

Quadros, Karly, "Has Any Artist's Sexual Fantasies Shaped Culture as Much as Tom of Finland's?,"
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ART

Has Any Artist's Sexual Fantasies Shaped Culture as Much as Tom of Finland's?

The artist is the subject of an expansive new showing at David Kordansky Gallery that fully fleshes out his enduring impact on contemporaries and next gen artists alike.

By Karly Quadros

July 10, 2026



James Bidgood, *Bobby Nude from Below, First Cover (Bobby Kendall)*, 1960s / 2025.
© Estate of James Bidgood. Courtesy of CLAMP, New York

In the decades since Tom of Finland's drawings—public/private fantasies of musclebound studs, hot cops, and bicurious cowboys—first graced the pages of *Physique Pictorial*, no single artist has had such an indelible impact on gay aesthetics. Into tight denim, bare HGH-sculpted chests, and pushbroom mustaches? You may have Touko Laaksonen to thank. (Yes, despite the Americana, he really was *of Finland*, and didn't permanently make Los Angeles his home until 1980.)

At once retro in its invocations of pre-AIDS sexuality and forward-looking in its anticipation of peptide-powered physicality, Tom of Finland's artwork is a past, present, and future picture of queer sensibilities. Now, a generation-spanning exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles—"Tom's Stretch," opening today and running through Aug. 22—is showcasing the groundbreaking artist's work alongside more than 70 artists including Matthew Barney, Peter Hujar, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, Salman Toor, Jonas Wood, Mike Kelley, and more.

With an exhibition so large, the scope of artists, mediums, and themes are, of course, as expansive and diverse as Tom of Finland's own work. Some of the exhibition's most familiar names, such as Mapplethorpe and Paul McCarthy, have faced scrutiny and censorship over their careers for so-called obscenity (Tom of Finland's work and *Physique Pictorial* were in a perpetual battle of wills with U.S. obscenity laws). Other pieces, like photos from James Bidgood (director of the landmark film *Pink Narcissus*), Mike Kuchar's '80s skin magazine illustrations,



Tom of Finland, *Tom's Men*, 1970. Photograph by Jeff McLane © Tom of Finland Foundation. Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation and David Kordansky Gallery.

and the theatrical extravagance of the Cockettes, resonate with Tom of Finland's campier side. Still others like R. Crumb, Spain Rodriguez, and G.B. Jones of the zine *Tom Girls* existed in an alternative, countercultural publishing microcosm that went on to unite a burgeoning punk ethos and gay pride movement.

Ahead of the exhibition, *CULTURED* spoke with nine of its participants about Tom of Finland's legacy and the future of erotic art.

Huma Bhabha

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland?

I first saw Tom of Finland's drawings at [*influential SoHo gallery*] Feature in January 1989 when Hudson opened Feature on Broome Street in New York. There were also paintings by Bastille. The invitation card was a Tom drawing. I framed it.

How do today's body politics percolate into your work?

It's like smoke from wildfires... you can't avoid it getting inside of you.

If you were to meet Tom of Finland today, where would you take him?

For a drink.

"Tom's Stretch" features over 70 artists. Which of them would you most like to have a studio visit with?

Tom of Finland.

Hardy Hill

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland?

I came across an issue of [Tom of Finland's leather comic] *Kake* in an online repository of pornographic comics while I was in high school. I was already aware of and, in fact, preferred one of Tom's imitators, Etienne, whose cruder hand and penchant for cruelty appealed to me more than Tom's gravely perfect and silent choruses. Later it became clear that the quality of Tom's attention was a deeper and more interesting form of cruelty. Recently I have appreciated that Tom's faces—low slung as they are—can be understood as axonometric projections of the face as viewed from below, as I like to think, from the perspective of hell.

What does making (homo)erotic work look like today?

