

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

Tom of Finland
Pen and Ink 1965 – 1989
March 20 – May 1, 2021

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to announce Tom of Finland: Pen and Ink 1965 – 1989, an exhibition of drawings in a range of media, including pencil, pen, ink, marker, and gouache. Together, these pictures demonstrate the breadth of graphic production key to Tom of Finland's creative output throughout his lifetime. Curated in close collaboration with Tom of Finland Foundation, the exhibition opens on March 20 and will be on view through May 1, 2021.

Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish; b. May 8, 1920, d. November 7, 1991) has long been recognized as one of the twentieth century's great visual innovators. A masterful draftsman, Tom produced an expressive body of work that depicts masculine, empowered gay men fully enjoying their sexuality, engulfed in intimate moments of unabashed joy and pleasure. This exhibition showcases the artist's diverse material approaches to his meticulous figurations—including sharp pen and marker linework, ink washes, and delicate pencil shading—that exemplify the boldness of his vision and the virtuoso qualities of his hand. With their skillful observation of light and classical composition, and their images of muscular men engaged in complex motions, the drawings reveal formal concerns that call to mind the work of Caravaggio and Rembrandt.

Based on graphite renderings and preparatory sketches, Tom's inked works were made using black pen and marker for the purpose of reproduction in publications. The printed medium provided a space for Tom to produce and disseminate his fantasies in the fullest possible capacity. An important precursor for many later underground LGBTQ zines, Tom's work was presented in graphic novels such as Trucker's Delivery (1965), Sightseeing the Guards (1973), Circus (1975), Greasy Rider (1978), and perhaps most notably, the collection of 26 Kake comics (1968–1986) titled after the namesake protagonist—the artist's recurring alter ego. A pen and ink picture from Kake in the Wild West (1982), for instance, shows the escapades of a leather-clad Kake in a cowboy western bar, documenting the convergence of two gay communities in an era still grappling with the criminalization of homosexual love. Tom radically hijacked traditional masculine roles; throughout the show, his emboldened cowboys, sailors, and bikers engage in couplings at turns boisterous, erotic, idyllic, and tender.

Throughout his body of work, Tom gave legendary form to an imaginative universe that helped fuel real-world liberation movements and enabled gay men to have agency over their sexuality in new ways. His revolutionary representations of the male body responded to his own desires and real-life experiences, drawing from careers in advertising and the military, as well as existences in Finland and Los Angeles. In turn, he not only imagined but also materialized a world that celebrates the boundlessness of desire, inspiring generations of artists and people of all kinds to embrace the empowering, libidinal forces in each of us.

An accompanying, fully illustrated catalogue will be published in fall 2021.

Tom of Finland has recently been the subject of numerous solo and two-person exhibitions across the globe, including Tom of Finland – The Darkroom, Fotografiska, Stockholm and Tallinn, Estonia (2020); Tom of Finland: Love and Liberation, House of Illustration, London (2020); Reality & Fantasy: The World of Tom of Finland, Gallery X, Tokyo and Osaka (2020); TOM House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland, Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2018); The Pleasure of Play, Artists Space, New York (2015) and Kunsthalle Helsinki (2016); and Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2013). Recent group exhibitions include Art & Porn, ARoS Aarhus Art Museum, Aarhus, Denmark, and Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2020); Camp: Notes on Fashion, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2019); Keep Your Timber Limber (Works on Paper), Institute of Contemporary Art, London (2013); and We the People, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York (2012). His drawings are in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Kiasma, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki; Art Institute of Chicago; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among many other institutions.

Tom of Finland Foundation, dedicated to preserving Tom's legacy and supporting erotic art since 1984, operates out of the Tom of Finland House (TOM House), the artist's former shared residence and now a Historic-Cultural Monument in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles.

