



# The Stretch of Tom of Finland's Influence

By Ignacio Darnaude on July 10, 2026

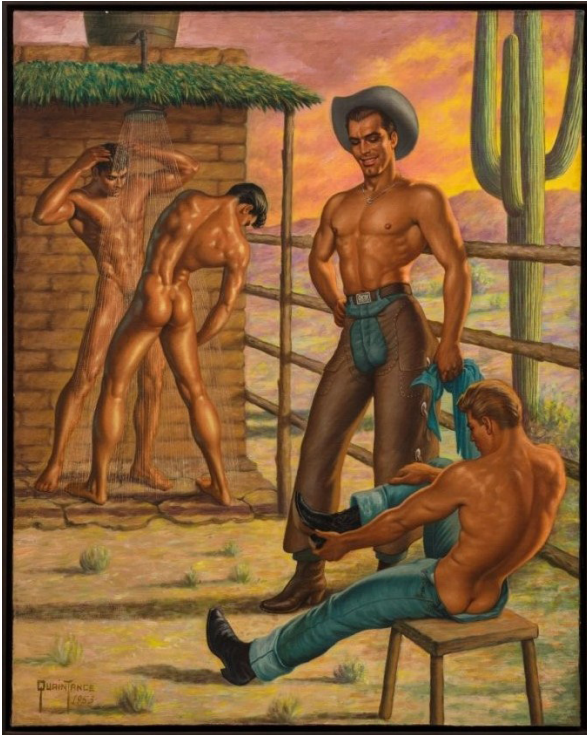


*Tom of Finland: "Tom's Men," 1970. Photo: Jeff McLane. Copyright Tom of Finland Foundation.*

*This review is bonus content for The G&LR's July-August 2026 issue, "Art in Place." All images are courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.*

Let's begin by setting the record straight. Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen, 1920-1991) is far more than a "gay artist." He is a revolutionary trailblazer and one of the most influential artists of the 20th century.

Long before body politics, sexual agency, and queer visibility entered mainstream discourse, Tom realized gay men didn't have positive role models. He appropriated the visual language of heterosexual masculinity—bikers, sailors, policemen, cowboys, construction workers—and transformed it into an unapologetically queer mythology.



George Quaintance: "Sunset," 1953. Photo: Jeff McLane.

At a time when homosexuality was criminalized across much of the world, depicting gay men as hyper-masculine, powerful, desirable, and joyful was an act of cultural resistance. Tom's fantastical stories and aspirational imagery weren't simply meant to arouse. They were a defiant political act that emboldened the LGBT community to embrace its sexuality, giving visual form to the confidence and sexual freedom that liberation would later provide.

Tom also had a profound impact on mainstream culture, from fashion to music (Freddie Mercury, The Village People) and film (*Querelle*). However, because of the explicit nature of his work, it wasn't until the early 2000s that the words "master artist" were used to describe him. A

new exhibition is going to smash these prejudices to smithereens.

"Tom's Stretch," a groundbreaking, expansive group exhibition on view through August 22 at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, brings together more than seventy artists spanning eight decades to explore Tom of Finland's enduring legacy.

The exhibition features an extraordinary range of artists, including Paul Cadmus, Félix González-Torres, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jim Shaw, Salman Toor, Jonathan Lyndon Chase, William E. Jones, Monica Majoli, Doron Langberg, and Paul McCarthy. It is remarkable that this appears to be the first exhibition devoted to examining the profound influence of Tom of Finland's queer imagination on successive generations of artists working across painting, photography, performance, collage, comics, and installation.

The exhibition opens with one of his defining works, *Tom's Men* (1970). Thirteen of Tom's unmistakable hunks encircle a contemporary—and considerably more well-endowed—version of Michelangelo's *David*. The mischievous comparison is deliberate. Tom inserts himself into a centuries-long artistic tradition in which the idealized male nude served as an excuse to express same-sex desire. His unique contribution was to make explicit what earlier artists left coded.

But don't let this exceptional piece undersell Tom's impact. One of the show's most compelling insights is that Tom's influence extends beyond his legendary men with impossibly broad shoulders, inflated biceps, and monumental bulg-



Jenna Gribbon: "Cosmic Inflections," 2026. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Copyright Jenna Gribbon.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya: "Positioning (\_DSF7986)," 2023. Photo: Brica Wilcox. Copyright Paul Mpagi Sepuya. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

es. Tom didn't intend them to be realistic. They were inspiring, belonging to the world of fantasy.

