Prop to Passion

It started as an idea. Create a series of photographs paying homage to the tools used by famous artists. Hemingway seemed to be a good artist to initiate the project. I began to research his writing habits. What time of day? Where did he write? And of course, what typewriter(s) did he use? It was little surprise to learn of his disciplined and deliberate writing routine; In the morning, re-writes of his efforts from the day before and a general belief that it is better to write one page of greatness than 20 pages of mediocrity. I was a little sad to learn that Hemingway never drank when he wrote. That was reserved for his afternoons of fishing and I am sure whisky was an essential part of his tackle box. Hemingway didn't smoke cigars less a staged photo op at some point in time.

The first typewriter owned by Hemingway was a portable Corona 3 given to him by his girlfriend of the time, Hadley Richardson in 1921. The Corona 3 was a tremendously popular typewriter with approximately 675,000 manufactured between 1912 - 1941. The metal frame is stout with a facade of two arched eyebrows presenting the Corona logo. Round glass keys, yellow with age, contrast perfectly against the black frame and silver stike plates. The Corona 3 would make an outstanding centerpiece for the photo.

Given the production numbers of the Corona 3, it didn't take long to find a suitable candidate. It was listed as non-working and offered at a modest price. It had an appropriate amount of wear on the painted surfaces and a lovely golden patina on the keys. The operability of the machine was irrelevant. I dated the Corona with a birth date of October 1920. I was immediately captivated by the mechanics of the machine and its tight tolerances, especially given its 94 year age. It was evident that the Corona 3 was built to last, no planned obsolescence other than the ribbon. Clearly, a parts department was not part of Corona's business model.

As advertised, the Corona was not operable. Keys stuck, the platen did not advance and it would not grab paper. As the new owner of this piece of history, I felt a paternal obligation to revive the little Corona 3. With the investment of a weekend, a can of compressed air, cotton swabs, gun oil, dematured alcohol and a box of miscellaneous springs from Home depot and the Corona 3 was back to life. The irony of the Corona 3 repair
is that it would not have been possible without the very technology that
in turn obliterated the typewriter industry; namely the personal computer
and its connectivity to the Internet. Websites dedicated to typewriter
repair and restoration, user groups offering years of expertise and gen-
erously responding to a "911" post from a frustrated enthusiast attempting
a repair and even eBay which has become an online photo archive of
sorts.

For all of the aesthetic attributes of the manual typewriter, its
remarkable engineering and manufacturing, its the process of writing on a
typewriter that is the most enthralling. Joyful but frustrating, simple
but complex, addictive yet therapeutic. Knowing that there is no CUT/
COPY/PASTE, no spell check and no magical reconfiguration of margins
all raise the stakes. It forces the writer to slow down, something counter-
intuitive in our modern society. Writing on a manual typewriter requires
a great deal of planning, forcing one to critically think about the writing
process before sitting down to the keyboard. The typewriter demands
focus, exclusive attention and dedication from the operator. The reward
is an output derived from a deeper consciousness than is typically
delivered in our world of 140 characters or less. The imperfections of
typing are its beauty.

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