too. Oil paint, or graphite has a well known history in art, lipstick, not so much. To me the unusual material choices are not clever, or arbitrary, they link to the story I'm telling, or to the portrait I'm making in the most urgent and authentic way. That all began early on, a few years after my mother died I was offered a solo show in New York. I decided to do a portrait of her, but before I started I set a rule for myself, I wouldn't use traditional art materials to make the work. I would use only the materials that surrounded her at the end of her life. I thought of materials I associated with her, her smoking and drinking, her life working as a secretary in law offices. I worked it out as I went. The rule to not use traditional material guided the process. How do you make images and objects out of smoke, or alcohol, etc. Which as time went on led to more complex approaches and finally to embedding her ashes in silkscreened photographic images. For me, honesty is the guiding principle, if it feels right, or necessary to do a thing, I'll do it, the rule is authenticity. Everything has to fit together as the expression of what the thing is, or who the person was. These techniques, if you can call them that, were logical to me in that what I began to feel like I was doing was conjuring forth a presence. You can't just say who someone was, or show who they were, you have to make people feel them there, their voice and mannerisms. People have a feel, like places do, and I wanted to make work that had a feel like that, take a photographic image and imbue it with the subjectivity of the material choices the person in the photograph made in terms of where they were and what they did to themselves or put around themselves, or in the case of the ashes, what became of them, their gone-ness and my memory hauntedness.



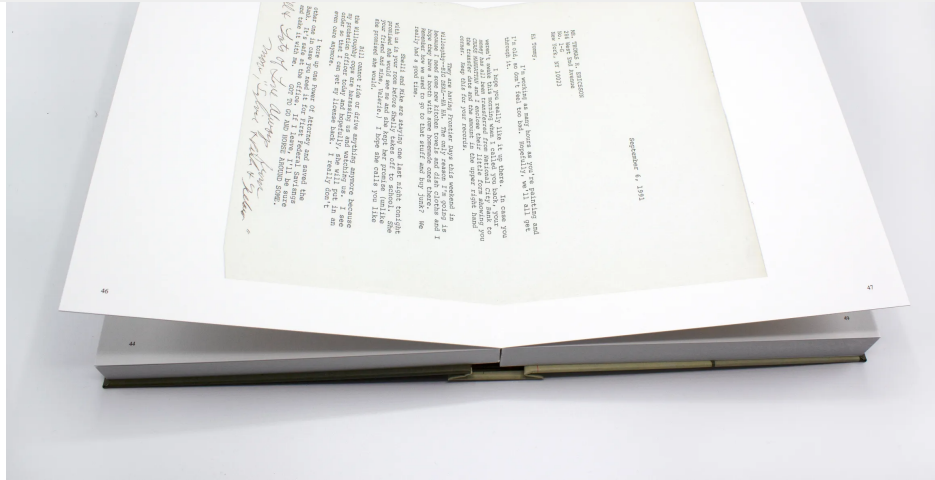


TR ERICSSON, TOM & SUE, 2022, GRAPHITE, RESIN, FUNERARY ASH, LONG ISLAND ICE TEA, CIGARETTE BURNS ON RAW BELGIAN LINEN, 76 X 94 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

WOULD YOU SAY YOUR ART IS AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND YOUR MOTHER, AND IF SO, HOW HAS IT ENHANCED YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF HER LIFE AND PERSONAL DECISIONS?

At first my work was not an attempt to understand her, it was only an attempt to understand losing her, my own grief. Understanding her came later. But I now consider that to be the most relevant part of the work I'm doing. But it's impossible, knowing someone. How can we say we understand someone? We really can't. It's always partial. The beauty and meaning is in attempting to understand someone, persisting to understand them. And to locate ourselves within these relationships we have with people we are condemned to not fully understand. That's where compassion begins, knowing we don't know. I think the best approach I had to making work that felt most purely to be coming from her, my mother, and with as little interpretation from me as possible, were my recent letter books, showed first at Harlan Levey Projects in 2022. I made seven volumes containing every letter I had from her and every voice recording I had of her. All that was left of her voice almost twenty years after her death was what that work was. My contribution was the design and the wrapper, each letter was scanned to its original size and carefully cropped with each fold or tear in tact. Who she was is in those letters more than anywhere else. The art is bringing that forward. Bringing her forward. But it's not about knowing her, it's about creating a space for her. As I get older I think this is the most relevant metaphor of my work, it's not what it is, that counts, it's what it points to, an effort to be more vulnerable, more unknowing, to dedicate your life to what seems not to matter, but does. I think there's something swimming in what my mother's death provoked out of me that for all its personal privacy does have a social and worldly relevance, though I'd rather not clumsily define it here, I think it's there.





TR ERICSSON, ALL MY LOVE ALWAYS NO MATTER WHAT (DETAIL), 2021, DIGITAL OFFSET, THE BOX SET CONTAINS SEVEN VOLUMES HOUSED IN A PLEXI SLIPCASE, OVERALL BOX DIMENSIONS 12 1/4 X 15 X 10 1/4 INCHES, EACH BOOK IS 110 PAGES, 8 1/4 X 10 1/4 X 2 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

YOUR WORK HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED AND INCLUDED IN COLLECTIONS OF MAJOR INSTITUTIONS LIKE THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AND THE DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART. HOW HAS THIS RECOGNITION AFFECTED YOUR APPROACH TO ARTMAKING AND THE THEMES YOU EXPLORE?

