Performance artist Tim Youd retypes 'A Confederacy of Dunces' at NOMA

By Doug MacCash, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune | September 29, 2015

Starting Friday (October 2) visitors to the New Orleans Museum of Art may hear a clacking noise echoing through the big marble atrium. The gray haired among them will recognize the sound as an old-fashioned typewriter resonating in a second floor gallery. If they follow the clacking upstairs, they'll find literarily inclined Los Angeles performance artist Tim Youd at work on his latest project, the retyping of John Kennedy Toole's classic "A Confederacy of Dunces."

Sitting at a bleak wooden table like a sort of Medieval monk, Youd will manually copy the whole book from beginning to end. But he'll not just retype the book, he'll retype it on a single sheet of paper, running it through the typewriter again and again, retyping each line until the page is saturated with ink and tattered like a flag after a hurricane. Past examples of Youd's retyped books will line the gallery walls.
Through the fall, Youd will type five Louisiana-based books at NOMA and other locations around the state. He'll type Walker Percy's "The Moviegoer" in part at the Prytania Theater. He'll type Robert Penn Warren's historical fiction "All The King's Men" in the Louisiana State Capitol, near the bullet mark left behind after the assassination of Huey P. Long. He'll type Ernest J. Gaines' "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" under the "Miss Jane Oak" in Pointe Coupee Parish. He'll also type James Wilcox's "Modern Baptists" in Independence Louisiana, at an undetermined location.

By the time he's done, he plans to have typed 100 novels across the United States.

**Tim Youd's 100 Novels**

- **What:** Performance artist Tim Youd will use vintage typewriters to retype classic Louisiana novels such as "A Confederacy of Dunces" on single sheets of paper, producing tattered, ink-saturated, ironically illegible manuscripts.
- **Where:** The New Orleans Museum of Art, 1 Collins Diboll Circle in City Park, 504.658.4100.
- **When:** Beginning with a reception from 6 to 8, Friday (Oct. 2), Youd will appear at NOMA Fridays, 11 a.m. to 3 and 6 to 8; Saturdays and Sundays 11 a.m. to 4, though Jan. 30.
- **Admission:** Adults, $10; seniors, $8, children 7 - 17, $6.
- **More information:** For a complete schedule of Youd’s appearances visit the NOMA website or look in the comment stream below.

Youd, 49, said his four-year (so far) literary pilgrimage began when he learned that legendary counter-culture journalist Hunter S. Thompson had typed "The Sun Also Rises" and "The Great Gatsby," early in his career, as an exercise in assimilating Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald's precise use of language. So, as a tribute, Youd retyped Thompson's "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," going Thompson one better by obsessively typing the whole book on one page.

"I just had a notion to take what Hunter S. Thompson did," Youd said. "But I wanted to squash the book down into one page. I said, 'Wow, I can do this, I want to make more of this.'"

Youd said part of the attraction of the process was the ironically illegible artifact left behind when the typing was done.

"There's a tactile presence to the piece," he said. "There's a build up of ink on the page."
Sure, Youd admits, there's something absurd about the whole undertaking. But there's something reverential too. Youd said that when he and his wife visited Hemingway's former home in Key West, they discovered that most tourists are as interested in the dozens of odd six-toed cats that live in and around the old house, as they are in Hemingway's prose.

"It becomes really all about the cats," he said. "But what about the author, Hemingway's words?"

Youd said he hopes that in a way his ceremonial retyping performances re-focus attention on the literature itself.

To achieve added historical resonance, Youd tries to identify and locate the exact style and brand of typewriter used by the bygone authors, so the text precisely echoes the past.

"It's a bit of an analog undertaking in a digital world," he said. "I was born in the gap when typewriters were headed out and computers headed in."

It might seem that Youd's project includes some commentary or criticism on the electronic word-processing era. But that isn't particularly his intention. He said he's certainly aware of a "small subculture of typewriter aficionados" and that there are "hipsterish" people who compose personal notes on typewriters to lend them added intimacy. But he said he's not actually "aggressively trying to make a statement" about the virtues of typewriters.

At its essence, Youd said, the project isn't about recreating a book, it's about consuming a book.

"It's a metaphor for deeply reading the book," he said. "For me, the reason I do it, is because on a personal level reading has always been my sort of default activity."

When things are going well, Youd said, he reads for enlightenment, when things are going not so well, he reads for escape. His transcription project is about "making the most that I possibly can of the reading experience."

Youd's performance series is the first exhibition selected by NOMA's new Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Katie Pfohl. Seems like a promising start.