



"Pink and Yellow"

Art Review: TR Ericsson at BCA Center

By **AMY LILLY**

One way to approach Brooklyn artist TR Ericsson's multimedia installation at the BCA Center is to consider what it is not. "Crackle & Drag: Film Index" is not the kind of exhibit that radiates instant accessibility. Instead of individual works of finished craft, the show is an "archive of personal artifacts" that are "deteriorating," according to an introductory wall panel. (The accompanying catalog shows 379 artifacts, more than the exhibit contains.)

There's something utterly familiar about this archive: Its vintage photographs and antique letter openers look like the collected memorabilia of any middle-class American family. But "Crackle & Drag" presents no obvious narrative, or even a chronology.

One almost doesn't know where to begin looking. At the huge slab of polished black granite lying on the floor, engraved from top to bottom with the contents of a letter? At the wall-mounted arrangement of "carbon stained" antique objects? Should one watch the two films being projected side by side on the opposite wall first? Or check out the 'zines full of old photos, displayed in vitrines in the back room?

"Crackle & Drag" might be approached as a series of connecting clues, beginning with its title. An explanatory panel says the show is "a haunting portrait of the artist's mother" that's named for a phrase in the final line of Sylvia Plath's 1963 poem "Edge." "Her blacks crackle and drag," wrote the poet in what some have judged to be her covert suicide note. (BCA provides copies of the poem on request.)

The wall-mounted collection of blackened found objects — "poker," "axe," "Playboy Bunny license plate" and so on — belonged to one Lynn M. Robinson (1918-2001), according to a label. Lynn is presumably the man standing on a Harvard dorm roof in a framed newspaper clipping.

He was the artist's maternal grandfather, one learns from reading the letter engraved on the floor slab. The letter, which appears to be to the artist from his mother, is transformed into a funerary object that echoes the wall-mounted items' carbon staining in both color and associative meaning: grave marker, cremation.

Ericsson's mother was Susan B. O'Donnell, one finally learns from her death certificate. That item appears twice in the show: in the series of stills that make up the projected movies, and as one of several covers the artist made for vinyl dub-plate recordings of his mother's voice. According to the certificate, the Ohio resident committed suicide in 2003 by an "overdose of drugs." She was 57.

BCA curator DJ Hellerman, who wrote the catalog's introduction and gives group tours of the show, has watched Ericsson's work progress over the past decade. The artist-archivist has mounted different iterations of the show while sorting through the material in the years since his mother's death, including ones at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland. In Hellerman's opinion, the BCA show is the most successful yet. "For the slow [viewer], all of this work carries itself," he opines.

Hellerman first encountered the artist, he says, while working as registrar in the art-acquisitions department of Progressive Insurance in Cleveland, where both men grew up. At that time, Hellerman helped the company acquire Ericsson's 2005 work "Everyday Is Like Sunday" — a white porcelain sculpture in the shape of an ax printed with a blue toile pattern. The item came in an edition of three; one hangs in "Crackle & Drag."

For Hellerman, "Everyday" represents the exhibit in microcosm. He points out that the show is not just about the artist's mother but about three generations — grandfather, mother, son. The porcelain ax is a duplicate of Lynn's ax; its toile pattern came from Susan's curtains; and the piece itself is the work of Ericsson, who left his Cleveland family behind when he moved to New York.

That move incurred some guilt, the artist reveals in a phone conversation, the weight of which is represented in the 750-pound granite letter. The letter, in which his mother recorded Thanksgiving Day family dynamics in the form of a play, served to remind him of his absence. "I was in New York not just for an art career but to escape something," Ericsson admits.

But the letter is also "hilarious, outrageous," he adds. Likewise, though prompted by a mother's suicide, "Crackle & Drag" should be viewed "as an affirmation," Ericsson insists, a celebration of the lives of ordinary Midwesterners. "So much of our culture comes out of New York or LA," comments the artist, whose work has been collected at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art and the Cleveland Museum of Art, among other institutions. "I tried to insert this middlebrow, middle-class culture into the narrative" to show that "these lives are really potent and relevant," he goes on.

They are also disappearing before the viewer's eyes. Yellowing photos contain crumple marks and scratches; those dub plates further deteriorate with each playing; and most of the "film index" will be subsumed in a film the artist is making — the next iteration of Ericsson's archive.

Hellerman highlights the exhibit's stills and quotes from experimental films that have influenced the artist, including Chris Marker's 28-minute, black-and-white "La Jetée." Film for the artist is an "interesting language," Hellerman suggests, that allows him to "let go of the static, fixed object" — fixed, that is, in time.

In a beautifully considered essay for the catalog, titled "American Gothic," art reviewer Arnaud Gerspacher deems a merely biographical reading of Ericsson's exhibit "facile." "Crackle & Drag" is also, at the very least, about time. The disappeared and disappearing past that an archive attempts to preserve, Gerspacher writes, is also "continually haunting the present and future."

Hellerman agrees. "When I lost my grandpa, I realized this. When you lose something, or something ends — a prom, or a marriage — that thing is never over. It comes forward with you."

"Crackle & Drag: Film Index" by TR Ericsson, BCA Gallery in Burlington. Through April 12. Screening of experimental films related to the exhibit, Friday, Feb. 28, 6:30 to 9 p.m., on BCA's second floor. Free. burlingtoncityarts.org

The original print version of this article was headlined "Glass Appeal"