Tom of Finland
Pen and Ink 1965 – 1989
March 20 - May 1, 2021



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 23 - "In the Wild West"), 1982

pen and ink on paper
13 1/8 x 8 7/8 inches
(33.3 x 22.5 cm)

framed:

16 1/2 x 14 x 1 1/2 inches
(41.9 x 35.6 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.003)



Tom of Finland

Untitled, 1979

marker and graphite on paper
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.5 x 21 cm)

framed:

17 7/8 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.4 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.002)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "Camping"), 1976

graphite on paper
11 3/4 x 8 3/8 inches
(29.8 x 21.3 cm)

framed:

16 x 12 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(40.6 x 31.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.005)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "Camping"), 1976

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:

18 x 14 1 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.004)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "Trucker's Delivery"),
1965

pen and ink on paper
6 5/8 x 4 7/8 inches
(16.8 x 12.4 cm)

framed:
12 3/4 x 11 x 1 1/2 inches
(32.4 x 27.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.013)



Tom of Finland

Untitled, 1967

pen and ink on paper
7 1/2 x 5 5/8 inches
(19.1 x 14.3 cm)

framed:
13 3/4 x 11 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches
(34.9 x 30.2 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.024)



Tom of Finland

*Untitled (from Kake vol. 19 - "Curious
Captain")*, 1975

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.019)



Tom of Finland

*Untitled (from Kake vol. 19 - "Curious
Captain")*, 1975

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.009)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 19 - "Curious Captain"), 1975

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.008)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 19 - "Curious Captain"), 1975

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.021)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "On the Bus"), 1978

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
17 x 13 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(43.2 x 34.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.016)



Tom of Finland

Untitled, 1989

marker and graphite on paper
11 5/8 x 5 7/8 inches
(29.5 x 14.9 cm)

framed:
18 x 12 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 30.5 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.026)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "Circus"), 1975

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.018)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "Circus"), 1975

pen and ink on paper

11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches

(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:

18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches

(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)

(Inv# TF 21.017)



Tom of Finland

Untitled, 1982

marker and pen on paper

11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches

(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:

18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches

(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)

(Inv# TF 21.010)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 17 - "Loading Zone"), 1975

pen and ink on paper

13 x 9 1/2 inches

(33 x 24.1 cm)

framed:

19 1/4 x 15 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches

(48.9 x 40 x 3.8 cm)

(Inv# TF 21.020)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 17 - "Loading Zone"), 1975

pen and ink on paper

13 x 9 1/2 inches

(33 x 24.1 cm)

framed:

19 1/4 x 15 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches

(48.9 x 40 x 3.8 cm)

(Inv# TF 21.023)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 17 - "Loading Zone"), 1975

pen and ink on paper

13 x 9 1/2 inches

(33 x 24.1 cm)

framed:

19 x 15 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches

(48.3 x 40 x 3.8 cm)

(Inv# TF 21.007)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 8 - "Hi-Jacked"), 1971
pen, ink, and gouache on paper
8 1/4 x 5 7/8 inches
(21 x 14.9 cm)
framed:
14 1/2 x 12 x 1 1/2 inches
(36.8 x 30.5 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.011)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from Kake vol. 21 - "Greasy Rider"), 1978
pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)
framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.015)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "Sex in the Shed"),
1975
pen, ink, and gouache on paper
9 1/8 x 8 7/8 inches
(23.2 x 22.5 cm)
framed:
14 x 14 x 1 1/2 inches
(35.6 x 35.6 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.006)



Tom of Finland

Untitled, c. 1982
graphite and marker on paper
16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches
(41.9 x 29.8 cm)
framed:
22 3/4 x 17 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(57.8 x 45.1 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.012)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (from "Setting Sail"), 1974
graphite on paper
12 1/8 x 8 5/8 inches
(30.8 x 21.9 cm)
framed:
18 1/2 x 14 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(47 x 37.5 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.022)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (Preparatory Drawing, from "Setting Sail"), 1974

graphite on paper
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.5 x 21 cm)

framed:
17 1/4 x 14 x 1 1/2 inches
(43.8 x 35.6 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.014)



Tom of Finland

Untitled (Preparatory Drawing, from Kake vol. 13 - "Sightseeing"), 1973

graphite and marker on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.027)



Tom of Finland

Untitled, 1968

pen and ink on paper
11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches
(29.8 x 21 cm)

framed:
18 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches
(45.7 x 36.8 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# TF 21.025)

TOM OF FINLAND

1920-1991
born 1920, Kaarina, Finland

EDUCATION

1946 Markkinointi-instituutti, Helsinki, Finland

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

(* indicates a publication)

