In the often assiduously intellectualized realm of contemporary art, conceptualizing has been pushed to places it probably didn’t really need to go. But LA based artist Tim Youd actually discovered a gap in the interconnectivity of modern culture, and has spent the last several years trying to close it, to fascinating effect.

Indeed, his monumental project 100 Novels finds him balancing along the imaginary line between performance and painting, as he sets about typing out a hundred of the most exalted works of literature in public. The end result are his surrealistic diptychs, that ask whether words can perhaps have underlying abstract interpretations.

He’s currently 67 novels in; and at this year’s Armory Show in New York, March 4 – 8, he will be undertaking Sylvia Plath’s 1963 classic The Bell Jar, a shocking (at the time) window into mental illness and its devastating effects. Whether by design or by chance, it’s a stunningly relevant work, considering our current and escalating mental health crisis.

Youd will be at the Cristin Tierney gallery booth #303, Pier 90, within the show’s Perspectives Section. In the lead up, with caught up with him to discuss what it all means.
What was the initial impetus for 100 Novels?

One day, years ago, I was reading a book while sitting in my studio. I had a moment of insight, when I realized that the page of a book is, on a formal level, a rectangle of black inside of a larger rectangle of white. I had a palpable urge to crush the book between my hands, to flatten it in a way that all the words of the book made the rectangle of black dense and thick and textured.

With that in mind, I decided I'd retype a book, all on one page, so that all the words would be there in that rectangle. And I'd retype the book on the same make/model typewriter used by the author. The words would accumulate sentence upon sentence, until the page was dense and illegible. And that's exactly what happened when I retyped Hunter S. Thompson's Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.

How do you choose the specific novels?

The novels have to have been typed by the author. I have to be compelled by the book enough to want to spend a week or two or three retyping it. And a location for the performance has to become available for me. I've sought permission from writers' houses, I've been approached by curators, my gallerist has helped me. The various performances have come together in different ways.

What is particularly meaningful to you about The Bell Jar?

The Bell Jar has been on my list since I first decided I'd retype a hundred novels. Thanks to LA Times arts writer Carolina Miranda, I've visited Smith College's Special Collections Library to review the Sylvia Plath archive. Smith College's Plath scholar Karen Kukil advised me on the [specific] typewriter Sylvia Plath used for The Bell Jar. It's a retyping that's been long in the works.

Is there a personal discipline that you're trying to achieve via this process?

I'm trying to be a devoted reader, and to become a better reader with each retyping. I thought I was a pretty good reader before I began the 100 Novels project. Now 67 novels into it, I can say I wasn't a good reader at all. I've improved, and I hope to keep improving. It is its own reward to love and appreciate the art of these novels.

How do the location and setting affect the process?

I've been to a lot of places at this point. Some synch up seamlessly with the performance—Virginia Woolf's cottage in East Sussex, England, or William Faulkner's House in Oxford, MS, for example. Some locations are unorthodox, like the parking lot of the Terminal Annex Post Office in downtown Los Angeles, where I retyped Charles Bukowski's Post Office.

The Armory will be a unique situation.

It will present its own challenges. There are going to be a lot of people, and many of them may want to engage with me—and through all my previous performances, I've engaged back. At the same time, I want to have the uninterrupted time to focus on the book. My gallerist Cristin Tierney and I have talked about a few ways to do this. We are going to start on Wednesday March 4, and adjust on the fly.

How would you describe the finished product?

My finished piece is a diptych, echoing the formal quality of two pages of a book. The pages are heavily worked and distressed, having been through the typewriter repeatedly. It's both a drawing and a relic. And all the words of the novel are present, but illegible.