An Artist’s Meditative Project to Retype 100 Novels

Tim Youd’s *100 Novels* project is continuing in New York at Cristin Tierney Gallery, where he retyped Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

On an especially hot day near the end of July, I stopped by Marie’s Crisis, where artist Tim Youd was hard at work between two of the historic café’s red windows. The Los Angeles-based artist was in New York’s West Village to continue his retyping of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, in conjunction with his *Ecstatic Reading* solo show at Cristin Tierney Gallery in Chelsea. The typewriter on the folding table in front of him — an Olympia SM3 — was the same model Highsmith used, and the café was a beloved hang out for the author when she lived in the area. While the location and material were perfect, the single page on which Youd was typing the full novel had nearly ripped in two, shreds of letters falling off like confetti. But he was familiar with these challenges, as the book was the 51st he’s retyped since starting the 10-year *100 Novels* project in 2012.
“The genesis of the project came from my recognition that on a formal level, when you are looking at two pages of a book, you are looking at two rectangles of black text inside the two larger rectangles of the white pages,” Youd told Hyperallergic. “I had a palpable desire to crush the words of the entire book into this formal image.”

That completed compression of Highsmith’s words is now on view at Cristin Tierney, still wedged in the Olympia SM3. “In Ripley, the action starts in New York and moved to Italy,” Youd said. “I reversed course, began this cycle in Italy and finished in New York.”

Eventually, it will be framed as a diptych like the others currently on the gallery walls, with the mess of ink and mangled paper on one side, and a sheet embossed by Youd’s keystrokes on the other. Some diptychs feature dark rectangles of impenetrable ink — including Jack Kerouac’s Big Sur — some pages are tattered with gaping holes, such as John Rechy’s City of Night. “As I see these diptychs now, I see them as relics of the specific performance, and also as metaphors for what happens when we read,” Youd explained. “We don’t remember every word no matter how prodigious our memory — rather we are left with some kind of layered impression.”
The first book in *100 Novels* was Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, typed on an IBM Selectric. Youd was inspired by Thompson’s own retyping of *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*, an exercise to delve into their inner workings. Earlier this year, Youd retyped Highsmith’s Venice novel — *Those Who Walk Away* — along the Grand Canal. He attacked John Williams’s *Augustus* at the Museo dell’Ara Pacis in Rome, and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell To Arms* at Lake Maggiore in Switzerland (the novel’s protagonist crosses the lake in an escape to neutral territory). Each is a meditative experience with a book, and the inclusion of the model of typewriter used by the author, and a setting that resonates with the texts, deepens that connection.

Youd has also clattered the keys through William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* at Faulkner’s former home in Oxford, Mississippi, and Charles Bukowski’s *Post Office* outside Los Angeles’s Post Office Terminal Annex, where Bukowski worked as an angry letter sorter.
Visitors to Cristin Tierney in early July may have been greeted by the rhythm of his typing from the gallery itself. As part of the process, he makes detailed annotations in each book, and sometimes films the typing with a GoPro worn on a harness. The finished pieces have a tactile relationship to the effort of writing a novel, yet *100 Novels* is also about learning how to read devotionally.

“If you had asked me five years ago if I thought I was a good reader, I would have said yes,” Youd stated. “From where I sit today, if I think about how my ability to read in a deep and devoted way has improved over the course of the 51 novels, I’d have to say I wasn’t so good as I thought. But that’s the mark of progress, isn’t it?”

Tim Youd typing Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in Cristin Tierney Gallery for his *Ecstatic Reading* exhibition (courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery)

The completed typing by Tim Youd of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, on view in Cristin Tierney Gallery (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)
Installation view of Tim Youd: Ecstatic Reading at Cristin Tierney Gallery (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The completed typing by Tim Youd of Patricia Highsmith’s The Talented Mr. Ripley, on view in Cristin Tierney Gallery (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)