Roland Flexner and T.R. Ericsson

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Roland Flexner's Studio

T.R. ERICSSON: The first time I saw your work was at the Whitney Biennial. And the same thing I thought then occurs to me here again, that there's a photographic quality to the work.

ROLAND FLEXNER: Right. I'm going for the image. They're clearly landscapes **[fig. 1]** and they're still showing the same ink blot effect. They're just stains. The viewer figures out different things, usually. Sometimes you see one thing and the next day, you see something else.

ERICSSON: There's that great expression, "The world is as you are." The surfaces are so sensual. They almost have a skin texture.

FLEXNER: Every one of those drawings is the result of a different gesture or technique. They all come together because they share the same medium, same format, same paper. I use three basic gestures: I tilt the paper using gravity; I use friction, working from the back of the drawing; and I blow on it, directly or with different types of straws. I don't touch the surface, or only occasionally, and I don't use traditional tools. That's the rule. Because when you do that, you involve perspective, you think traditional perspective, you know. Otherwise, it's more organized chance.

ERICSSON: I see something of the surrealists of a certain era.

FLEXNER: Yes. You know, there is a long tradition of using ink blots. That goes from Chinese artists in the eighth century to modern days.

ERICSSON: And have you ever done these on a larger scale?

FLEXNER: I've done some drawings about 24 by 30 inches, something like that. The problem is, the bigger you work, the more you focus on fragments, on some portion of the surface. And what I want to maintain is the image coming up all at once with no composition whatsoever. If you start thinking, "What am I going to do in this corner?" or "Let's do something here," or "Work this part and then that part," you compromise the unity of the surface. This is one of the reasons that format works well. The bigger you work, the bigger the marks become. That's also something I didn't predict.

Some of the works look more complex because the marks are smaller. There's a relationship to scale, in fact. I think scale is what's important, not size.

ERICSSON: That's an interesting distinction. It's tricky. The smaller size of the drawings really pulls you in, but as I look closer they seem almost to expand and occupy a larger space in my mind. What I find amazing is the diversity—you'd think there'd be more repetitions. But they're really diverse, picture to picture.

FLEXNER: Well, they are made in very different ways.

ERICSSON: So I mentioned the similarity to photography. Is that interesting to you?

FLEXNER: Yes. I'd like to compete with photography, ideally. I want this to be the best image as possible. But you cannot go beyond the fact that the medium and the paper and the gestures that are applied—all define a different type of perspective than you would get if you were working in a traditional way. The way the medium flows is very specific, and it does not flow according to the laws of perspective. That's why it's unified—by the way the medium does certain things but cannot do others. In the end, I push the image in the direction I want. If you look at the drawing from another angle, you know what I mean. They're always shown the way I make them.

ERICSSON: And the other question I have—it's kind of a banal question—but, how long do they take? In my mind, these could go either way. They could be very deliberate.

FLEXNER: The drawings that I'm going to show in Indianapolis **[fig. 2]**—those took barely any time at all. And there's no way I can work on them a second time. First of all, because of the paper—they're done on clay paper. Once the medium touches the paper, it's going to take about ten seconds before it dries. And then you cannot touch it anymore. So I've got ten seconds to act. I do similar things. I spray. I blow on it. I use gravity. I manipulate it, but within the ten seconds before it dries. So it's a very different process than in my more recent works.

ERICSSON: To get that amount of detail and dimension in just ten seconds is really incredible. Your mind embeds itself in that image and lingers in a way that far surpasses the ten seconds it took to make them.

FLEXNER: So you see what we were talking about—the scale.

ERICSSON: And the precision of the contours, it's almost similar to printmaking, like an etching or even a fine woodblock print. It's interesting, too, because there's something about these that have a real historic weight.

FLEXNER: Some people have said, referring to this type of drawing **[fig. 3]**, that they evoke Hieronymus Bosch. It must be the effect of multitude.

ERICSSON: Yeah. There's that weight of history, but at the same time, there are these very graphic and contemporary contours, and an anthropomorphic sense of figurative form that's compelling, too. Maybe that's also where the Bosch reference comes from.

FLEXNER: You push every one of those marks into something. Like this, maybe you want it to be a bird **[fig. 4]**. You know, when you push those blots into images it's always the same basic things that come out—water, trees, rocks, sky, birds . . .