When it comes to "erotic art," we tend to fall back on a naïve politics of recogni-

tion. That is to say, we still tend to view erotic art in terms of what Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis," politically balancing it by understanding it as a violation of the injunction against speaking sex aloud. Of course, this falls apart under anything beyond the most cursory examination of the work in question. In Tom of Finland's case, it is laughable: He is more interested in the modulation of value across volume than in depicting anything like "homosexual experience." It would therefore be better to understand Tom as an inheritor of a pictorial regime inaugurated by Seurat than to think of him as engaged in a politics of recognition.

Worse still, this perspective elides the most germane aspect of erotic art: namely, that it is art, and in many cases pictures, static tableaux. As such, this lapse obscures the natural affinity between the erotic as such and the pictorial. (The erotic is a principle of exchange that allows an image, whether living or artifactual, to "stand in for" the impossible object of the libido. The erotic therefore does two things: it imbues the image with the incandescence of the impossible object, while at the same time rendering this image indifferent, insofar as it can itself be substituted by another image. In this respect, the erotic is fundamentally figural: it is representational to the degree that it works by substitution, and abstractive insofar as it denatures the particular.)

The structural similarity between the operations of the libido and those of the image—their shared concern with substitution, indifference, and effects of distance—makes erotic art uniquely useful in bringing these "formal" issues to bear in the humid precincts of the subject itself. I think today it is incumbent on us to understand the subject on these terms: as a subject that increasingly struggles to distinguish itself from a glossy pencil drawing of a jackboot.

How do today's body politics percolate into your work?

I am interested in the enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulder.

If you were to meet Tom of Finland today, where would you take him?

I don't think we would get along.

Jonathan Lyndon Chase

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland?

Around 2010 during my undergraduate studies. It was late summer, and I was working as a barista at a Borders bookstore in the heart of Philadelphia. An elder queer customer—who was lively, quirky, creative, and very horny—brought up his work in conversation, which prompted me to look it up. I immediately recognized the distinct, highly charged style from browsing the Internet during my formative years. Today, my personal library is stocked with many of Tom of Finland's books.



Ana Benaroya, *In the Limelight*, 2025. Photograph by Dario Lasagni. © Ana Benaroya. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

I frequently refer back to them as the work of an old queer master.

What is your relationship to risk as an artist working today?

I have a very intimate relationship with risk. In my work, this means experimenting with a variety of mixed media materials, as well as aiming for honesty and being unapologetic within my practice. For me, risk is a vital way to find the power of vulnerability.

If you were to meet Tom of Finland today, where would you take him?

I would love to take him to the Bike Stop, a Gay leather bar in Philadelphia.

"Tom's Stretch" features over 70 artists. Which of them would you most like to have a studio visit with?

Salman Toor, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Robert Gober, and Paul McCarthy.

Kye Christensen-Knowles

What does making (homo)erotic work look like today?

The recent exhibition "Yukio Mishima and Pier Paolo Pasolini: Clues for a Confrontation—Without Silence, Without Looking Away" at the Italian Cultural Institute in Tokyo feels encouraging. Dennis Cooper is getting a handsome republication of his "George Miles Cycle" with Grove Atlantic. It suggests that there remains space for artists to engage the unspeakable, the erotic, and the transgressive as necessary sites of inquiry. These are not peripheral concerns; they are among art's oldest responsibilities.

How do today's body politics percolate into your work?

Often associated with toxicity, the current tendency of masculinity to consume itself in the public sphere strikes me as, on balance, a productive development. I see it as the labor pains of a broader renegotiation—one that expands the historically rigid boundaries of masculinity to admit qualities long coded as feminine: artifice, vulnerability, autoeroticism, abstraction, and self-fashioning.

What is your relationship to risk as an artist working today?

Risk is both the prerequisite and off-gas of any legitimate advance in representation. Every worthwhile image courts the possibility of misunderstanding. The nuance of presentation ought not be confused with endorsement. I'm after an image that buckles under its own friction.

If you were to meet Tom of Finland today, where would you take him?

I'd prefer him to take me somewhere.

"Tom's Stretch" features over 70 artists. Which of them would you most like to have a studio visit with?

Monica Majoli. Her aside, Mapplethorpe. Because Mapplethorpe is king.

Mark Grotjahn

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland?

