

**ArtSeen**

# TR Ericsson: *Pale Fires*

By **Emily Chun**

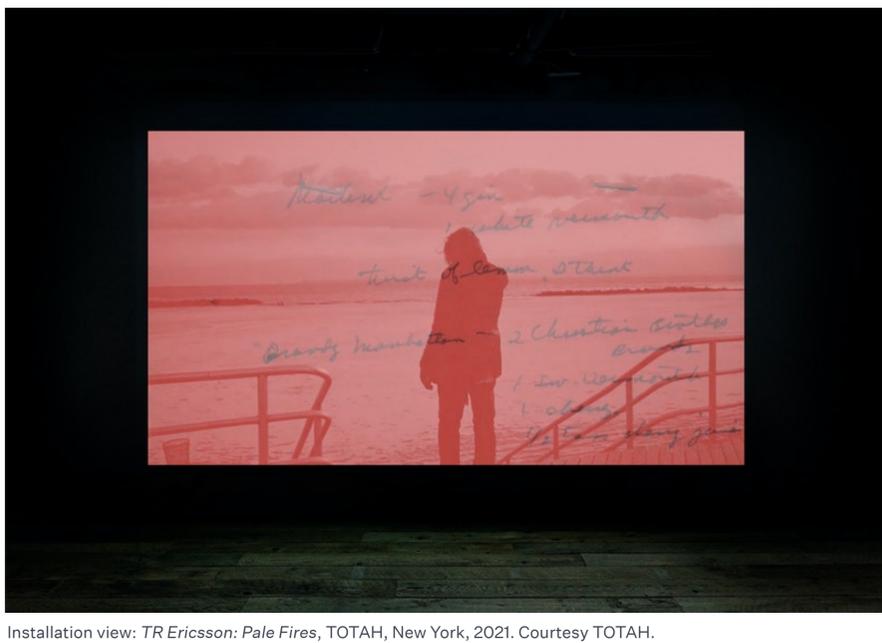
After Roland Barthes’s mother, whom he loved deeply and referred to as his “inner law,” passed away, she began to frequently appear in his dreams. But, he revealed, it was never *quite* her: “I dream about her,” he wrote, “I do not dream *her*.”<sup>1</sup> This aesthetics of *almost*—the way the specter of a dead loved one lingers seemingly within the bounds of representation but remains ever-elusive, gone—plays out in TR Ericsson’s solo exhibition at TOTAH, which constructs a tender portrait of his mother who died by suicide in 2003 at the age of 57. Using family artifacts from his Northeastern Ohio heritage as source materials, Ericsson imbues the photo-conceptualism of his works with a haunted sensibility that memorializes, without mythologizing, his mother and the post-industrial American life in which she existed.



TR Ericsson, *Sue 63 (Nicotine)*, 2020–21. Nicotine on gessoed panel, 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy TOTAH.

ON VIEW  
TOTAH Gallery  
February 11 – April 25, 2021  
New York, NY

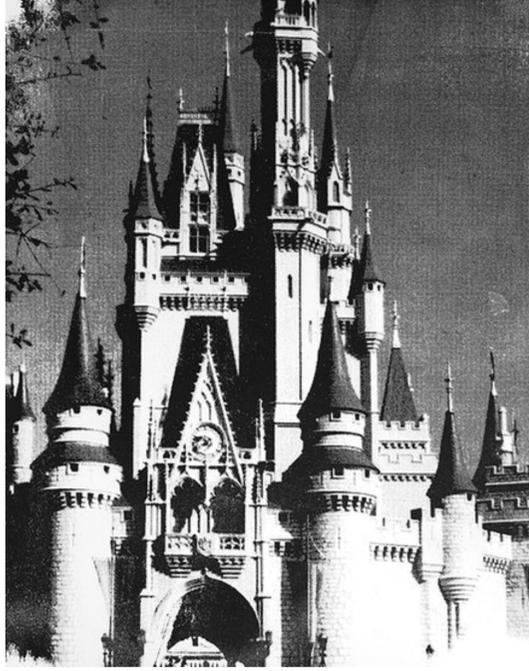
Central to the show is the black-and-white, 46-minute film *Crackle & Drag* (2015), which documents the life of the artist’s mother using archival photographs, voice recordings, letters, and original footage. In lieu of a coherent temporality, the only linearity in the film stems from the voicemails that she left for her son in the ’90s and early 2000s, which become increasingly despairing in tone as she struggles with addiction and poverty. Her voicemails grant us access to an interiority and emotional immediacy that bypass the oft-ambiguous open-endedness of the visual. Towards the end of the film, we see the artist sifting through his family archive, self-reflexively calling attention to the process of the film’s own making, à la Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). But unlike Vertov, who was interested in attuning the viewer to the means of the collectivist production of film, we see Ericsson making sense of his own making, laying bare the mechanisms of a filial archaeology.



Installation view: *TR Ericsson: Pale Fires*, TOTAH, New York, 2021. Courtesy TOTAH.