ERICSSON: I'm guessing a lot of these get destroyed in the course of a day?

FLEXNER: I keep everything, because it is the result of an experience. Every drawing can be a model for things to come. I keep them all, even though not every one is successful. From the beginning, I've kept a box of drawings that I've rejected but which did have some very good parts in them. Four years ago, I made an installation where I cut out the most pictorial parts of those drawings and combined them with picture stones **[figs. 5–6]**. Picture stones are made in a similar way—take a big rock, slice it and cut out the best part. There is also a relationship between the making of the stones—where organic material is trapped in pockets of water and takes millions of years to appear—and the flow of ink over the paper. There's a difference of time, but it's a similar process. Some stones are Chinese. This is a stone from Florence. It's called Pietra Paesina. Every single one of these rocks makes a little other landscape.

ERICSSON: Well, it's odd, because that looks like a Renaissance fresco, and this, from China, does not.

FLEXNER: In Italy, they pick up stones that look like a Renaissance painting. And in China, they all look like Chinese paintings.

[LAUGHTER]

FLEXNER: So I always wonder if you send an Italian to China what stones he's going to come out with. It reflects the culture of the place.

ERICSSON: It must.

FLEXNER: I'm sure you can find a stone like this anywhere in Europe if you look hard. In fact, you can say this is the work of nature. And it is, but if you put this back in its natural element, it's really nothing. First, you've got to dig it and cut it. Then you've got to make that window. Then you've got to polish it. You've got to orient it the right way. There's a lot of gestures involved in making a picture stone. And the same for what I do.

ERICSSON: I was just reading Rudolf Arnheim's book *Film as Art*, where—it seems kind of anachronistic now—but it's a defense of film and photography. And it starts with much the same argument. Where are you standing? At what vantage point? There are so many things that go into the making of a photographic image.

FLEXNER: The same with [Marcel] Duchamp. I think what he calls neutral or indifferent is never really. Take the bottle rack. It really looks like a sculpture of the period in the forged iron, like [Julio] González or Picasso.

I have started to use a new synthetic paper that is waterproof and nonabsorbent. If I don't like the image, I put it under the faucet, and it's all white again. Here the image is actually sitting on the paper, as opposed to being embedded into the paper as in my previous drawings.

ERICSSON: How many drawings are coming to Indianapolis? Is there a significance to you in the way the series counts out sometimes?

FLEXNER: Twenty-four. I think it's kind of arbitrary. The grid of nine works well, just to show the diversity of the work with a minimum amount of drawings. Then I thought twenty-four was the second extension of the grid, and then there is thirty. The arrangement I do myself. And I have a strategy about putting them together. It's about the connection they make. If you put two drawings next to each other, I don't want there to be a continuation in the marks that links the drawings together.

ERICSSON: Now, the landscapes themselves—do you have a relationship to a landscape? Does an actual place, or something in your mind or memory, influence this?

FLEXNER: No. There's absolutely no model that is in my mind. That would be impossible. First of all, you cannot predict what you're going to get. All that can be predicted is that a drawing I make can serve as a model for another one. So I know how to do one kind of landscape or another type of landscape by applying a specific kind of gesture to it.

ERICSSON: There's something very meditative in the way the work is grouped and in the process itself, with the combination of chance and control. It begs the question, is there something that concerns you, outside of the strict image making or material? Whether it's literary, philosophical, psychological, religious, is there something else informing your working habits that's outside of the actual finished drawing?

FLEXNER: Not really, no. The drawings I've made inform the new ones. Each one appears for the first time in the world. It's like a little invention. What I've been doing recently, which is kind of interesting, is to feed those drawings in to Google image search, and it returns photographic landscapes from somewhere. So in some way, it's reversed mimesis. I've found some relating landscapes that are very close to the drawings.

ERICSSON: Anywhere in the world? Has it shown itself to be specific to a region?

FLEXNER: Anywhere in the world. If I add the name of a specific place, then only images from that place will come back. There are some that will fit, but if I take the entire web as a reference, more images will come back that are closer to the drawing.

ERICSSON: It would almost be interesting to see if they started mimicking a certain region repetitively.

