

AUTRE

CRACKLE AND DRAG: AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST TR ERICSSON

April 22, 2016



text by Abbey Meaker

Contemporary artist TR Ericsson, in his ongoing body of work titled *Crackle & Drag*, recreates in film, photography, and sculpture, the darkening, the vanishing of his mother's life, and then conjures her back, dousing her image in a kind of twilight, the hazy indeterminacy of dusk turning to night. I got a chance to speak with Ericsson to discuss his work and its deeply personal nature.

Abbey Meaker: *It has been an interesting couple of weeks getting to know your work intimately enough to feel I can talk to you about it. It was liberating to learn that someone was making work so deeply personal, yet also in dialogue with other histories of art, cinema, and literature. Was a relationship with these histories inherent to the work, or did it grow first from a self-referential place, a way to channel your grief, into something broader in context, a buffer between the personal and the public?*

TR Ericsson: Of course a love of art and books and movies came first. But after a while, and as I got a little older, it became obvious that no matter how talented you are or how informed, there has to be more to it than that. Simply put, I eventually used art as a way to wrap my own emotions and story around a thing. I came late to contemporary art; I'd learn about Sol Lewitt and the minimalists and then adopt some aspect of their formal structures like a cube or a box but I'd engrave a voice into it, my mother's voice, some lament-like phrase; it was a trick, but a sincere trick. There was another issue too, after my mother died I was angry. Real self loathing anger, and art was a part of that. Art was the reason I left her; art was the thing I hung up on her to go and do; art was a distraction from my real life and that pissed me off, too.

Meaker: *Did these histories you are engaged create a necessary distance between the complex and potent emotions you were experiencing when the work began? How has that changed over the last thirteen years?*

Ericsson: There was always some reluctance on my part to really go all the way. It just felt wrong, something you're not supposed to do. But you don't really know why. A built-in reservation. It took a long time for that to break down. It's hard to recall what did it, probably many things. I do work fast. You keep doing the wrong thing fast enough and you start to move toward the right thing. But then literature could be a guide too. I came late to David Foster Wallace. I read *Infinite Jest* in 2005/6? But it floored me, his whole thing floored me. Sincerity, no irony. It really spoke to me. He defined art somewhere as the box of letters you take out and read on a rainy day. Bas Jan Ader was another influence: *I'm too sad to tell you*. There was a romanticism to him, a gentleness, a sort of androgynous quality I really loved. I think in summary, when you swim in these waters (the personal, autobiographical, sacrosanct, etc.) there are rules, and they aren't easy to follow.

Meaker: *When mining a history that is, to some degree, unknowable, a mythologizing would naturally occur. Was this your intention? Did the work develop its own identity, unique from your mother?*

Ericsson: I don't know if I've ever really had any intentions. My work is driven by a mood, or an emotion. The more cerebral parts usually come along after the fact. And it is as you say, an "unknowable" history. And that's painful. There's no denying the work has its own reality, I believe that utterly. I'm doing what I do; it's doing what it does; the viewer/world coming to it does what it does, and somehow it all coalesces into a life and a career. I have become attracted to the thought of her image becoming a symbol.

Meaker: *My dad and I often hypothesized about death, the after effects. He believed that you're still sort of around, hovering in the breeze, until the last person who knew you dies. You're creating a kind of immortality, then, by so widely sharing her image. In the spirit of my father's philosophy, anyway.*

Ericsson: I love that! The breeze. I can tell you a story. Just after my mother died, I met with the county coroner and a forensic pathologist on the outskirts of a small town in Ohio. We met for lunch, it was a converted railroad car. They were explaining to me why there was no other possibility other than suicide for my mother's death. As you can imagine it was a really difficult lunch. I didn't eat anything. They were really nice to me, very sensitive and very in depth, but they both ate like maniacs and told me these awful stories of other suicides, etc. When I left, I got out to my car and waved to them both. I got into my car and started driving, but I was completely out of it. I had no idea where I was going, I was just moving. It was so dumb to be driving. But out of nowhere I was approaching a dead end, one of those triangular black and yellow signs, and I just came to a stop. As I did, I could see I was surrounded by leaves and bushes and suddenly this tremendous wind kicked up, and I perfectly recall this feeling of all the branches and leaves bending achingly toward me in this loud wind, and I perfectly recall thinking it was her, trying to embrace me again, achingly trying to reach me through that wind.