- 2021 *Pen and Ink 1965 – 1989*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2020 *Tom of Finland - The Darkroom*, curated by Berndt Arell, Fotografiska, Tallinn, Estonia; Fotografiska, New York, NY; Fotografiska, Stockholm, Sweden
Tom of Finland: Love and Liberation, presented by House of Illustration, Tom of Finland Foundation, and the Finnish Institute, House of Illustration, London, England
Reality & Fantasy, The World of Tom of Finland, GALLERY X, Tokyo, Japan
**Tom of Finland: Made in Germany*, Galerie Judin, Berlin, Germany
- 2018 *TOM House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland*, organized by Graeme Flegenheimer, Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, MI
- 2017 *Touko Laaksonen – Tom of Finland: Of Music and Men*, Waino-Aaltonen-Museum, Turku, Finland
The Man Behind Tom of Finland: Loves and Lives, curated by Susanna Luoto, Salon Dahlmann, Berlin, Germany
**The Man Behind Tom of Finland: Ecce Homo*, curated Susanna Luoto, Galerie Judin, Berlin, Germany
- 2016 *The Pleasure of Play*, Kunsthalle Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
- 2015 *The Pleasure of Play*, Artists Space, New York, NY
Sealed with a Secret: Correspondence of Tom of Finland, Postimuseu, Tampere, Finland
**Early Work 1944 – 1972*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- 2013 *Tom of Finland Preliminary Drawings*, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, England
- 2012 *Tom of Finland*, Kulturhuset, Stockholm, Sweden
Tom of Finland: Male Masterworks, World Erotic Art Museum, Miami Beach, FL
- 2011 *Tom of Finland: Public and Private*, Antebellum, Hollywood, CA
Tom of Finland: Original Drawings, PHD, St. Louis, USA
Tom of Finland, European Capital of Culture, Logomo, Turku, Finland
- 2009 *Tom of Finland*, Schlechtriem Brothers, Berlin, Germany
- 2008 Galería Espacio Mínimo, Madrid, Spain
- 2007 Inman Gallery, Houston, TX
- 2006 Galerie Jean-Luc & Takako Richard, Paris, France
Helsinki City Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland
Rough, Western Project, Culver City, CA
Coming of Age, Charles Cowles, New York City, NY
- 2005 *Tom of Finland*, Galería Espacio Minimo, Madrid, Spain
Tom of Finland, Maes & Matthys Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2001 Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1999 James Van Damme Gallery, Brussels, Belgium
The Adventures of Kake, Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
The Most Famous Finn, Finnish Institute, Paris, France
Jyvaskyla Art Museum, Jyvaskyla, Finland
YYZ Artist Outlet, Toronto, Canada
TBA, Chicago, IL
- 1997 Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
Galleri Lars Boman, Stockholm, Sweden
- 1995 Galerie Emanuel Perrotin, Paris, France
- 1994 Feature Inc., New York, NY
Schwules Museum, Berlin, Germany
Museum des Erotik Kunst, Hamburg, Germany

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- Club Champion, Canberra, Australia
- 1993 Gallery Daniel Bucholz, Cologne, Germany
- 1992 Galerie Pelin, Helsinki, Finland
A Memorial Retrospective, Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York, NY
- 1991 Amos Anderson Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland
Feature Inc., New York, NY
- 1989 Feature Inc., New York, NY
- 1988 Feature Inc., New York, NY
- 1987 Rob Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1985 Rob Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1984 Galerie Jansen, Berlin, Germany
Andres Ufer, Berlin, Germany
- 1983 Rob Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1982 Score, Los Angeles, CA
Rob Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Ambush, San Francisco, CA
- 1981 Rob Gallery, New York, NY
Rob Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1980 Rob Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Robert Samuel Gallery, New York, NY
- 1978 Rob Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Feyway Studios, San Francisco, CA
Eons Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 1973 The Revolt Press Bookstore, Hamburg, Germany

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

(* indicates a publication)