FLEXNER: Exactly. I've got those stones that I showed you. I've got some American stones from the Oregon Trail. I fed one in the image search with the word "Oregon," and there came back a landscape from Oregon that looks like the picture in the rock found underground.

ERICSSON: I think there's something to that. Maybe it's a silly human habit in our consumer culture, but you tend to pick one you really like, almost. My mind just keeps going to this one. **[fig. 3]** This area here.

FLEXNER: So this is the punctum for you.[1] For me, it's this kind of skull iceberg **[fig. 7]**.

A few recent ones are made with calligraphy ink **[figs. 8–11]**.

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[1] The reference here is to *Camera Lucida* (1980) by Roland Barthes. The work defines the punctum as that element of a photograph that has the most emotional resonance for a particular viewer.

ERICSSON: These caught my eye. They start reading a little bit more like skies and clouds, almost, or oceans.

FLEXNER: Color can have the advantage to look like a material. If I'm going to do something in color, I don't want it to have any kind of symbolism attached to it.

ERICSSON: Color for me has always been difficult, somewhat for the reasons you're saying. If you're working with color, it seems to me you should have something to say with color, like an Ellsworth Kelly, whereas I don't have a single thing to say with color. So I just stay away.

FLEXNER: I more agree with Matisse, who said that a good colorist is not someone who knows how to put one color next to another, but someone who knows about the chemistry of color.

ERICSSON: It's funny, I don't know if it's from what you were saying before we came into the studio, but this sort of anonymity—you're more comfortable with not being photographed—it almost seems like it's a fidelity to the work. It just seems like these wouldn't want that, almost. They do very well by themselves.

FLEXNER: They need the viewer, for sure.

ERICSSON: Yeah. But that's it. They're just very complete to be looked at. I've enjoyed our conversation, but they don't need anything.

FLEXNER: Have you seen any of my ink bubble works **[figs. 12–14]**? They are very small.

ERICSSON: I saw some of them on your website. And these over here are the Sumi drawings, right?

FLEXNER: Yes. The Sumi ink is so much richer than any other type of ink. Those are very old pigments. They are fifty to a hundred years old. I traded my drawings for old pigments with a family of ink makers in Japan. So that pigment is almost like gold. Sumi ink is like French wine. It gets better with age.

ERICSSON: And these?

FLEXNER: This one is liquid graphite with a little bit of indigo in it **[fig. 15]**. What's interesting about graphite, as you know, is if you burnish the surface, it becomes like pencil, like lead. That was my initial idea. I thought, now if I do this in graphite, it's going to look like pencil drawing. I burnished one, and it's shiny just like pencil. But the fact is that there's no way you can confuse the marks, the way it's made versus marks left by a lead pencil with the pressure of the hand.

ERICSSON: It's interesting, the way a medium follows you. I remember I worked in powdered graphite in school; a teacher suggested it to me. I'd never heard of such a thing. I started making drawings with a brush and powdered graphite. I did that for a while, and then let it go for years, until just recently it came back again.

FLEXNER: Do you put anything in your powdered graphite? Any binder?

ERICSSON: Nothing.

FLEXNER: And do you fix it afterwards?

ERICSSON: No. The amount of fixative I'd have to apply for it to do its job really just destroys the image. I don't know exactly what happens, but it becomes blown out.

FLEXNER: I've never used any fixative.

ERICSSON: I even am annoyed by what the glass does, going over my drawings. There's something about the quantity of graphite I use. It's so rich and black, and it gets under that glass and somehow it's diminished.

FLEXNER: This here is watercolor graphite. It's graphite you can wet. So what I did with those two drawings is I drew it with a pencil **[figs. 16–17]**. And then I sprayed the entire surface. That expanded the marks so you completely lose the fact that it has been touched by hand.

ERICSSON: What you just said hits really close to home for me, where it not appearing touched somehow seems to matter a lot.

FLEXNER: It tends to go this way. If something looks touched, I'm going to work on it to the extent that in the end it looks untouched.

ERICSSON: Yeah. I don't know why that's so important.

FLEXNER: For me, it's not the concept. It's the way it gives unity to the work. I like it to come all at once, like a snapshot.

T.R. Ericsson's Studio

ERICSSON: This is the most recent work I did in graphite **[fig. 18]**. It's the Forestay waterfall. The same waterfall Duchamp photographed in the '40s.[2]

FLEXNER: So you went to Switzerland to the scene of the crime?

