

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

A Family Portrait in Ash

The artist uses his relatives' funerary ashes, bone fragments, and old photos to explore a complex family history.



Installation view of *TR Ericsson: Cinders* at Albertz Benda Project Space, 2017 (photo courtesy Albertz Benda)

In 2003, when TR Ericsson was 30 years old, his mother committed suicide. The artist felt the huge weight of worry lifted from him, quickly replaced by an equal weight of guilt. Although Ericsson was unable to make anything for a year, when he finally started up again, his mom and her tragic family history kept popping up again and again in his work. His latest exhibition, *Cinders*, delves into that very personal and often heartbreaking family history, unfolding around the artist's mother and her relationship with her father.

Goukassian, Elena. "A Family Portrait in Ash," Hyperallergic. January 8, 2018.

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Ericsson's show takes its title from Jacques Derrida's book of the same name, a collection of philosophical essays about ashes and cinders, death, the Holocaust, and the limits of humanity. The exhibition opens with cinders, encompassed in a dual-projection video on two adjacent walls. On one wall, snippets of text from conversations the artist had with his mother about her father's abusive tendencies appear in a seemingly random sequence, while on the other, a video of the artist burning copies of family photographs (he wanted to keep the originals) fills the screen.



TR Ericsson, "Cinders," 2017. Video, 2 screens (loop), edition of 5. (photo courtesy Albertz Benda)

In the back room, two ceramic urns accompany two screenprinted photographs — of Ericsson's mother as a child and her father as a young man in the Merchant Marines during WWII. The urns are modeled after the real ones used to store each relative's ashes. In making the screenprint of his mother, Ericsson incorporated some of her ashes into the medium, and inside the urn, he placed a small bone fragment. He did the same for his grandfather, working his ashes and bone fragment into his own portrait and urn. On the opposite wall, a bronze cast of one of the grandfather's pin-back buttons reads: "I want your body." Next to it, a bronze cast of a letter opener he'd made from bullet casings

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during the war is superimposed with words from letters Ericsson's mother wrote to her son about her father.



TR Ericsson, "Susie, Christmas, c. 1953," 2017. Graphite, resin, and funerary ash on muslin, 24 x 18 in. (photo courtesy Albertz Benda)

While Ericsson is far from the first artist to incorporate human ashes into his work, he uses them more to begin to comprehend his painful family history than to keep remnants of the people alive. When talking about his grandfather, Ericsson sees a Jekyll and Hyde, loving one moment and hateful the next. It seems that through his work, Ericsson hopes to eventually tease out complicated familial relationships, finally making some sense of them. "It's all about the mystery of failed relationships," he says. "My mother was a lot like her father, especially as she got older. Part of the complexity was seeing the similarities."

Ericsson notes that his family archives of letters, recording, photographs, and random ephemera are endless, and he sees himself making related work for the rest of his career. He views his pieces not as being stuck in the past, but rather as lessons he can learn for the future. Ericsson has a 10-year-old daughter — named Susie, after

her grandmother — and he strives to be the kind of father his own grandfather could never be to his mom. The cinders and ashes of his works are a constant reminder of what could happen if he falters.

TR Ericsson: *Cinders continues at the Albertz Benda Project Space (515 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through January 13.*

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