



HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

Tom and Sue
An exhibition by TR Ericsson

Harlan Levey Projects 1080

65 Rue Isidoor Teirlinckstraat
1080 Brussels, Belgium

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Tom and Sue: An exhibition by TR Ericsson

TR Ericsson began his career as a conventional portrait painter and has never really stopped making portraits, though for many years he traded painting for mixed-media works in unconventional materials such as the work *Bride* (an image of his mother's first wedding), which is made of nicotine and currently on view at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. Portraiture is central to his third exhibition at Harlan Levey Projects in Brussels, two of which are durational and inform each other the way a mother does a son and vice versa: One is of Sue and another of Tom. One, shows a young woman aging, the other expresses a young man searching for his voice. Both are created over the course of decades. Art historically, a portrait was usually of an isolated individual, a likeness executed with varying degrees of skill or accuracy, often, though not exclusively, of the upper classes. With photography, and more than ever our current smartphones and selfie obsession, the portrait is democratized and digitized. Today, recording a likeness is a rather mundane affair. In response to this, many artists now often exclude likeness altogether in favor of revealing a deeper and more penetrating interior identity, which Ericsson does with remarkable success.

The portrait of Sue consists of a 7 Volume Letter Book called *ALL MY LOVE ALWAYS NO MATTER WHAT*, which illustrates every written or taped record of Susan Robinson's voice. The portrait of Tom is called 'SAD YOUNG MAN ON A TRAIN' and consists of 107 paintings created between 1992 – 2002 just prior to Sue's death. When combined, they produce an overarching portrait of filial love, grief, joy and existential crisis. Unlike individual portraits the double portrait conveys a relationship between the depicted subjects. A relationship less static than the isolated individual and in this togetherness a literal third presence emerges, it is a zone of constantly shifting thought and emotion where the border lines between the two individuals become indistinct, porous, it's impossible to determine who each of them may be without the other. As a further complexity many other individuals and even the culture at large influences and agitates the narrative. Here we have a mother and son. Tom and Sue. Two self-portraits conjoined, that neither Sue or Tom knew they were making at the time. Sue was writing letters to Tom throughout the 90's and up until her death in 2003. Tom spent those years away from home studying painting in New York City, at first making a rigorous attempt at academic figurative realism and later experimenting with modern and contemporary approaches to painting.

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Both the letters and paintings reveal the personalities and mental and emotional movements of mother and son, having never been brought together before in a single space in time the meaning and expression they will conjure together remains unknown.

The exhibition features other types of portraits, such as Ericsson's film *Crackle & Drag*, where an attempt to portray a mother becomes a portrait of a son, *Angel of the Morning*, Ericsson's first painting in 20 years and the mixed-media work *Tom & Sue* which maps all the chaos of reading another person through love.

ALL MY LOVE ALWAYS NO MATTER WHAT

All My Love Always No Matter What is a seven-volume book collection of letters written by the artist's mother, Sue, to her only son, Tom (TR Ericsson). It took nearly twenty years and numerous other projects for the artist to finally gather this material into a singular work. What emerges in this now complete collection of letters, is a vibrant but at times tortured individual who though struggling with a variety of abuses and addictions was still capable of great wit and humor and love: a portrait far more revealing than the image of an unknowable face. The seven volumes, mostly in her own words, chart a slow descent from her early years as a young wife and new mother to a lonely isolated figure with less and less to live for. The artist has painstakingly assembled each book with a loving thoroughness that avoids interpretation or explanation, instead it's his mother's voice alone that is driving the narrative. In volumes 1 - 5 all the remaining typed or handwritten texts had to be digitally reproduced in rigorous detail to the exact scale of the original correspondence and then organized into a chronological timeline. Volumes 6 and 7 have audio and video components embedded in cut out pages inside the books along with a complete transcription of each recording. A profuse and disorderly jumble of original audio recordings including countless answering machine messages had to be observantly arranged into the same dated chronology as the letters. This slow and methodical process led the artist to many surprising discoveries, including his mother's final recorded message to him just days before her death.

SAD YOUNG MAN ON A TRAIN

'Sad Young Man on a Train' consists of 107 oil paintings, painted by TR Ericsson between 1992 and 2002. For the then young artist, the end of the 20th century was a turbulent decade full of movement, experimentation and anxiety. In 2002, Ericsson turned 30 and stopped painting. His mother died the following year. The loss changed the course of his life and practice. These paintings were stored away in the attic of his summer home in Painesville, Ohio, unseen and rarely thought of until the summer of 2021 when for the first time they were all hung together. What emerged was a kind of self-portrait and time capsule; a youth on the move, inspired, questioning, forging an identity. Impossible to know then and extremely evident now, these set the foundations for his epic mixed-media project 'Crackle & Drag', which he has been expanding on since 2003. The title of the work, 'Sad Young Man on a Train', is taken from Marcel Duchamp's 1911-12 painting which he identified as a self-portrait. The painting is a cubistic one, which depicts a fragmented figure in motion on a moving train. Time, though seemingly rigid, appears malleable and abstracted: the young man, a self in motion on a train in motion.