ERICSSON: I did. We drove out to see the waterfall the day I got there, and that's when I took the photographs that became the source images for the graphite works.

I just finished these. I felt compelled to do it, and there it is.

FLEXNER: Did you go there specifically?

ERICSSON: I was asked by the artists Stefan Banz and Caroline Bachmann to do an installation there. They call it the smallest museum in the world. The Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp. It's located in a small village on the shore of Lake Geneva; it's quite literally a box sitting on a post outside their house. It might measure less than sixteen inches all around, with little viewing windows cut into it on all sides.

FLEXNER: Like the Duchamp box?[3]

ERICSSON: Yes, the *Boîte-en-valise*, the same kind of thing. They did something recently with Ai Weiwei's sunflower seeds. They were interested in a reference I made to Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*. I titled the installation *Shot 44*, after the 43 scenes in the famous park sequence. I put a plaster cast of my face in the box and fit the windows with magnifying lenses. My up-turned profile seen through the magnifying

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[2] Marcel Duchamp photographed the Forestay waterfall near Chexbres, Switzerland, in 1946 and incorporated an image of the waterfall within his landmark assemblage work *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas)* (1946-66).

[3] *Box in a Valise (From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy)* (1935-41) is an edition of leather valises that contain miniature replicas, photographs, and color reproductions of works by Duchamp.

lenses was visually distorted and referenced the murdered man in the park in Antonioni's film, Duchamp's own iconic profile, and the jagged profile of the mountains that surrounded the box. It was a really convoluted thing, but I had a lot of fun with it.

FLEXNER: So that pure white here, there's no graphite?

ERICSSON: Yeah, it's just the paper.

FLEXNER: How much do you rework the surface?

ERICSSON: It depends drawing to drawing. But to your point earlier, I also like to minimize the appearance of working over the surface too much, the touch.

FLEXNER: Like those effects here, the fog. Is that stumping?

ERICSSON: Yes, stumping, and also at times just being able to blow the graphite off the page. Sometimes I use a vacuum or canned air spray over the surface, as well.

FLEXNER: So the graphite stays attached to the surface.

ERICSSON: It does. With just pressure. Once, just to experiment, I made a drawing and went over it with a vacuum, and the image was still there. So it's more powerful than it appears. But then I am, of course, attracted to the seeming precariousness of the whole thing.

FLEXNER: There are interesting effects here. They're not quite graphic. I found lots of touch in it.

ERICSSON: Well it's a real physical process. And I really had no background in photography, per se, at all, which I think has been a good thing.

FLEXNER: Yeah, sometimes it's an advantage. It allows you to do things that you're not supposed to do.

ERICSSON: Exactly. But I think the things I did with smoke came before the graphite. I did a show where I wanted to make the entire show out of materials that weren't art supply art materials. I wanted to make images out of, really, anything else. And I used anything from cigarette smoke **[fig. 19]** to lipstick, alcohol—I just didn't want to do anything with traditional materials. And oddly, it led me to the graphite.

FLEXNER: Do you work in detail or mostly in large areas?

ERICSSON: Mostly a large area. It's that problem about getting away from the composition. I like it to just sort of happen. This is the one going to Indianapolis **[fig. 20]**. I was very happy with this one in terms of just the way the graphite sat on the surface. The sense of the materiality of the graphite is very good.

FLEXNER: How come there is so much detail around the body, and the body itself, it's almost like a cutout? It's so white.

ERICSSON: Empty, yeah.

FLEXNER: That's the way it comes out—it picks up a lot of nuances, mid-gray tones.

ERICSSON: I've gotten better at it as I've gone on, anticipating what the graphite does and where I want it to go. The first ones I did barely read. They were very gray. I wasn't really getting the image to appear.

I even think something happens to the graphite depending on the temperature and the environment I'm working in. When I'm in my studio in Ohio, the graphite acts differently than it does when I'm working in New York.

The whole process is still informed, a great deal, by a lot of unexpected accidents.

FLEXNER: The air spray effects on almost every piece, they are a bit atmospheric. Is that more related to the effect of photography, or is it a way to make the surface more present?