- 2019 **Circus of Books*, curated by David Fierman and Rachel Mason, Fierman, New York, NY
 **Art & Porn*, ARoS Aarhus Art Museum, Aarhus, Denmark; Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark
 **Camp: Notes on Fashion*, curated by Andrew Bolton and Karen Van Godtsenhoven, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
 The Foundation of the Museum: MOCA's Collection, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
- 2017 *Social Surfaces*, organized by Jay Sanders, Artists Space Books & Talks, New York, NY
 A Spaghetti Dress for World Peace, Park View, Los Angeles, CA
 Over the Rainbow, curated by Réne-Julien Praz, Praz-Delavallade, Los Angeles, CA
 Get'cha Head in the Game, The Naughton Gallery, Queen's University, Belfast, Ireland
 Please fasten your seat belt as we are experiencing some turbulence, Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai, China
- 2016 *Olympia*, curated by Karma, Galerie Patrick Seguin, rue des Taillandiers, Paris, France
 Desire, curated by Diana Widmaier Picasso, presented by Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian, Moore Building, Miami, FL
- 2015 *Slash: In Between the Normative and the Fantasy*, curated by Kaspars Vanags and Gary Everett, kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, Latvia
 #*RAWHIDE*, curated by Dylan Brant and Vivian Brodie, Venus Over Manhattan, New York, NY
- 2014 *Richard Hawkins & William S. Burroughs, Cerith Wyn Evans, Isa Genzken, Tom of Finland*, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Germany
 LET'S GO LET GO: In Memoriam Hudson, 33 Orchard, New York, NY
 Abandon the Parents, curated by Henrik Olesen, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark
 Do Not Disturb, curated by Elmgreen & Dragset, Gerhardsen Gerner, Oslo, Norway
 Stroke: From Under the Mattress to the Museum Wall, Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, New York, NY

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- 2013 *Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland*, MOCA, Los Angeles, CA
Happy Birthday Galerie Perrotin/25 Years, Lille300/Tripostal, Lille, France
Keep Your Timber Limber (Works on Paper), Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, England
I Want That Inside Me, Feature Inc., New York, NY
Rare and Raw, Leslie + Lohman Museum, New York, NY
- 2012 *Punt*, Feature Inc., New York, NY
We the People, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, NY
Summer Camp, Schroeder, Romero & Shredder, New York, NY
- 2011 *Tom of Finland and Mates*, Galerie Mooi-Man, Groningen, The Netherlands
Compass in Hand, Martin-Gropius-Bau, New York, NY
Stripped, Museum of Sex Comics, New York, NY
- 2010 *Compass in Hand*, Valencian Institute of Modern Art, Valencia Spain
Never Alone: A Look at Tom and His Friends, One Archives Gallery, West Hollywood, CA
Tom of Finland and then some, Feature Inc., New York, NY
The Boneyard, Maloney Fine Art + Kim Light, Los Angeles, CA
Revealed: The Tradition of Male Homoerotic Art, Central Connecticut State University Art Galleries, New Britain, CT
- 2009 *Sex in the Streets*, Erotic Heritage Museum, Las Vegas, NV
The Collectors, Nordic & Danish Pavilions, 53rd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
Tattoo, Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts, New York, NY
Compass in Hand: Selections from the Rothschild Foundation Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
- 2008 *Pre-Revolutionary Queer*, The Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN
Liverpool Biennial, Homotopia CUC, Liverpool, England
Ma Bête Noire, Phil, Los Angeles, CA
Glossolalia: Languages of Drawing, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Trade, Phil, Los Angeles, CA
- 2006 Portland Museum of Art, Portland, OR

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- 2005 Art@Large, New York, NY
- 2004 James Kelly Contemporary Museum, Santa Fe, USA
- 2000 Whitechapel Gallery, London, England
Made in California, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
10th Anniversary Exhibition, Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York, NY
- 1999 Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland
Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1998 Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University, Orange, CA
Wessel + O'Connor Fine Art, New York, NY
- 1997 Patricia Faure Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
Master Drawings, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
The Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, Scotland
Meyerson-Nowinski Gallery, Seattle, WA
Akademie der Kunste, Berlin, Germany
- 1992 Casco Gallery, Utrecht, Belgium
Summer Group Exhibition, Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York, NY
Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1991 Rutgers State University, New Brunswick, NJ
Amos Andersonin Taidemuseo, Helsinki, Finland
Feature Inc., New York, NY
Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Fetish Art, National Leather Association, Los Angeles, CA
Galerie Mosabaka, Helsinki, Finland
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Private Collections, Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York, NY
Matrix Gallery, University of California, Berkeley, CA
- 1990 Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Wessel O'Connor, New York, NY
Micher, Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1989 Matrix Gallery, University of California, Berkeley, CA

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- WIWA International, Cologne, Germany
New Museum, New York, NY
- 1988 Leonardo da Vinci Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 1986 Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, CA
Naked Eyes, International Gay & Lesbian Archives, West Hollywood, CA
- 1983 The Basement, New York, NY
- 1982 I.E.M., Paris, France
- 1976 Stompers (boot shop), New York, NY