All of it has a deepening effect on me, it keeps me going. We all thrive on approval from the time we're children and in some ways it is sort of childish. The drive to feel relevant and be celebrated in the world for whatever peculiar thing it is that you do. That all gets weird. But the greater thing that's achieved, or gained from the approval and partnering with institutions, peers and partners is the way it opens the work up to a larger audience, the impact it has on other people and the way it pushes the work forward and makes me, the artist, go deeper into the work. I feel like I owe it to anyone whose ever believed in my work to constantly strive to be better and go further. As I already mentioned with Rose and Harlan other people's insights enhance the work, each curator, collector, or gallerist I've ever worked with, has contributed either a little or a lot to the quality and thoughtfulness of my work and for that I'm very grateful for the career I have.





TR ERICSSON, ANGEL OF THE MORNING, 2021/22, OIL ON LINEN, 78 X 60 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

AS YOUR SERIES 'CRACKLE & DRAG' CONTINUES TO EVOLVE, ARE THERE NEW THEMES OR MEDIUMS YOU ARE INTERESTED IN EXPLORING? HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF THIS DEEPLY PERSONAL PROJECT?

I'm always developing new approaches. The most surprising thing to happen is that I started painting again. I'm still wrestling with photographic images but I'm painting again, and it's wonderful. I'm freer and have more control over myself (when I want to) and I now think about painting very differently than I did when I was younger. I've noticed while painting photographs how my memory blends with these static and factual and purely descriptive images. I recently painted my mother as a child but the painting looks different than the photograph, she looks older, my clearer memory of her older self blends with the photographic image of her as a child and something else emerges there visually. I'm currently making a series of small scale portraits of my mother, 57 of them, one for each year of her life.

I've also for the first time devoted myself regularly, daily, to writing. I struggled for years with how little the images I made revealed their hidden narratives. It was only in conversations around the work, or in interviews like this, or press, or catalogs with museums and galleries that the stories came out but it was still all so partial and fragmentary. I'm working on a multi volume novel now that brings all the stories into a single work made up of numerous literary and graphic forms. I'm using the old timeless tools to tell the old timeless stories and it feels great.





TR ERICSSON, TOM & SUE (SOLO EXHIBITION), 2022, INSTALLATION VIEW, HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

WITH AN UPCOMING SHOW AT ART BRUSSELS (25 – 28 APRIL) WITH HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS, COULD YOU OFFER AN INSIGHT INTO THE WORKS THAT WILL BE DISPLAYED?

Harlan Levey Projects has a rare probity and depth in their approach to presenting artists and their work. Harlan and Winnie have built a program founded on the most rigorous investigations of what each artist explores. They are both as much a part of their own roster creatively and conceptually as each artist is. But they don't control the artists or their visions what they do is steer and guide the artists to their best and most revealing work. Their approach is unique and unselfish, it's hard to accurately explain. I say all that to introduce the Brussels booth concept because it was Harlan who suggested tracking back through my life and career to create a coherent presentation of it's over all trajectory, which in many ways is what the work I do is all about. Tracking time. I can't believe we pulled it off in such a small space, but we did. There will be significant examples on display from each stage of my career up to and including my most recent work. Thirst Magazine will be presented in its entirety for the first time along with other key works consisting of printed matter, an important cocktail painting and a monumental work on muslin are also included, as are the first works in my project 57 years, which have never been shown before.



TR ERICSSON, THIRST MAGAZINE, 2001 – 2009, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

YOU WILL BE RELEASING A NEW BOOK WITH TBW BOOKS THIS SUMMER. COULD YOU GIVE US AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK AND WHAT READERS CAN EXPECT FROM ITS CONTENT?

This has been a very meaningful development for me. Paul Schiek at TBW was given a copy of my Crackle & Drag book and was immediately drawn to the nicotine works. He connected to the work through his own upbringing and through his mother. The TBW book will focus exclusively on the nicotine works. I've loved TBW Books for a long time, for as long as I've been going to the NY Artist Book Fair I've always lingered longest at the TBW table, the books are gorgeously made and the content is always real and deep and human. I made the nicotine works of course but the book is all Paul and all TBW, and I love that. This is the amazing work that a gallery does or an independent publisher like TBW, they make a home for artists and their ideas, which also makes me think of my mother. The warm way she welcomed people into her home, but it was more than that, she really got people, and enjoyed them for who they were. Her parents were brutally judgmental and she lived her life determined to not be that way. And she wasn't. She listened to you, and suffered with you. And it drained her. She told me once, not in an angry way, but in a sympathetic way, that I didn't know what love was, she meant I didn't get how you lose yourself in loving someone. I was a young man when she said that, and she was right, now I'm a father to a young person myself and I at least now know what she meant. In terms of living that way, I keep trying. And I learn from people like my wife Rose and Harlan and Winnie and Paul, all of whom seem to me to be a lot like my mother in that same inviting and platforming way, creating a warm and inviting space for people to tell their stories and in the case of the gallery and TBW Books sharing those stories with so many other people. That inviting-ness and openness and exploratory approach makes for great art and great books. If you don't know them dial into Harlan Levey Projects and TBW Books, incredible things have been happening in both places for a long time and there's no end in sight.





TR ERICSSON, BRIDE, 2019, NICOTINE ON PANEL, 60 X 48 INCHES,
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS