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Memory and Photography: TR Ericsson's *Crackle & Drag*

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Barbara Tannenbaum, Curator of Photography at the Cleveland Museum of Art, has written a smart, warm, and moving guest post for us about her experience with the work of TR Ericsson, a 7 year acquaintance that has just culminated in an exhibition currently on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art and a book of the same title, TR Ericsson: Crackle & Drag.

Barbara Tannenbaum—

TR Ericsson's *Crackle & Drag* has engaged my mind and emotions since 2008, when I first encountered his work within the same month at both a commercial gallery and a nonprofit art space, both in Cleveland. Work on the project started fifteen years ago; each body of work that appeared over the ensuing years added another chapter to the saga of three generations of a Northeast Ohio family. At the heart of it all was the troubled life of the artist's mother, Susan B. Robinson Bielinski Ericsson O'Donnell, who committed suicide in 2003 at age 57.

Photographs showed Susan as beguilingly alive and joyful, charming and engaging. I began to care about her life and to want to understand her choice of death. I longed not just for the next installment in the story but also for a way to fit together all the pieces in two interlocking puzzles, one depicting Ericsson's family history and the other crystallizing his sometimes frustratingly diverse artistic career. Providing an overview for myself and for viewers was one of my hopes when I invited Tom Ericsson to show at the [Cleveland Museum of Art](#). The [book](#) and [exhibition](#), both entitled *TR Ericsson: Crackle & Drag*, supplied that and more.

Crackle & Drag takes as its source and inspiration an archive of family artifacts, documents, and photographs. They are transformed and transmuted into a number of bodies of work that employ a wide range of media including photography, drawing, sculpture, artists' books, and cinema. The story they tell is not a linear narrative; it meanders and curves back on itself to explore the variability and reliability of memory and photography, pondering their power to define the past as well as shape the future.

The book that accompanies the exhibition has both linear and nonlinear components; it functions as both a traditional monograph and as an artist's book. Analytical essays by art historian Arnaud Gerspacher and me bracket the extensive artist-created content, which alternates chapters of biography and archival materials with Ericsson's own explications of individual bodies of his work. The volume's design is the result of close collaboration between Ericsson and Thomas H. Barnard III, senior designer at the Cleveland Museum of Art.



Cover, *TR Ericsson: Crackle & Drag*, 2015.

Susan's story is deeply moving whether encountered through the book or the exhibition. But while the book's biographical chapters present her life in a relatively chronological fashion, the exhibition takes the viewer on a more challenging and circuitous journey. It is on view at the Transformer Station, a private museum on Cleveland's west side that serves as a satellite space for the museum half the year. In the larger of the two galleries, images of the central figures in the story—the artist and his mother, along with her abusive, controlling father and the second of her three husbands, who is Ericsson's father—intertwine and interact, jumping through and over decades.



Installation view of the exhibition.

They are joined by sculptures in porcelain, cast bronze, sandblasted granite, and blown glass, and a wall of smoke-charred objects that once belonged to Susan's father. There are drawings made with graphite and paintings where the wall is formed from graphite, resin, and funerary ash. Digital inkjet photographs hang on the walls, while a set of 150 offset-printed zines sits on a table, waiting to be picked up and read. The artist's hand is juxtaposed with mechanical processes. The texture, materiality, the objectness of the works are emphasized. This is quite different from the book, in which the medium of ink on paper homogenizes and unifies the images—no matter their source.



Crackle & Drag (still), 2015. TR Ericsson (American, b. 1972). Single-channel video; 45 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Shaheen Gallery: Modern and Contemporary Art. © TR Ericsson.

All the depictions of Susan in the first gallery of the Transformer Station come from the first three decades of her life. We see an impish and adorable young girl; a seductive, beautiful woman; a caring mother. We see her father as a young and old man, and her son as a child and adolescent. In the second gallery the dominant work is a haunting, tragic story of maternal and filial love comes from the final line of Sylvia Plath's poem "Edge," written shortly before her suicide: "Staring from her hood of bone. // She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag."



American Greetings, 2013. TR Ericsson (American, b. 1972). Graphite, resin, and funerary ash on panel; 48 x 60 in. Collection of Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell. © TR Ericsson.

Making the art that comprises *Crackle & Drag* became a significant part of Ericsson's process of grieving for his mother—"an attempt to reclaim her life, and even my life after her death by way of art." The title for this haunting, tragic story of maternal and filial love comes from the final line of Sylvia Plath's poem "Edge," written shortly before her suicide: "Staring from her hood of bone. // She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag."

Crackle & Drag provides highs and lows. We fall in love with Susan, are angered by some of the circumstances of her life, and frustrated by her flaws. But even though it awakens our empathy, we cannot bring her back nor can we lessen the suffering of those she left behind. Ericsson takes us on a deeply moving journey as he digs down into these lives to uncover the whys and why nots, but *Crackle & Drag* also reminds us that there are no simple answers. A life is not a jigsaw puzzle. There is no single missing clue that will snap into place and complete the picture. History, whether of an era or a family or an individual, is not finite and fixed but fathomless, messy, and constantly rewritten.



Pink & Yellow, c. 1980, *Greenville, Tennessee*, 2014. TR Ericsson (American, b. 1972). Chromogenic print; 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shaheen Gallery: Modern and Contemporary Art. © TR Ericsson.