ERICSSON: I think the sense of the material over the surface is more to my interest. But the fact that there is this photographic thing that happens with that is nice, too. I've always been interested in Michelangelo's late sculptures, the ones where the figures emerge out of the stone unfinished. Rather than simply using the medium to create an illusion of reality, the stone is left exposed as an integral part of the work. The juxtaposition of the material and the image emerging from it becomes really compelling and slightly ambiguous.

FLEXNER: Ambiguity is what really gives the image its chance.

ERICSSON: What's interesting about the technique I use with the graphite is the similarity there is to processing a photograph in the darkroom, where the light and dark values can be manipulated by the exposure time. The same thing happens here. But the shifts in value are due to pressure, rather than light.

FLEXNER: Is it due to pressure? Are the gestures here recorded?

ERICSSON: Yes, to a degree. Most of it is pressure based. I have had times where, if the screen lifts up from the paper, I get things to happen. Or I will see motions that I tend to not like. If I started seeing too much of the direction in my hand, it's almost as bad as the over-handled look.

FLEXNER: Of course, the beauty of that surface is that pure pigment.

ERICSSON: But as I mentioned before, it's diminished under glass. It's strange. But what can you do? They are totally fragile. It is what it is. Part of me has wanted to try to preserve some of the informality of the way they're viewed in the studio, but I haven't found a way to do that.

FLEXNER: So here, you're not around the waterfall. But is it the same place?

ERICSSON: The image of the waterfall for the *Etant Donnes* work was shot in a ravine near a freeway in northeastern Ohio. It's a little spot of land not far from our house. I did a series before *Etant Donnes* in the same area based on the Narcissus myth, all self portraits **[fig. 21]**. It's a place of significance for my wife, Rose; she took me there when we first got together.

FLEXNER: That's really beautiful. So how is this occurring? It's like the superimposition of a different image on the body.

ERICSSON: Correct. The first thing I do is bring the images into Photoshop. I convert them to grayscale and manipulate the values there. But it's also possible to create different layers, as well. Then it becomes a film positive, and then it's burned onto the screen. Along the way, each process affects the image.

Ils Huygens writes about Gilles Deleuze's thoughts about film. She says: "Cinema makes it impossible to think, because before we can interpret one image it is already replaced by another. Before we can grasp an image it is already passed, the process of association is constantly interrupted, deconstructed, dislocated."[4] So taken all together, the concept, the process, and the serial repetition of the images become filmic in this way.

FLEXNER: Here you don't have a pure white, like on the other picture **[fig. 22]**. You've got enough modeling of the body.

ERICSSON: Correct. That's all defined by pressure.

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[4] Ils Huygens, "Deleuze and Cinema: Moving Images and Movements of Thought," *Image & Narrative* 18 (2007), http://www.imageandnarrative.be/thinking_pictures/huygens.htm. [[not sure what the original link that was here was referring to, but it's broken, so I'm deleting it.]]

FLEXNER: His ears look like Mr. Spock. He looks like a faun.

ERICSSON: He has that quality. While I was making them I started to think of *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli. The little imp. I kept thinking of him as a little dark Cupid. Like a little, black, ill-intentioned Cupid. I'm pretty happy with this grouping.

FLEXNER: Yes, especially the one with the boy in it. What's the effect, the atmosphere that you're researching? Mythological?

ERICSSON: To be honest, I like horror films. I like the voyeurism of this work, that the child seems weirdly unalone. There's something threatening about it. Actually, I was influenced by a film Carter Foster (Curator of Drawings at the Whitney Museum of American Art) turned me on to, called *Let The Right One In*. It's a Swedish vampire film. It deals with a little child vampire, a little girl, but it captures something dark and horrific about the reality of a child's day-to-day life. Something terrifying and dramatic about the way a child sees the world. Visually, it's just a stunningly beautiful film.

FLEXNER: Did you make a picture that was exactly at the angle of Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*?

ERICSSON: The idea of Duchamp came after the work was well on its way. I never meant it to be an homage to Duchamp, at all.

FLEXNER: I saw your glass jar **[fig. 23]** that relates to another work of Duchamp **[fig. 24]**.

ERICSSON: Yes, it will be on exhibit in Indianapolis as well. That came well before the Duchamp influence, too. I did an unusual commission for the Progressive Art Collection. H. Scott Westover, the curator of the Progressive Art Collection, asked me to go out to LA to create a memorial for a Progressive manager who died after a fire broke out in his high-rise apartment.

