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Tim Youd's Quest to Read Closely by Retyping 100 Novels



Colleen Smith
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Artist Tim Youd's intention to become a better reader goes to extremes, and typewriters are key to this endeavor, called *The 100 Novels Project*. Youd is on course not only to read one hundred novels but also to retype them—each on a single page atop another sheet.

"There are only so many books we get to read in our lives, and that's upsetting," he said. "I'm trying to do my best with my chance to read as many as I can as closely as I can."

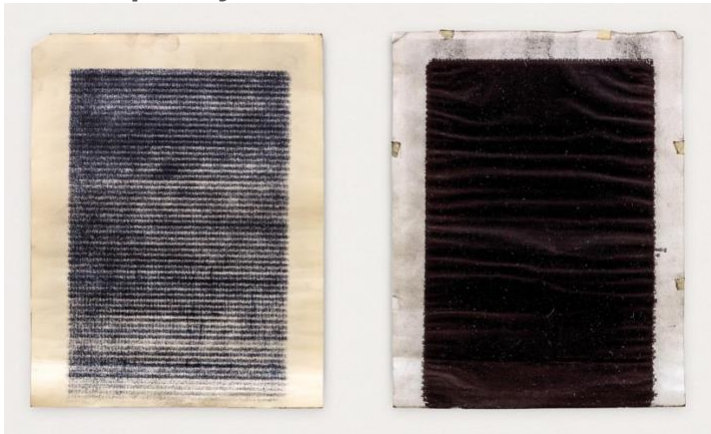
Youd's three-pronged approach combines literary, performance, and visual art. With his retyping of each page of a novel, the paper in his typewriter grows ink-soaked and tattered, and Youd patches it to continue. When his process concludes, the top sheet is a blur of letters, the novel condensed like a black hole. Youd frames what resembles a literary Rorschach test alongside the under-sheet bearing the typewriter keys' imprint. The result is a diptych reminiscent of an open book.

"It's like a drawing of a novel," said Youd, who launched his project in 2013. Aside from the clatter of keys, typewriters offer Youd more than any computer keyboard could. He added, "That connection to the actual making of the mark is like holding a pencil or pen or paintbrush."

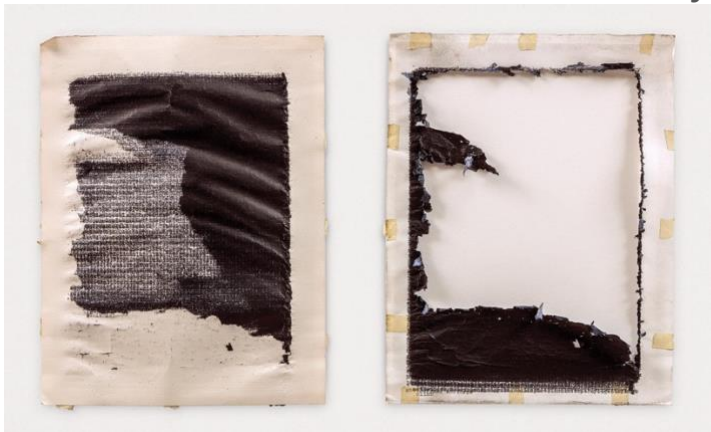
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Tim Youd retyping Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* this summer at Atlanta Contemporary.

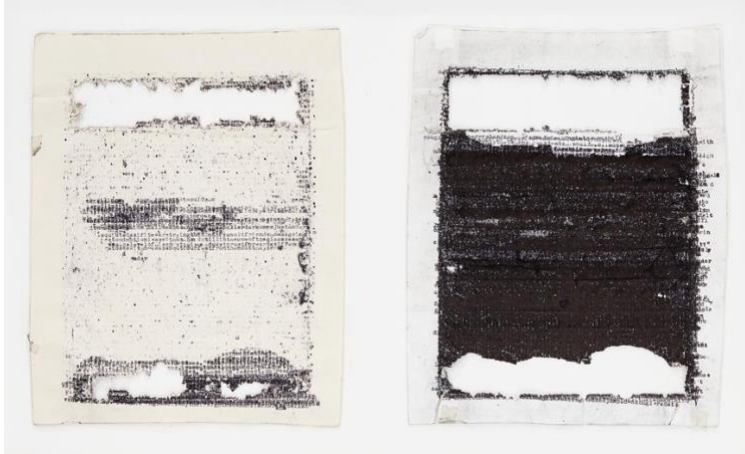


Tim Youd, Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, 2018.

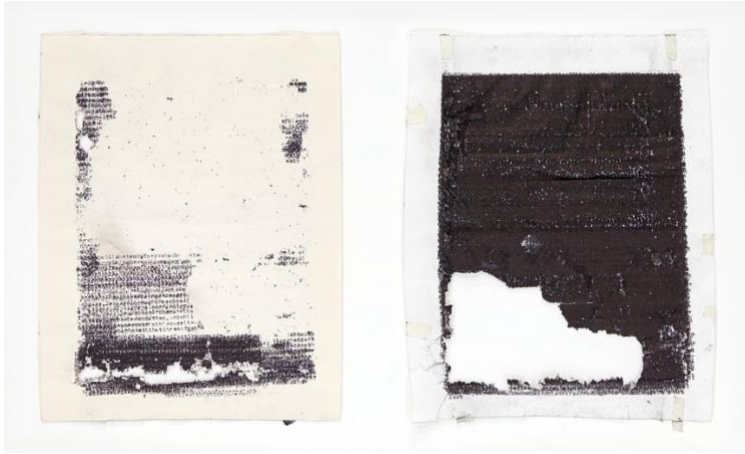


Tim Youd, James Dickey's *Deliverance*, 2022

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Tim Youd, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, 2016



Tim Youd, Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, 2016

He focuses on books written in English on typewriters. His studio in Los Angeles houses at least one hundred typewriting machines. To determine the make and model used by an author whose work he is retyping, he studies photographs, researches online, visits author archives, and interviews family members and biographers. He has even consulted a man, now deceased, who specialized in ransom note forensics for the FBI. “My standard is artistic, not necessarily scholarly,” Youd explained.

Furthermore, Youd sets up the specific typewriter in a setting personally significant to the author. He has retyped novels at William Faulkner’s house, Carson McCullers’s childhood home, and Virginia Woolf’s summer cottage, as well as dozens of other locations throughout the United States and Europe. Youd has twice retyped Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and twice publicly burned his work as a stance for the novel and against book censorship.

A two-finger hunt-and-peck typist, Youd finished typing his eighty-third novel—*An American Marriage* (2018) by Tayari Jones—in Atlanta this summer. The retyped work by Jones, an author born and raised in the city, features in his solo show *Georgia Retyped*, on view through October 6 at Atlanta Contemporary. Youd has retyped novels in Georgia five

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times in the past eight years, with the exhibition including these pieces as well as examples of his studio art.

“Tayari is a contemporary author, making her typewriter usage quite unusual,” he noted. When Youd met Jones, he learned that she uses three different typewriters when working on her novels. “As it is my practice for a retyping to use the same make and model typewriter the author used, I’ve acquired three machines identical to Tayari’s machines. I used each one in the retyping, dividing the novel into thirds.”

For Youd, his process of spending so much time with a novel takes on an intensity far beyond ordinary reading. “When I sit down for a retyping, I’m attempting to bring my best energy and focus to bear on the novel and to come to terms with the book on an almost existential level.”