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Tran, John, "The subversive happiness of Tom of Finland's men," *JapanTimes.co.jp*, September 25, 2020
"Tom Of Finland Official Biography Released For Artist's 100th Anniversary," *DNAMagazine.com*, September 4, 2020
Rudolph, Christopher, "Open Tom of Finland's Archives in Iconic Artist's First Official Biography," *NewNowNext.com*, September 1, 2020
Westman, Michael, "TOM OF FINLAND – The Official Life and Work of a Gay Hero," *MetroSource.com*, September 1, 2020
"Tom of Finland at 100: the icon who raised the homoerotic to high art," *HeadTopics.com*, July 1, 2020
Clark, Murry, "There's A Gay Porno Stashed In Your Wardrobe: The History Behind Pride 2020's Best Collab," *Esquire.com*, June 30, 2020
Jensen, Emily, "David Kordansky Gallery Imbues Virtual Art Basel Booth With Intimate Portraiture," *HYPEBEAST.com*, June 16, 2020
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Khan, Tabish, "14 Exhibitions Not To Miss In London This Month: March 2020," *Londonist.com*, March 2020
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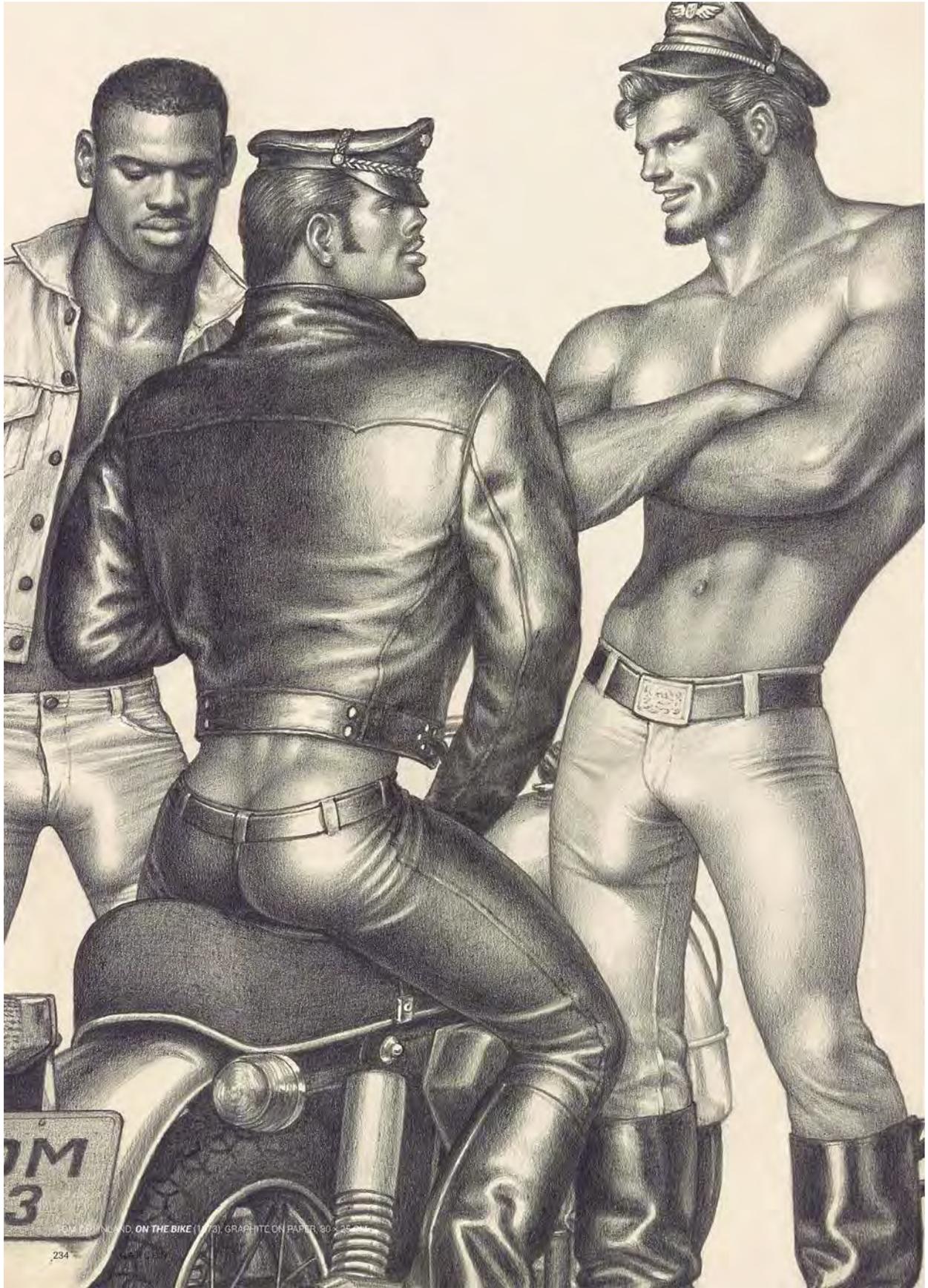
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TOM OF FINLAND

