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Story:

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Life Story

T.R. Ericsson unveils Thanksgiving this month at the Sculpture Center and shows how common artifacts of our lives and relationships can be some of the most telling.

A thin, jet-black slab of granite, 5 feet by 6 feet, lying flat — T.R. Ericsson's Thanksgiving installation at the Sculpture Center — is strikingly similar to the thousands of headstones located a few hundred feet away in Lake View Cemetery.

"You can't do something in that space without being aware of the huge amount of acreage of dead humans next door," Ericsson says of the Sculpture Center, which will unveil his newest piece Nov. 7.

Like the neighboring headstones, Ericsson's work is engraved, although not with names, dates and epitaphs. Instead, it is inscribed with the contents of a letter his mother wrote one November in the early 1990s, serving as both a memorial to her and the banalities of life.

This letter, and many others written after Ericsson fled Cleveland for New York City and art school, covers the family's petty squabbles in incredible detail. To an 18-year-old Ericsson, they were awful and hilarious at the same time.

"[The letters] pushed me more firmly away from home," says the artist, who now primarily resides in New York, "but I knew that is where I was from, and there was no escaping that."

Much has changed in Ericsson's life since his mother sent that holiday letter. His mother took her own life in 2003, prompting the Willoughby native's return, at least on a part-time basis.

Now 36 and the father of a 9-month-old girl, Ericsson says his homecoming has helped him appreciate the seemingly insignificant pieces of our lives.

"These details of our lives are everything," he says. "Inside of them we find redemption, dreams. When you take something as unmemorialized as an answering machine message or a fragment that was never meant to be intended as legacy, in some strange way, it tells a better story than anything else would."

It's the idea that storytelling isn't reserved for orators or writers but is open to visual artists as well that drives Ericsson these days. His work has a narrative quality to it, whether through the presence of a letter written nearly two decades ago or a series of self-portraits (Narcissus, an exhibition of Ericsson's recent graphite drawings, will open at Cleveland's Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art gallery on Nov. 15, in conjunction with Thanksgiving).

"The thing I learned after my mother's death is that I gained some compassion," Ericsson says. "I keep returning to that in my art. This is the story I am telling, and it is revolving around that lesson I learned in a tragic time."

One thing he keeps coming back to is the gaze his mother would level at him as a boy.

"There were things that were fairly dark about her, but she had a quality of engaging a person that was so wholly unjudgemental and involved," he says. "When my daughter was a few months old, I felt myself looking at my daughter with that gaze.

"I know that will have an impact on my art. I just can't imagine how."

The Sculpture Center, 1834 E. 123rd St., Cleveland, (216) 229-6527, sculpturecenter.org.