In the man's office there was this ridiculous, inflated deer's head hunting trophy, just a joke, something funny to entertain his coworkers. This kid that worked for him told us about it. He was packing up his manager's office after he died and when he started to deflate the deer head, he remembered him blowing it up, and he couldn't bring himself to let the air out. He didn't say it, but there was some emotional connection there for him between the trapped air and the death of his manager. As Scott and I were leaving him I remember saying something about how life always trumps art. It's impossible to invent such an odd and compelling moment, it just happens.

And then, the more I thought about it, I knew that had to be the work. I had Progressive ship the still-inflated deer head from LA to my studio in Ohio. I released the air into a glass jar. The trapped breath, that was the concept of the piece, that's where the idea came from, and that was in 2007.

In this case, the breath comes from a living person, my wife, Rose.

FLEXNER: When you blow up glass, in any case, it's going to be the breath of the person—

ERICSSON: Who blows the glass. But what happens is the glass comes to me empty. And it's a real simple, eighth-grade-science thing. It's water displacement. So the glass is hollow with a hole in the bottom, and you fill it with water. Here, I had Rose breathe into the glass and displace the water.

But something unexpected happened. Once the glass was sealed with silicone, some moisture remained. Condensation appeared on the inside of the glass, it appeared to sweat and fog over, there were drips, rivulets running down the foggy interior of the glass, so as a sculptural work, it remains oddly alive. It's very strange. Did you see the Duchamp show in Philadelphia?

FLEXNER: Oh, of course.

ERICSSON: Quite something, wasn't it? I thought that show was remarkable. That's another reason why these works are fairly repetitive. It was interesting to me that Duchamp's original photographs were fairly poor pictures. The repetition of the waterfall as an image was interesting too, the way he kept working with a particular photograph.

FLEXNER: And the fact that you chose your wife as a model bears some relationship with the fact that Duchamp's models were all of his lovers combined.

ERICSSON: I know. I was surprised. I had no intention of being so absorbed by the Duchamp community. But I think that was one of the bigger reasons why. I think that a lot of Duchamp scholars believe there's a misunderstanding about Duchamp in the art world.

FLEXNER: Some people came up with the theory that it was a crime, that it was this and that. But I'm sure he didn't want it to be precise. It came along the way it came along. At the end, the only model left was his wife.

ERICSSON: The *Etant Donnes* series had that in common with the Duchamp work, the numerous possible influences and interpretations.

When Rose was modeling for these, she brought up something I'd never thought of while making the work, a girl I knew in high school was brutally murdered not far from where these images were taken. It was very memorable. She was only sixteen years old, she was missing for a week or two. And it was very bizarre—eventually the news of her death came over the loudspeaker at the end of the school day, and all they said was that her body had been found.

Someone so young from such a small town being murdered had a profound effect on me at the time. My mother and her mother were friends since high school. There's not much time that goes by where I don't think of her, but I didn't think about that when I was making the work. Rose kept saying it all had something to do with that, that I couldn't get that girl's murder out of my head. So you never know. I don't know.

And there were other thoughts that came up along the way. My mother died in 2003, almost ten years ago now. She was just fifty-seven years old. I wasn't there when she died; I was told she collapsed at home on the living room floor. And I think there's something strange about not seeing someone's death who you love. It feels very unresolved.

So all these thoughts were in my head—not Duchamp at all. And then at some point, I was thinking about how to contextualize this work. And I thought it was kind of cheeky to call it *Etant Donnes.* Because there would be a lot of ways to think of a nude in the woods. And I thought, with the *Etant Donnes* title, you throw people. The ambiguity of the image, as you said, can also be conceptual.

FLEXNER: Oh, absolutely.

Your work has a lot to do with the ephemeral. It's almost ready to disappear.

ERICSSON: Yeah. I don't know what that is, but it keeps happening.

FLEXNER: Not even the concern about the permanency of things.

ERICSSON: There was a graduate student, Natasha Lushetich, in England. And she saw my works at Progressive and wrote a really lengthy paper, somewhat pursuing her own points of view, but using my work as a point of departure. She titled her paper "On the Performativity of Absence."[5] That seemed about right.