Meaker: *There is a sense in your film, Crackle & Drag, in the burning of photographs and the inclusion of voice recordings, that you're simultaneously constructing and erasing traces of your mother's physicality. It's as if you're keeping her active in an in between state...*

Ericsson: Your question is interesting and maybe another hint at an influence, Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia*, the burning of photographs with sound tracks that don't sync with the images. Such a great work. But more to your point, keeping her active, keeping her in an in between state. Someone told me years ago I was trying to keep the grief alive like a drug addict getting off on it. I felt it was true. Her death was so transformative; it became for a while so easy to know what mattered and what didn't. I didn't want to lose that, but it goes. I do think this sort of suspension/hovering is part of the work. It's really attractive to be engaged in a bottomless idea no matter what anyone else thinks about what you're doing.

Meaker: *Does it make you feel connected to something bigger? Not just her, but maybe the fabric of which she has become a part?*

Ericsson: I struggle with relating to "bigger" things; it makes me actually physically uncomfortable. I like small things. I like feeling connected to the most intimate, private things. But that feeling of knowing what matters and what doesn't - just before she died I was really active in my career, I was doing all sorts of complicated public art projects and when she suddenly died so did all that. I even wrote people these really bizarre semi professional but angry letters where I said I couldn't work with them anymore because...and then I would bluntly and cruelly relate her death. It was a little nuts.

Meaker: *Your absence is palpable in the narrative you've reconstructed, and this absence is particularly acute in the voice recordings. It's as though the more unavailable you were, the more she sought you out, the greater her need became. As I read the letters, looked through the photos that once comprised private family albums, listened to voice messages left for you, your presence began to surface. It became a sort of omnipresence in the work, unseen but deeply felt.*

Ericsson: I think that's exactly right. There's no way around that. I know exactly what you're saying. I can't really add anything to that.

Meaker: *How has the continual process of analyzing and recontextualizing your mother's life affected your relationship and her identity?*

Ericsson: It's had a tremendous effect. I was always a loyal son, I always picked up the phone, but I was always trying to escape. Trying to get away from her. I remember a friend had a surprise 30th birthday for me in Ohio. I was in from New York and everyone was there; it was nice like those things are, then I walked toward the front of the house and saw my mother in the passenger seat of a car pulling up. I turned and started rushing toward the back of the house until I checked myself and turned back around again. It was weird. But then she died. And that was it. Gone. And almost immediately I was rushing toward her all the time. And she was rushing toward me. The best thing that happened is that I had a daughter five years after she died. The thing I recall most, and felt most terribly the loss of, was her gaze. She had a way of looking at me, or anyone, and I never consciously valued it until it was gone.

Meaker: *There's an interesting lineage here: your maternal grandfather, mother, you, and now your daughter.*

Ericsson: Yes. Very interesting. They had a terrible relationship. My daughter and I are really close. I am fully present with her. Frankly I feel like my mother as a father.

Meaker: *You're changing the story.*

Ericsson: I think I am. Even changing the geography.



Abbey: *Suffering can become part of the fabric of a family, but it only takes one person to shift the narrative.*

Ericsson: I like how you say that. I think it's true. It can be broken. It's as if my mother was part of that determination to end all of it. This idea of her life as sacrificial comes up all over the place. She often said things like she gave me this life I'm living. It was always odd to me. I didn't know what she meant when I was younger, but I know now, she was always trying not to enslave me like her parents enslaved her. And she failed a lot, but she succeeded more than she failed. And my father plays into this too. He was really independent in his way, and I think I'm like that too. Something about my family story and its arc through the 20th century seems really important to me. I am seeing that more and more. Crazy intersections all over the map.

Abbey: *It's interesting that you screened the film in Europe. How did that unfold during your solo exhibition, All My Love Always No Matter What, at Harlan Levey Projects? Harlan mentioned you were there with your family...*

Ericsson: It was incredible. Harlan really made it a very special thing. I think we did two screenings. There were some pretty intense reactions. Harlan had a friend play a set after the second screening. A duo called Joy Wellboy. They have now recorded a record around my and my mother's narrative. They sang an original song in her words that night, "I hope you don't get lonesome". It floored me. This constant refrain sung in a man's deep voice, the words of a woman, "I hope you don't get lonesome, like I always do". They also did a cover of *Darklands* by The Jesus and Mary Chain; I had no idea how potentially that connected to my mother's story. This collaboration has been amazing. But that second screening had all of us laid to waste. It was really something. We were all there, my wife Rose, my daughter, my brother (from my dad's second marriage) it was a special night.