For marginalized communities, fantasy wasn't just escapism. It became a survival tool, a way of imagining a liberated future. Tom understood this instinctively, and this vision echoes throughout the exhibition, where artists across generations similarly stretch the body beyond realism to imagine new identities, desires, and social possibilities.

Each section of the beautifully curated show highlights different unspoken themes, anchored by Tom's original works, some finished, some preparatory, all equally stunning.

The first section features a dazzling 1983 commissioned portrait by Tom, echoed nearby by a sensual photograph by Paul Mpagi Sepuya. Not far away, Tom's 1973 drawing from his *Cyclist and the Farmer Boy* series takes your breath away. His textured rendition of muscle and leather brings to mind, dare I say it, Michelangelo's mastery.

Sections devoted to sailors and cowboys, bondage and cruising, leave no doubt about Tom's impact on Matthew Brannon's alluring Marine or on Julien Ceccaldi's anime-inspired locker room scene. A wall with comics from pioneers such as R. Crumb reaffirms how Tom's comics were used to critique the status quo.

The show reveals how Tom's stretch also applied to gender. A huge wall showcases artists who aspire to create the body they want in a variety of forms, teaching us that we are all permitted to be creative authors of our destinies. We see here James Bidgood's late 1960s photographs, which suggest alternative Hollywood narratives, and a painting by Mike Kuchar that elevates the idea of the "catch" to epic proportions. Also in this section are works by Steven Arnold and Bob Mizer, who gave Tom his pseudonym.

The next section features portraits created with a tender gaze, from a luscious figure by Paul P. to Jenna Gribbon, known for her portrayals of her female partner. Gribbon is one of the many female artists in the exhibition. Cindy Sherman's provocative, larger-than-life photographs prepare us for Ana Benaroya and Ruby Neri, who reimagine the female nude through aggressive figures that reject passive beauty. G. B. Jones' *Tom Girls* zine reimagines Tom's work through a lesbian lens, and Anita Steckel paints female nudes softly protecting Tom's male lovers.

The risks Tom took in his work were matched by his daring approach to distribution. Constrained early in his career by obscenity laws, Tom's drawings circulated in underground networks that galvanized a global gay community. A work by Japanese artist Go Mishima reveals how he felt empowered to make art after encountering Tom's drawings in the 1950s.



Cindy Sherman: "Untitled," 1992. Copyright Cindy Sherman. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

The show also sheds light on Tom's interaction with fellow artists such as George Quaintance, who influenced Tom tremendously, and Peter Berlin. Quaintance's painting in the show will astonish anyone who's only seen his work reproduced in beefcake magazines. Even artists whose practice couldn't be more different paid Tom their respects. Mike Kelley invited Tom to lecture at CalArts in 1985, acknowledging his impact publicly. Kelley's cheeky paintings in the show allude to Tom's "sword fighting" images.

Many of the works on view were created in the brief window between Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic. Tom created works promoting safe sex, but his effort wasn't enough to slow the tide of infections. A devastating 1989 painting by Hugh Steers, an artist who portrayed loneliness, fear, eroticism, and even joy under the specter of AIDS, stops you in your tracks.

*Tom's Stretch* ultimately argues that Tom's legacy lies not simply in his iconography but in the permission he gave artists to exaggerate the body, to celebrate desire without apology, and to imagine identities unconstrained by social convention. In today's climate of renewed attacks on bodily autonomy, gender expression, and queer visibility, his permission feels anything but historical.

Tom died at 71, in 1991, without witnessing his mainstream success. Had he stood in the packed galleries at David Kordansky, surrounded by visitors of every generation, nationality, gender, and sexuality, he would have seen the ultimate confirmation of his life's project. The world has finally stretched far enough to meet him.

*Ignacio Darnaude is an art historian whose ongoing project, Breaking the Gay Code in Art, explores queer narratives hidden within art history. His lectures and articles are featured on his Instagram account, @breakingthegaycodeinart.*



*Hugh Steers: "Floor Mirror," 1989. Photo: Dan Bradica Studio. Copyright: © 2025 Estate of Hugh Steers/Artists Rights Society, New York. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.*