FLEXNER: You're really documenting the disappearance of things.

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[5]Natasha Lushetich, "On the Performativity of Absence: Death as Community," *Performance Research* 15, no. 1 (2010): 81–89.

ERICSSON: And then the current project I'm working on now is all about film. So that can be an ephemeral medium, potentially. Especially if you think of it in a more material sense, which is what I'm doing.

FLEXNER: What I like in the aspect of the ephemeral today, contrary to what was done in the past that was largely symbolic, is the fact that many artists are acting out the ephemeral rather than representing it.

ERICSSON: That's interesting. It just feels honest to me, too, because I'm fairly young. But my God, there's just no way around it. It's all going away. And there's a beauty to that.

FLEXNER: The image is strong. It carries something with it, even if it's an everyday object. This is more than an everyday object.

With the nicotine works **[fig. 19]**, in some sense, you've chosen to make those objects come back on paper as poison. That probably has meaning.

ERICSSON: Yeah. And it was interesting too because some of the images I chose to make were images I hate looking at. Different photographs or things from your past aren't always something you really want to return to. I was using those images in this medium because it just seemed right. I hated the images. So that was another side of it somehow.

FLEXNER: That's very consistent with the graphite work.

ERICSSON: Yeah. As different as the medium, materials, and even the color is, there is a consistency.

FLEXNER: You are led to work specifically with the image. That's due to the nature of the medium and what it does. So you follow the lead, and you're breaking away from the original photograph in a big way.

ERICSSON: That has been certainly the case. I tend to move around a lot. I like to change. I work in all kinds of different media. But this has really stuck. There's a diversity to the graphite or what's happening here that I keep returning to comfortably.

The whole process is actually very violent physically. Sometimes my entire body weight has to go down on the screen. The physicality of the process shows up in the drawing and has some relationship to the image. To a certain degree, the energy that goes into the making of the work seems to be recorded or embedded in the image.

FLEXNER: Yeah. I see you're not in the business of correcting the image by adding or taking some medium away to get closer to photography.

ERICSSON: Yeah, no. It just works. Or it doesn't work.

FLEXNER: Graphite has different grades, right? It is made from two or three different minerals.

ERICSSON: Yeah. It's super diverse. You can get graphite that's silver, metallic graphite, other kinds of colors I tried messing with.

I'm learning even more from seeing some of the other artists' work from the exhibition. It's a pretty incredible medium, the properties of it. My understanding is that it's essentially carbon.

FLEXNER: Same for the ink. It's all carbon.

ERICSSON: Is that right?

FLEXNER: Yeah. Chinese ink or what you call India ink is carbon.

ERICSSON: That's interesting to me. My grandfather's fireplace had a broken flue. The smoke would get into the house and just blanket the whole place in this sort of sooty, dust-like black residue. You can't believe some of the books from his library that once would have been in fairly good shape. You can still smell the smoke. It's really incredible. Everything he owned turned into this. And it was all from the smoke. The carbon.

I just made this little work in bronze from an object I kept from the house **[fig. 25]**. Here again the concept and the process is embedded in the final image.

FLEXNER: Things are coming back to a new life. A nice way to give them new meaning.

ERICSSON: Yeah. I think so. Because that was the thing. I had all this stuff, and it just doesn't mean anything. But embedded in it are these narratives and these stories. And that was always sort of the idea for me, telling the story.

I think that's why I keep drifting toward film.

FLEXNER: I'm interested in film as well. Particularly in film stills, dislocating sequences and rearranging them. Some black-and-white film has amazing quality when you print it. I've been watching mostly Japanese movies of the '40s and '50s, especially Kenji Mizoguchi. He studied *Sumi-e* painting. He also had a great cameraman.

ERICSSON: The film project I mentioned that I'm working on now is visually all about the still image and contrasting black-and-white values. Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* was another point of departure. The title comes from the last line of a Sylvia Plath poem, which was one of the last poems she wrote before her death. It's called "Edge," and I titled the project after the last line of the poem: "her blacks crackle and drag." *Crackle & Drag*.[6] I'm not entirely sure where it's all going, but it seems to be revolving around all of these topics we're discussing. We'll see.

[6] T.R. Ericsson's project *Crackle & Drag* can be previewed online: http://www.trericsson.com/crackled_trailer.html.