It's hard for me to pinpoint it, but my guess is going to the Folsom Street Fair, either in high school or just after high school. There were people in BDSM gear walking around, but you were also allowed into different apartments where you could see installations. In those apartments, I believe that's where I first saw his drawings and posters.



Julien Ceccaldi, *Locker Room Etiquette*, 2026. Photograph by Dario Lasagni. © Julien Ceccaldi. Courtesy of the Artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

What about his work struck you most then, and how has your connection to it evolved over the years?

What struck me about it then was just how overt it was, how much about sex it was, and objectification and body parts, and just nothing hidden. Just going for it. No holds barred! I think, intuitively, I felt the naughty part of it. Not just that it was sex, but also that it was gay sex. And at the time there was something different about showing gay sex, more hardcore than hetero sex.

I know more about the history of Tom of Finland now and have more thoughts on the rule-breaking of it. A brave and positive and unapologetic stance, mixed in with how beautifully the work is rendered. How fucking imaginative it is. How much fun the dudes are having.

I also was able to buy some of his drawings, and on my third or fourth sober birthday, David Kordansky gave me a drawing of these guys pouring beer on each other's fucking dicks. It made me so happy.

What does making (homo)erotic work look like today?

I mean, what does it look like today? I have no idea. There's no one way that it looks. It looks a million different ways.

How do today's body politics percolate into your work?

It's such a huge relevant topic right now. I'm interested in all sorts of unwritten rules. For instance, there is this stuffy conservative part of the art world that says what can and can't be depicted, and I sometimes like to poke that bear. In part because that bear needs to be poked and in part because it is fun.

What is your relationship to risk as an artist working today?

I like it. I like having the potential of failing and of falling on my face. I like making things that other people aren't making. I like making work that can be misinterpreted.

If you were to meet Tom of Finland today, where would you take him?

I'd be more interested in finding out where he wanted to take me.

"Tom's Stretch" features over 70 artists. Which of them would you most like to have a studio visit with?

Mike Kelly. And then living, Richard Hawkins.

Tala Madani

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland? What about his work struck you most then, and how has your connection to it evolved over the years?

I became aware of him my first year in college at my friend Orlando's dorm room. It was a Tom of Finland calendar and it made me oh-so-happy: the bursting bulges in all the pants and shirts felt like an orgasm itself.

Over the years, understanding the breadth of his work and the consistency of what he desired, and the pleasure he took from bringing it to life in his work itself became a thing to study.

What is your relationship to risk as an artist working today?

For me, risk is everything. I embed risk in how I approach painting every day. Not so much about what is being depicted, but about myself, jumping almost with blindfolds into whatever I'm working on like a trapeze walker. I really need to not

know and then to know. I've set myself up this way because it gives me the most sense of being alive and excited.

If you were to meet Tom of Finland today, where would you take him?

I'd take him to my studio and ask him to model for me, or we can go to his studio and I can watch him work, but really, I'd let him take me somewhere.

What's turning you on in the art world right now? What's turning you off?

Events like this show that bring the treasures of the recent past or the far away past back into our psyche really excite me right now. Performance artists like Geo Wyex and any opportunity to see works by Andrea Fraser I hunt for. Meaningful transgressions turn me on. Safe and conservative art turns me off. Farmer's market art turns me off—by that, I don't mean art you can find at the farmer's market, but work that makes you feel you're in a Sunday morning farmer's market walking by it—no edge.



Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *NEVER LET ME GO I XII. only by special order [12]*, 2026. Photograph Dario Lasagni. © Tiona Nekkia McClodden. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland?

I first saw and learned of Tom of Finland while visiting Outwrite Bookstore & Coffeehouse in Midtown Atlanta back in spring 2001. His art covered a few of the gay men's magazines and books, and he had several art books, so it was a dominant aesthetic and became easy to recognize. I started going to that bookstore when I moved to Atlanta for college in the fall of 2000, weekly, to read through their art and film magazines. Outwrite was also where I expanded my knowledge of the leather community and specifically learned of lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer and got to read and gain more insight into Cheryl Dunye's early work as well.