For Ericsson the many potent metaphors and conceptual games in Duchamp's painting become personalized and contemporary, recognizing how an older artist may look back with clarity,

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sympathy, and even gratitude for the energy it took to make the inward and existential motions required to grapple with the external forces that had surrounded his youth. As time trips over itself, the gesture of gathering these early works all together again is much more than a merely matured acknowledgment of how the past weaves into the present in unexpected ways. It accounts for the complexity of a sum when each part has its own value and has its own meaning. Meaning, which changes over time.

Angel of the Morning

This painting is based on an 8 x10 color photograph of Ericsson's mother, taken by his father in Atlanta, Georgia in 1977. It is the artist's first painting since 2002.

According to Ericsson, "the thing that helped me begin and even finish the painting, among many things, was Arshile Gorky's Painting, *The Artist and His Mother 1926–c. 1936* the same version in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. I kept reproductions of it and studies he made for it taped to the wall beside me as I worked. I've known and loved that painting since my early twenties. Gorky also used a photographic reference, and also depicted himself as a child with his deceased mother. Gorky died by suicide. And his mother, a refugee, starved to death. Since we can't control many of the horrible things that might happen to us, what we do have and to a degree what we can take hold of and leave to those who come after us, is our stories. Which is why I write this here, there's a story to be unearthed, a life and lives to be unearthed and considered, because it is true what Socrates was thought to have said *the unexamined life is not worth living*.

I had the painting stretched the other day (March 29th), seeing it completed for the first time I was overcome by emotion which rarely happens to me regarding my own work. It was emotion without thought, but as I did think about it and as the day wore on I thought about the tremendous amount of guilt I felt after my mother died, as if leaving her and pursuing my art contributed to her death. Painting, at that time, seemed increasingly egotistical to me, an end in and of itself, a vacuum of carelessness, a distraction from my engagement and responsibility to others. Quitting painting, but not art, I started using other tools to tell another story, to tell her story/our story. I think with all that and seeing the painting stretched, the two of us there memorialized, I felt like I got something back that I'd lost. And not just the return to painting, which apparently I do love to do. This work, each day I worked on it, gave me great pleasure, but also in a ghostly sense it got the two of us back together again. This couldn't have been far from Gorky's mind either. That incredible thing art can do, following its own invented script, it can still, quiet, or for a time seem to defeat the things that annihilate us. Namely the passage of time and/or whatever tragedies may come to us in time. A work of art, a painting, has the potential to put something together again, time can be turned back, and the small space of painted canvas hung on a wall becomes window-like, a view to home for a fugitive soul.

TOM & SUE

Tom & Sue began with the source photo for the painting *Angel of the Morning* and builds around it. This work is a dialogue between Ericsson and his memory. A mother's letters to her son. A son's letters to his mother.

Photographs and memories, fragments of dreams, notations and thoughts, passages from books or songs, all of it now suspended in a cocktail of ashes and graphite and resin, spilled alcohol and

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cigarette burns; a chaotic, even disorienting map of time, place, people and cultural connotations. Once completed the work was drenched in cheap alcohol and dried in the sun. Lit cigarettes were left to fall onto it, as if forgotten in an ashtray until they slipped off the table to leave their mark. The alcohol stains darken and intensify in humidity, an unpredictable choreography of love and abuse. The artist loosely paraphrases something he read from Rumi, the Persian poet saying, “we drink people, they drink us.” What and who are we after we’ve drunk one another? Living or dead, the intoxicating impact of love goes on.

CRACKLE & DRAG

Ericsson’s film is a haunting epitaph of maternal and filial love structured around a series of biographical vignettes that document his mother’s life. The passing of time and distance are narrated by voice recordings she left on the artist’s answering machine in the mid 90’s and early 2000’s as she struggled with addiction, poverty and chronic illnesses. Like most of Ericsson’s work, this film is constructed using a combination of archival and originally shot material. Ericsson conceives of the archive not as a series of historically bound facts and images but as a vulnerable metabolization of how things become memory, either evolving into anecdote or remaining stuck between anecdote and denarrativized affect. Dealing with great loss, Ericsson finds something else to lose every time nothing seems to be left. He uses intimacy as a political instrument that marries the signifier and the signified, the sacred and the profane, deconstructing subtle repressions to get to the heart of what it means to be human; what it means to construct and care for a life; what it means to love.

ABOUT TR Ericsson

For the past 20 years, TR Ericsson has expanded on an investigation and reinterpretation of a deteriorating archive of family artifacts, documents, writings, and photographs. His ongoing project ‘Crackle & Drag’, makes a personal struggle public, coming to terms with the archive’s power to determine the past and the future, even as it vanishes in time. Many works in this project are made with unusual materials including nicotine, alcohol and funerary ash. Ericsson’s nicotine portraits were recently recognized by the Smithsonian Museum as a finalist in The National Portrait Gallery’s triennial Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. His ash works appear in numerous private and public collections as, according to the artist “I am in the process of not only spreading my mother’s ashes into private and institutional frameworks but more importantly spreading her life story. She was uniquely able to receive others, to listen and provide comfort in the harshest and most difficult moments of personal pain. I consider every work I’ve made about her, or of her, as a symbol of her love, devotion and selflessness. Lessons our world desperately needs.”

Ericsson’s work is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and many other prestigious public and private collections. His books and zines can be found in numerous library collections including the Yale University Arts Library, the Museum of Modern Art Library, and the Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

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