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## Tragedy & Triumph

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### Transformer Station's "Crackle & Drag" provides an intimate portrait of the artist's troubled mother

By Jacqueline Mitchell

Artist TR Ericsson was lying on the couch in his Willoughby home listening to the radio when he first heard the song "Crackle and Drag" by Paul Westerberg of the Replacements. The rocker's tribute to troubled writer Sylvia Plath references "Edge," one of the final poems Plath penned before her she took her life at age 30: "Staring from her hood of bone. She is used to this sort of thing. Her blacks crackle and drag."

But the haunting words also reminded Ericsson of someone else: his mother, Susan Bartlett Robinson, who at 57 committed suicide in 2003 in Concord Township. The lyrics gave birth to the name of his new exhibit, running May 23 to Aug. 22 at the Cleveland Museum of Art at Transformer Station. "Crackle & Drag" combines photography, sculptures and cinema collected and created by the artist to create an intimate portrait of his mother.

"It's the story of the artist's mother and her somewhat tragic life, but a life that also had great moments of love and affection between the two of them," says Barbara Tannenbaum, CMA's curator of photography. "It ranges in mood from images of her as a young woman – she was quite beautiful – to films that are much bleaker, showing her later in life."

People were drawn to Susan. Many of the children growing up in Ericsson's neighborhood reached out to her for advice.

"She seems to have been a very extraordinary person in terms of her ability to reach out to others," says Tannenbaum. "And she's an amazing model for the camera, intriguing and seductive. You sense a fire and a spirit beneath."

This is where the word "crackle" comes into play, says Tannenbaum.

"There was an energy and vitality to the artist's mother, almost like lighting or electricity – it's attracting, but it can also harm you," she says.

Susan also had a darker side. The word "drag" might refer to her depression and state of mind. She was an alcoholic and suffered from multiple sclerosis, and her death was most likely an intentional drug overdose, explains Tannenbaum.

"It's like most lives, which have moments of great joy and moments of great trials and tribulations," she says. "The exhibit addresses many issues of society through the lens of a single life."

Ericsson uses various media in his exhibit, ranging from a porcelain sculpture of an axe to traditional photographs. He creates manipulations of family photographs remade in graphite, ash and nicotine. Viewers will also see objects from his grandfather's house, a glass sculpture containing human breath, and a series of film.

"He's an artist who can speak in many different media," says Tannenbaum. "Many of the works use the photos as their starting point, whether that's a found family photograph or one the artist took himself. Some of the most fascinating and unique works are the drawings made from nicotine. His mother smoked quite a bit. Her dining room was just covered with smoke."

The nicotine prints, such as "Baby Shoes," come from Susan's photo albums and appear as if they were smoked into the paper, faded with no sharp edges.

"Here's this poison that pollutes your lungs, and something poisonous is used in an act of creation and memory," Tannenbaum says.

A large granite slab, titled "Thanksgiving Day," sits in the exhibit, engraved with Susan's harrowing yet humorous account of celebrating Thanksgiving with her family.

"It's almost like a reflecting pool, but also like a gravestone," says Tannenbaum. "It's a hilarious account of the dysfunctional family dynamics that are all too often revealed on holidays in many of our families."

There's also a series of 150 "Crackle and Drag" 'zines that reveal glimpses of the family's history, each volume providing a different insight into family life or a moment that illuminates the family's story.

Ericsson's art tells the saga of three generations of a Northeast Ohio family. In addition to Susan, the works examine the lives of his grandfather (Susan's father) and the artist himself.

A print titled "American Greetings," made of graphite, resin and funerary ash on panel, shows two grinning children at a birthday party, surrounded by cake and balloons. The boy in the photograph is Ericsson, and though it looks like he's attending a fun celebration, the image is actually staged. The print is based on a photo Ericsson's father took while working as an artist at American Greetings.

"Dark lines come through from squeegeeing the panel, and you get a sense that it's almost being canceled out, and it is, in fact, fiction," says Tannenbaum.

Another photograph from Ericsson's childhood, "Scarecrow," shows the artist dressed in a scarecrow costume with an eerie, masked jack-o-lantern head.

"You don't see his face," says Tannenbaum. "You have this sense of the acting, of costuming, of trying to see beneath that but having those efforts frustrated."

Ericsson's history with the Cleveland Museum of Art dates back to his childhood, when his grandmother would bring him for visits. In high school, he decided he wanted to become an artist, and he made trips to the museum by himself.

"Here's an artist that, while growing up, was nurtured by the Cleveland Museum of Art, and now is showing there," says Tannenbaum. "It really comes full circle." **CV**



Sue, 2014. TR Ericsson (American, b. 1972). Graphite, resin, and funerary ash on panel; 50 x 33½ in. Courtesy of the artist. © TR Ericsson.



St. Patrick's Day, 1982, 2015. TR Ericsson (American, b. 1972). Digital inkjet print; 24 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist. © TR Ericsson.