What does making (homo)erotic work look like today?

In this weird pornocene we've worked ourselves into, it looks like restraint. I know with my work I've moved into a minimalism period that is less figure and more poetics and emotion.

How do today's body politics percolate into your work?

In my refusal to change or adapt my work to them honestly. I am determined and committed to staying on what I refer to as "my own time," which is basically the timeline and tenets that I have set out to explore and execute within my practice. While I remain aware of where things stand today, my work is actually pushing forward with my interest in desire and power relations in the work and within sexuality at the intersections of lesbian identity and power.

What is your relationship to risk as an artist working today?

I hurt myself, unwittingly, with each body of work that I produce, so right it's physical, and now I'm recovering my right shoulder from a new series of works on leather and the cut. Each canvas is hit via epee sword 35 times, so I am in a sling three days out of the week to stabilize things. In other areas it's been bizarre censorship, canceled exhibitions, and other chaos.

If you were to meet Tom of Finland today, where would you take him?

I'd take him to have an in-depth conversation in the Etienne Auditorium, which is located in the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago. I feel that Dom Orejudos is a beautiful and more diverse extension of the visual identity that Tom of Finland also pushed aesthetically.

"Tom's Stretch" features over 70 artists. Which of them would you most like to have a studio visit with?

I would definitely go with Felix Gonzalez-Torres because of the sheer beauty he pushed during an extremely hostile time period, or Monica Majoli for her quiet consistency.

Nayland Blake

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland?

I first saw Tom's work in 1980 at Christopher Street Books, a porn store and peep booth emporium in New York. I think that the compilation I found was one of the first non-pirated American reprints. Even though lots of other illustrators were copying Tom by that point, I immediately saw how distinct his work was, not only in the touch of his pencil technique, but in the warmth and ease of his figures. His work retains its erotic charge for me because of those qualities.

What does making (homo)erotic work look like today?

The gallery and museum world remains overwhelmingly erotophobic. In part this is because they are public spaces, and throughout our society people panic whenever the public touches upon the erotic. So there are plenty of people making erotic work, but it circulates in ways that are primarily subcultural. This isn't as bad as it seems: in most circumstances the makers of today's erotic art are in vigorous dialog with the people who consume it. They are making fan art, furry art, digital images birthed out of goth, queer, and kink communities. It circulates at conventions, meetups and online groups. This isn't so different from the ways that Tom's work circulated in the physique mags and mail order services.

How do today's body politics percolate into your work?

I am queer, old, fat, Black, and nonbinary. My work is about helping interesting people to enjoy those facts about my body as much as I do.

What is your relationship to risk as an artist working today?

My greatest risk is hiding from the personal changes that my working process illuminates for me, it is the risk of not going where I need to go next.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

When did you first become aware of Tom of Finland? What about his work struck you most then, and how has your connection to it evolved over the years?

I'm certain I came across Tom of Finland's work in the mid '90s in middle and high school, the early internet gay websites that were digitizing and posting his drawings. By 1998, I had one of those postcard books in my stash, picked up

at some bookshop in Hollywood. They were and still are exciting, hilarious, and while titilating they're completely non-threatening. Everyone has a smile. I like them but I'm not interested in leather or fetish gear. My connection has changed over the years, from desire to ambivalence to admiration. It's complicated and not easily resolved and, as long as we can honestly discuss it not as historic artifact but something alive and in dialogue with today's politics and a leather world more diverse, queer, Black, and brown than Tom would have perhaps liked, that's ultimately a good thing.

What does making (homo)erotic work look like today?

Making homoerotic work should mean expanding the possibilities of visibility and expression, and acknowledging that strictly homoerotic work is not radical unless it intersects with, supports, and is acknowledges trans, queer, lesbian and non-normative heterosexual life.

What is your relationship to risk as an artist working today?

Risk is in realizing moral values. I am thankful to have a voice as an artist, and believe it is important to stand against America's imperial fascism, Israel's enabled genocide of Palestine, and for peace and social justice. If we have platforms, it's our responsibility to speak. Art is not escapism.