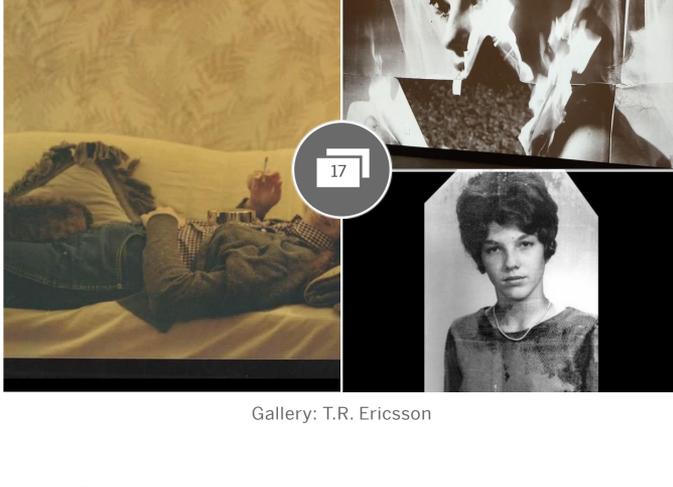


# Love, beauty and suicide in T.R. Ericsson Transformer Station show on mother's troubled life (photos)

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T.R. Ericsson



Gallery: T.R. Ericsson

By [Steven Litt, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Harrowing is one word that describes artist [T.R. Ericsson's](#) current [exhibition](#) at the [Transformer Station gallery](#) in Ohio City; the word exquisite also fits.

Organized by photography curator [Barbara Tannenbaum](#) at the [Cleveland Museum of Art](#), the show delves into the artist's 15-year exploration of the life and death of his mother, who committed suicide in 2003 at age 57 after struggling with depression, multiple sclerosis and alcoholism.

On view through Sunday, Aug. 23, the exhibition presents a compelling and portentous array of photographs, drawings, sculptures and installations, plus a 45-minute video.

All are based on raw materials including family photo albums, recorded voicemail messages, typewritten letters and even the ashes of Susan Ericsson's cremated body.

The artist used his mother's ashes to make unique silkscreen blowups of selected family photos that take on uncomfortable new layers of meaning thanks to their unconventional materials.

## Layers of narrative

Ericsson presents these and other objects in the show without labels, intensifying their mystery in a way that focuses a viewer's attention sharply.

A free booklet accompanying the exhibition provides layers of narrative and technical detail, as do the exhibition's video installation and a [voluminous monograph](#) on Ericsson's project, which includes essays by Tannenbaum and by critic and curator Arnaud Gerspacher.

Entitled "[Crackle & Drag](#)," the show takes its name from the Sylvia Plath poem "Edge," written shortly before her suicide.

As it unfolds across the show's multiple platforms, the Ericsson family story exerts a kind of gravitational force. It pulls you in like a compelling novel in which moments of crystallized and gemlike agony are sifted, focused and presented with a precise, refined elegance.

The exhibition is an important artistic event in the region because it presents the most extensive body of work yet in Cleveland by Ericsson, who should be considered one of the most prominent contemporary artists now associated with Northeast Ohio.

Ericsson, who divides his time between New York and Concord Township, has had his work collected by institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

## A sharp focus

From a curatorial viewpoint, the show is selective and focused rather than panoramic. Rather than function as a retrospective or a broad-gauged introduction, it presents a highly specific look at one strand of Ericsson's career, albeit a central one.

Given that aim, it is Susan Ericsson whose presence comes across most strongly. We see her as a young bride. We see her as a model posing provocatively in lingerie for photographs taken by her husband, who worked at American Greetings Corp. And we see her smoking a cigarette and lolling on a couch with a pair of cats like a beautiful suburban diva.

Ultimately, we see her aging, as time compresses within the show's framework and as the arc of her life closes. Or rather, we hear her.

The show's video installation presents a flood of family photos and home movie clips, overlaid with the sound of Susan Ericsson's whiskey voice preserved in recorded messages she left for her son late in her life, in which she speaks of pain and loss.

"My biggest disappointment in life was when my husband left me," she says at one point. "That was not just a disappointment, that was a devastation..."

The exhibition sets Susan Ericsson's life within the larger context of three generations of the artist's family, including the turbulent marriage of her parents, Lynn Moore Robinson and Jeanne Dorothy Heil.

## Three generations

Susan was born in Cleveland in 1946, and suffered from her parents' frequent and violent fights, according to the show's catalog. They divorced when she was 13, and her father moved to San Diego.

As we learn from the catalog, Susan left Ohio to live with her father but moved back to graduate from Willoughby South High School in 1964. By then, her father had moved back to Willoughby to live not far from his ex-wife. He got a job with Tishman Realty and Construction, and found work for his daughter as a secretary at East Ohio Gas.

Susan had a brief first marriage in 1968, followed by divorce a month later, and a quick new romance with Ericsson's father, Mike, whom she met in Cleveland later that same year.

The couple eloped in West Virginia in 1969 and moved to an apartment in Lakewood. Their life was not a happy one, according to the artist, whose notes sprinkle the catalog.

"She was beautiful and flirtatious," he writes of his mother. "My father was often infuriated by the attention she received from other men."

Like her parents, Susan and her husband also fought.

"She threatened to kill my father with a knife," Ericsson writes, adding that his mother later threatened to kill herself. She ran away but came back. She sought treatment for migraines and anxiety. And then, in 1971, she became pregnant with her only child - Tom Ericsson, now known as T.R.

The show's narrative unfolds with shots of the future artist posing in a Halloween costume, or in a St. Patrick's Day scene in which he poses in a Groucho mask next to his mother, who hikes up her skirt and partially curls her leg around his body in an uncomfortably suggestive pose.

The interplay between words and images in the show adds to its power, although fundamentally, the show's heft derives primarily from Ericsson's enormously skilled manipulation of his raw materials.

For example, as enlarged and presented by the artist, the snapshot of Susan Ericsson reclining on the couch with her two cats has the authority of the Old Master paintings that inspired the artist as a young art student.

The show's elegant aesthetics derive equally from Ericsson's immersion in traditional painting and from the history of conceptual art, including the artistic jujitsu performed by Marcel Duchamp in the "found objects" he transformed into art.

But there's nothing coy, distanced, ironic or hyper-intellectual about Ericsson's work. It is instead pervaded by a graceful, poignant and at times searing emotional realism.

That's why the show fascinates, and why it is worthy of attention, even though as an experience, it hurts.

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