

ARTFORUM

Tom of Finland

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

True to his pseudonym, gay erotic illustrator Tom of Finland was, in fact, a Finn. Born Touko Valio Laaksonen in 1920, he was by all accounts a humble man. As a young recruit in World War II, he was majorly inspired, creatively and sexually, by the hypermasculine, physically fit military aesthetic of Allies and Nazis alike (minus the fascism of the latter). He went on to invent a vast army of his own, featuring a battalion of big-dicked studs who were forever on the hunt for a good fucking and sucking. By the time he died in 1991, at the age of seventy-one, his reputation as an iconic pornographer was known the world over; it has only expanded since.

Starting in 1968, Laaksonen developed a series of black-and-white graphic novels titled *Kake*, named after its mustachioed star character. Two different stories, rendered in pen and ink and arranged in sequential page order, were on display at David Kordansky Gallery. Both tales are rape fantasies that, in classic Tom of Finland fashion, are portrayed not as abhorrent, but rather as opportunities for playful debauchery, with plenty of position swapping so that everyone gets a chance to either top or bottom. The action is fast and furious: No need for lube or brushed teeth, it's all wham, bam, fuck me man! The outrageousness of everything is downright comical.

In *Kake vol. 22* – "Highway Patrol," 1980, *Kake* is depicted as a leather-clad motorcyclist savagely ravished by a couple of highway patrolmen behind a giant billboard. Meanwhile, *Kake vol. 21* – "Greasy Rider" 1978, begins as a trespassing dispute in the countryside and turns into yet another ménage à trois, involving boot licking, double penetration, water sports, and more. One can practically hear the ecstatic moans and groans emanating from each framed panel. On a gentler note, the exhibit also included preparatory sketches, highlighting the artist's masterly drawing skills, along with "mood board" photocollages, consisting of images torn from magazines and newspapers of men and their assorted riding machines.

Obviously, *Kake* and company's sexploits aren't meant for your Aunt Gladys. But in this day and age, someone's likely to be offended. Has the alarm been rung about this unabashed celebration of "toxic masculinity?" Honestly, to judge the work with such a flinty spirit is silly and counterrevolutionary. For most of the past century, gay guys were portrayed as prancing pansies. Laaksonen smashed the stereotype, providing an alternative full of smiling sexy studs who provoked countless men to launch their own sexual explorations. His vision especially influenced the 1970s gay clone era and helped provoke much cultural debate about what constitutes "manliness" in both attitude and appearance. How wonderful that Laaksonen, as if by magic, turned shopworn images of machismo into gloriously flaming symbols of fagginess that often make even the draggiest of drag queens look pretty modest by comparison.

Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1978, pen and ink on paper, 11¼ × 8¼". From the twenty-two-part suite *Kake vol. 21* – "Greasy Rider."





REVIEWS

Interestingly, or maybe ironically, the gallery's West Chelsea location was once an after-dark playground for Tom of Finland types. Up until the early 2000s, the neighborhood and the nearby Meatpacking District were sprinkled with various leather bars and clubs. (Only the Eagle remains, a few blocks from Kordansky, surrounded by glass high-rises.) Nowadays, the Tom of Finland Foundation in Los Angeles, which helped curate the exhibition, keeps Laaksonen's legacy alive via artist residencies, events, shows, and contests. Meanwhile, a slew of retailers provide a wide range of merchandise, from oven mitts to jigsaw puzzles, emblazoned with all kinds of kinked-out ToF imagery. Even in a gentrified, commodified world, Laaksonen's work still has the ability to shock, delight, and arouse. Horny hunks with ten-inch erections will never go out of style.

—Linda Simpson