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ArtSeen

TR Ericsson's *Letters from Home*

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By Nicholas Heskes



Installation view: TR Ericsson: *Letters from Home*, TOTAH, New York, 2023.
Courtesy the artist and TOTAH.

TOTAH

Letters from Home

September 7–November 4, 2023

New York

Much has already been said about *Crackle & Drag*, TR Ericsson's ongoing tribute to his mother Sue as it has passed through various iterations since her suicide in 2003. *Crackle & Drag* is also the title of an early video Ericsson made of his mother's archive. Its title is drawn from Paul Westerberg's song "Crackle and Drag," which itself is an homage to the lines "The woman is perfected / Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment...Her blacks crackle and drag," from Sylvia Plath's poem "Edge." Different versions of the project have encompassed various mediums and forms from the aforementioned video to painting, printmaking, book art, and sculpture. *Letters from Home* is the latest of these.

Ericsson's emphasis on Sue's own words and letters is notable in the present installation. All his text reproductions have been drawn from an enormous archive of notes, letters, and recordings left to him after her death. In 2021, Ericsson compiled this cache into a series of seven published volumes titled *All My Love Always No Matter What* to allow Sue's own words tell the story of her rise and fall. But unlike the collected letters, which tell a more complete story, individual letters by themselves, as Ericsson represents them here, only resonate with the silence that follows them.



TR Ericsson, *What a scream I am, MAY 1972*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 10 × 8 inches.
Courtesy the artist and TOTAH.

The fragmentary qualities of the two main text pieces of the show, *Thanksgiving Day* (2008) and *"WELL, THE WEEK REALLY STARTED WITH A BANG!"* (September 17, 1991) (2023), juxtapose the more pictorial works. *Thanksgiving Day*—an engraving in granite installed on the floor—reads like an epitaph to the circumstances of a family event in four acts. Sue chronicles a banal but venomous series of conflicts between family members. What would normally be forgettable now has an air of great importance after being engraved in stone. I found myself reading closely for details that could give a fuller picture of Sue and Ericsson's home life, though I know the picture will never be complete.

"WELL, THE WEEK REALLY STARTED WITH A BANG!" (September 17, 1991) is notable because Sue's own handwriting is directly represented in the enlarged, silkscreen triptych, whereas most of Ericsson's previous reproductions of her words were from typewritten original sources. To put it in Sue's own words from a different letter: "I am typing this letter, of course, because you probably won't be able to read my handwriting..." Nevertheless, in *"WELL, THE WEEK REALLY STARTED WITH A BANG!"* (September 17, 1991) we see Sue recount, in her own penmanship, a story about money owed to her and how she can't file for bankruptcy because she would lose her "personal injury case." She will get a new job "downtown," buy a new Toyota and maybe give the old one to Ericsson, maybe save it for "Bill" to drive when he gets his license. She seems desperate to leave wherever she is: "As soon as I get your check I will send away for my license. Can we come & live with you-haha! Grandpa is driving me nuts! Ever since I quit, he's been a wreck."



TR Ericsson, *Day is Done*, 2022. Graphite, carbonized soot, resin and funerary ashes on linen, 70 × 100 inches. Courtesy the artist and TOTAH.

Aside from the text pieces, *The Fireplace* (2023), *Day is Done* (2022) and "What a Scream I am", *MAY 1972* (2023) stand out among other paintings and prints. In the haunting oil painting of a photograph of Sue, "What a Scream I am", *MAY 1972*, the artist's mother shines past the camera. She looks happy, but the way the image is cropped just around her face, along with its rendering in paint, imbues it with an eerie quality maybe absent from the original photograph. Something about the shape of her mouth, how her lips are slightly pulled downward at the edges makes what is almost a smile look closer to a cry of laughter. Her expression complements the wild, eccentric, and endearing tone of her letters. On the other side of the gallery *The Fireplace* and *Day is Done* depict collections of mementos like books, photographs, trinkets, sculptures, mirrors, plates, wall decorations, surrounding, in *The Fireplace*, a family hearth. Both mixed media screen prints (on canvas melded with bone powder) appear to be collaged from different photographs, each element made discrete by its disjointed value relative to the objects around it. The result is two highly stylized pictures that carry psychological weight only because they seem excessive, like a junkpile of memories.

There is an insistence in Ericsson's work that the materials reflect some reality of the content represented, and that the copy of the memento carries something of its origin. It should not be surprising then that Ericsson's medium of choice is Sue's ashes. And in past exhibitions like *Tom and Sue* (2022) at Harlan Levey Projects, and *Pale Fires* (2021), also at Totah, Ericsson has made use of these as well as other materials associated with Sue, like nicotine and long island iced tea cocktails, among other things. But this is the stuff of which family is made: ashes, bones, objects, and smells. All the graves of everyone that has ever been loved and the boxes of paper and keepsakes left behind.

Contributor

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Nicholas Heskes is an artist, writer, and translator.