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Art Gallery Shows to See in August

By Carolina A. Miranda

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This week in Newly Reviewed, Carolina Miranda covers three shows in Los Angeles: a group exhibit with Tom of Finland at the center, Betye Saar's "wearable art" and Esther Pearl Watson's spaceships.

MID-WILSHIRE, LOS ANGELES

'Tom's Stretch'

Through Aug. 22. David Kordansky Gallery, 5130 West Edgewood Place; 323-935-3030, davidkordanskygallery.com.



An untitled piece by Tom of Finland. Tom of Finland Foundation, via David Kordansky Gallery

In an interview last month, Representative Becca Balint, Democrat of Vermont, likened Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's exaggerated notions of masculinity to the virile men drawn by Tom of Finland, the artist known for producing erotic illustrations of square-jawed leather men and chiseled farm boys.

Born Touko Laaksonen in Finland in 1920, the artist is regularly mentioned as a key precursor to the biker aesthetics of the experimental film "Scorpio Rising" by Kenneth Anger and the macho-man looks of the Village People. This may, however, be the first time he has been invoked in relation to the president's cabinet.

Thirty-four years after his death, Tom of Finland remains a touchstone. And "Tom's Stretch" articulates his relevance to visual art. The exhibition puts his drawings, watercolors and collages in conversation with works by more than 70 mostly contemporary artists exploring themes like sexuality, fetish and extreme physiques.

On display are pieces by Laaksonen's contemporaries, like the California photographer Bob Mizer, whose beefcake magazine, *Physique Pictorial*, was the artist's springboard to fame. But also included are unlikely acolytes, like the conceptual artist Mike Kelley, who once invited Laaksonen to lecture at the California Institute of the Arts. A sequence of paintings by Kelley, "Lobed" (2008-09), depicts a series of biological forms, including a pair of penises facing off.

The sex, naturally, is abundant. Graphite pieces by the Los Angeles painter Joey Stella show corporate mascots in flagrante delicto. And eroticism permeates even the abstractions, such as the seductive, bondage-inspired paintings by Tiona Nekkia McClodden, made with black leather and jute rope.

It is a playful, uninhibited gathering — just right for a steamy summer. It's also a winking statement of affirmation in the face of the homophobic and anti-trans vitriol that has wended into civic discourse these days.