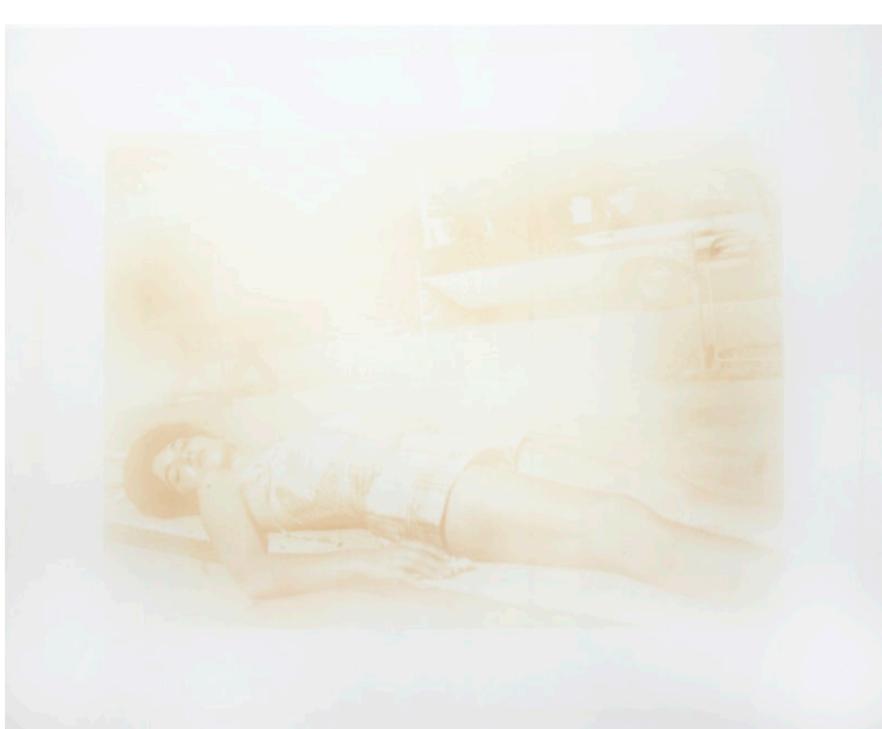
Recalling Hollis Frampton’s film *nostalgia* (1971) in its burning of photographs to court narrative, *Crackle & Drag*’s motif of fire is informed by Derrida’s theory of the cinder as a haunting, visible remainder and sign of something that is no longer visible, of a now-absent presence. For Ericsson, smoke is a generational inheritance, an indexical force that quietly tethers all his childhood memories: tobacco smoke stained his mother’s floral wallpaper and fireplace smoke perpetually permeated his grandfather’s house. When they went to McDonald’s together for lunch, the artist recalls, people would “smell the fire on [his grandfather] and ask each other if they smelled something burning.” The tobacco-stained walls—and the unrepresentable but felt presence of smoke in his childhood—serve as the origin for his works rendered in nicotine.

Ericsson created *Sue 63 (Nicotine)* (2020–21) by letting cigarette smoke smolder and drift upward to filter and stain the panel. The result is a hazy, poetic portrait of his mother that smuggles her presence via a tenuous resemblance to a Nefertiti-like funerary bust. For other photo-based works such as *Magic Kingdom* (2013) and *California Sun (1963)* (2021–21), the artist mixed his mother’s funerary ashes with resin and graphite to create silkscreen images of childhood memories. The seemingly quotidian subject matter of these works—Disney’s Cinderella Castle in the Magic Kingdom, his sun-tanning mother—belie their emotionally fraught process of scraping her remains in the urn, sifting them through a strainer, and sprinkling the resultant ashes over the surface of the substrate. Tiny bone fragments scratch the screen and register marks on the surface. “It’s a terrible process,” Ericsson says, “I do feel like I’m crossing a line, something unsacred about doing it, but then profoundly sacred in the end having done it.”



TR Ericsson, *Magic Kingdom*, 2013. Graphite, resin, and funerary ashes on panel, 14 x 11 inches. Courtesy TOTAH.

Ericsson wrestles with the viability of representation in the wake of such tremendous loss: after his mother’s suicide, he wanted to “make a portrait of her but without a visual representation of her.” By literally incorporating her bodily remains into her portraits—collapsing the signifier and the signified—these ash works do not simply represent his mother but also question what loss does to representation. Are we bearing witness to his mother’s life or to its unrepresentability?



TR Ericsson, *California Sun (1963)*, 2020–21. Nicotine on gessoed panel, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy TOTAH.

In doing so, Ericsson conceives of the archive not as a series of historically bound facts and images but as a vulnerable metabolization of how things become memory, either evolving into anecdote or remaining stuck between anecdote and denarrativized affect. Although the show is ostensibly centered around a singular event—his mother’s life and suicide—this event exceeds and outlives its eventness to constellate larger subtexts about post-industrial Rust Belt America and the desire to flee it, the protracted afterlife of loss, and the brutal facticity of maternal love: the film ends with his mother’s words —“It’s your mother”—before cutting to black.

1. Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 66.

**Contributor**

Emily Chun  
**Emily Chun** is a writer based in New York City.