Meaker: *I tend to think that a European audience is more open to work that explores deeply personal territory. That is perhaps a sweeping generalization, but I have noticed it. Did you feel more comfortable breaking 'the rules'?*

Ericsson: I know what you mean about Europe. They accept it as normal and just dial in. That being said, I have to say I am getting more committed to my American roots than ever. When I was younger I was all about Europe. But something is changing. Actually real people respond well to my work, so do academic people, university, or scholarly people, some artists, too, but that's always the case. Artists get art, but that hipster celebrity art shit is always a problem. I definitely don't fit with that.

Meaker: *I am curious about the varied tenor of the Crackle & Drag works.*

Ericsson: Tenor? All the different approaches and media?

Meaker: *The images and drawings resemble, and in some cases are, deteriorating, familial artifacts, but the sculptural objects are more symbolic, less direct. Without context, one may not quite know how they are linked, which I think is good, actually. One sculpture titled Everyday is Like Sunday, is a porcelain cast of an axe, printed with a blue toile. After some investigating I was able to find the source for both the object and its graphic: the axe belonged to your mother, and the toile was from a set of curtains in her home. Without knowing these details, the axe, paradoxically, provides a sort of reprieve from the heaviness of the other works. Did you intend to create this separation, a kind of ebb and flow in the reading of the work?*

Ericsson: The axe was one of the first things I made, when I could finally work again after she died, it was 2005. The source belonged to her father; the curtain was hers. I remember the curtains from my childhood. They were weird to me, the lambs, the graven images; there's even a knife in a bowl by the feet of a man holding a baby lamb up to a sculpture of a woman. Collapsing the axe and the curtain, the domestic curtain and violent technology of the double bitted axe, just collisions like this all over the place. I think its gentleness is part of my early reluctance to really tell the story. Also, I was still really involved with ideas of beauty. I titled it after a friend who I watched sing those Morrissey lyrics at a bowling alley. There's something triumphant about the misery of it all. Do you have a copy of the Yale book? If not I will send you that too.

Meaker: *I have the book published by The Cleveland Museum of Art.*

Ericsson: The linear arrangement of the works was really clarifying to me. I'd never done that before. It was interesting, I could see the journey so clearly.

Meaker: *I want to spend more time with it. I went straight to the essays, but didn't spend enough time just feeling the work. It will change for me now that we've talked.*

Ericsson: The essays are great. Arnaud especially is an old friend, and I was really struck by some of the directions the work went in with him.

Meaker: *Was it he who made the Gummo reference?*

Ericsson: It was.

Meaker: *That was really interesting but didn't strike me until seeing the film.*

Ericsson: I wrote the biographical sketches and the texts about the art. I had another friend help me with the artwork texts. I was happiest with the intro though. That felt like another collaboration with my mother.

Meaker: *Now that the book has been published, do you feel that Crackle & Drag has come to a close I wonder if the work has given you a clearer understanding of who your mother was and how she continues to influence you?*

Ericsson: I don't see an end. I see continual change and repetition, day to day efforts to understand the same thing. I also want to continue to establish the fact that these works are more than a look back but are crucially grounded in the present moment, looking at a history from the position of a shifting "now" so to speak, which further transforms the past, or the way we understand the past.

Meaker: *It feels like the beginning, something about to bloom.*

Ericsson: I do have, I think, a better understanding of her. And a firmer grasp of her influence. I also feel a certain exhaustion, not a lack of energy but a desire to put something really immediate out there, and then let that drift into the narrative, too.

Meaker: *The film really captures that feeling of something becoming. I forgot to breathe while watching it. My chest was tight. Her voice saying, "it's your mother" before the snap to black. Wow.*

Ericsson: The hardest part about that film, and I felt helpless but to follow along in its logic, but it was the way the film started to organically move toward her death. How can someone die in a film where they already are not embodied as a moving image? It all happened with the sound. In the end, I feel like as visual as film is, it's a sound medium in a very profound way.

You can see TR Ericsson's work now at **Harlan Levey Gallery's** booth at **Art Brussels** (Booth A5) from today until April 24, 2016. Text and interview by Abbey Meaker. Follow Autre on Instagram: **@AUTREMAGAZINE**