WHERE ART MET PORN AND GAY LIB GAINED SOME MUSCLE

WORDS BY NICK BYRNE

There are certain dates in an artist's life that immediately add an accessible gravitas to their name. A 100 years anniversary is such a thing. The artist here is Touko Valio Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, born in 1920, died 1991. He's in good company, as Helmut Newton is celebrating his 100 years too. Some interesting overlaps here: the love of the larger-than-life, and a feeling for fetish as a bridge to connect art with porn. Traveling back 100 years is quite a time-tunnel trip: to be born in Europe in 1920 meant growing up through the rise of fascism, and being just a little older than a teenager at the start the Second World War. And for the Finnish Touko, it actually meant being a very young soldier during the conflict. It also meant exploring life and lost youth retrospectively through post-war Europe, enduring the grimness of the 50's, and testing the sexual openness of the 60's. He finally hit Los Angeles in the salacious 70's, in mid-career and middle-aged. Despite the darkening shadow of AIDS in the mid-80's, he became successful, financially and emotionally secure, and helped define that era's image of gay masculinity. He was loved by the leather fraternity, and admired by art collectors and gallery owners alike. Sadly death happened in 1991, too early for him to develop further, to continue lecturing in art schools, and for his public to see the full breadth of his work. Luckily, his partner Durk Dehner was able to progress the Tom of Finland Foundation which has done amazing work in many areas of outreach. He has been particularly successful in reconciling two, at first glance, contradictory elements - the artistic and the commercial - and making these elements more complementary than conflicting. So yes, you can buy Tom of Finland bedlinen, wallpaper and bags in top department stores. And why not? If you can dry crockery with a Vermeer tea towel, and



TOM OF FINLAND, ACHIM (LATE 1960S), GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 39 X 26.2 CM

have a Rembrandt as a fridge magnet, you can certainly have a Tom of Finland on your pillowcase. I'd say it's a lot more appropriate! For the tighter purse, you can still get his cockologies for a quick flick and fumble - he had no problem with people using his works as masturbatory tools. Alternatively you can splash out on or, indeed, over a glossy arthouse selection of prints and reproductions. The originals can be seen in some of the world's best museums. In Finland he's become a national treasure, accepted as a serious artist, an idiosyncratic symbol of Finnish chutzpah. To have a Tom of Finland biker on a postage stamp is the most wonderful accolade, bold and generous, showing a clear acknowledgment of his influence on popular culture outside of the gay community itself.

DESPITE THE IN-YER-FACE SEXUAL ANTICS, HIS ART CAN MANAGE TO CELEBRATE THE PRIAPIC AND THE EROTIC, YET SOMEHOW, IN THE CONTEXT OF A FRIDAY-NIGHT-OUT, BE PERVERSELY AS REASSURING AND COMFORTING AS A CONSTABLE PRINT IN AN ENGLISH COUNTRY PUB.

I asked Juerg Judin, the owner of Berlin's Galerie Judin who explained to me the importance of Tom of Finland's work for him, his gallery and interestingly for Germany too:

I started collaborating with the Tom of Finland Foundation four years ago towards an exhibition at my gallery that eventually would become the most comprehensive survey of the artist's studies and sketches - the so-called „roughs“. That initial exhibition, „Ecce Homo - The Preliminary Drawings“, also resulted in my first book on the artist: a fictitious „sketchbook“ that re-united almost all of the 100 hundred works we exhibited in facsimile quality. I was overwhelmed by the feedback for these two projects by old and new Tom of Finland collectors, curators and the artist's companions. In the many interesting conversations that ensued, I realized bit by bit that Germany, and especially Hamburg, had played a vital role in launching and shaping the artist's career. The results of the research that my colleague Pay and I immersed ourselves in, surprised not only us but also the team at the Tom of Finland Foundation. We'll actually be able to tell a completely unknown but crucial part of his story! The pivotal event and turning-point in Tom's career was an exhibition in Hamburg's Revolt Shop in 1976, the first gay porn shop in Europe. It was the artist's first show ever - and we will try to recreate it in at least parts in our exhibition. It was also in Hamburg that the artist met his first serious patrons - such as the owners of Tom's Saloon the only bar that was officially allowed to be named after the him. They recognized his talent, commissioned drawings to advertise their businesses and thereby assembled an exquisite collections of his works. This enabled Tom to get a foothold in the international gay scene. And it was a friend from Hamburg that introduced Tom of Finland to a gallerist in the United States, resulting in the artist's first trip to the US, the country of his dreams. There he also met Durk Dehner, who eventually became his partner in crime, privately and professionally. So although we clearly associate Tom of Finland's leather-clad and fun-loving bikers, policemen, cowboys and skinheads with the United States, it was Germany that gave the impetus for his rise to becoming an international icon of the gay movement! As Berlin based gallerists, Pay and I couldn't be more excited than to being able to shed light on these formative "German" years, the friendships they formed and the works created in that context - and all that in the year in which we celebrate the artist's 100th birthday.

IF YOU GREW UP GAY IN THE 60'S, 70'S OR 80'S THERE'S NO WAY THAT YOU WOULDN'T HAVE COME ACROSS A TOM OF FINLAND CHARACTER. THEY ARE DEFINED BY THEIR OUTSTANDING MASCULINITY, THEIR ENORMOUS VIRILITY, THEY ARE THE HOMO ERECTUS MAXIMUS IN ANY AND EVERY POSSIBLE SENSE OF THE DOUBLE ENTENDRE.

Some key facts. Touko aka Tom of Finland was born to parents who were teachers near Turku. He grew up at a time when 20th century Finland, liberated from both Sweden and Russia, was trying to discover its own identity and its own direction. You could say exactly the same thing about Touko. This is of course true about many a young man, but if you're gay with an artistic bent, you probably feel it more than others. His attraction to men was known to himself, self-acknowledged and acted upon at a relatively early stage. His interactions took place in parks, fields and woods. Part illicit, part lyrical, these clandestine sexual encounters in the "open" made a physical and spiritual connection between nature and a natural urge. It's important for his work. There's a healthy, lusty spirit in the sexual escapades he portrays. You can almost smell the pine forests, and feel the breeze rather than the fetid stench of the darkroom. But let's not get carried away here. Outdoor cruising is a real social leveler. In German you can say: "Nachts sind alle Katzen grau." (all cats are grey at night...), and the felines he patted were gay as well as grey. In the clichéd but not untrue "twilight world of the homosexual", lawyers and judges, actors and doctors, manual workers and office clerks all dropped their guard. Soldiers in particular crept into his sexual dreams and life. His attraction to soldiers is complex. He was attracted to them sexually, but also connected through the camaraderie of soldiers at war. Beyond the fetishisation were true emotions of love, loyalty and loss. For sure there are drawings, not often displayed, which depict men in the uniform of the Wehrmacht as desirable sex objects. But with the passage of time and reflecting military events, there are drawings of equally desirable and attractive soldiers in Russian uniform. And as a constant there are always drawings of attractive, desirable men in Finnish uniform. Sexual attraction going beyond nationhood and politics. Finland was caught in an impossible position in the war, a country forced to change sides, and caught between a rock and a hard place i.e. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Finland was almost destroyed by both armies. It emerged from the Second World War brutally battered and bruised, with one eye warily and wearily watching the Soviet Union, the other looking at Sweden with a mixture of resentment and envy. The post-war Finnish identity may have had Sibelius' Finlandia as its theme, but the country's economy, political identity and social structures were caught between a Slavic suppressive super-state and a liberal Scandinavian model of self-expression. Touko's eye was keenly observant too. I asked the art historian Alice Delage, who works at the Berlin's Galerie Judin, about how we could re-evaluate him in 2020, the year of his 100th anniversary.

Though Tom of Finland has been such a prominent figure of pop culture for many decades, art history has only recently begun to take an interest in him. Thanks to this discipline, a new light can be shed on his oeuvre. Developments in style and motives can be analyzed by which we are also able to compare them to those of other artists. And there's so much to find out ...! While preparing the exhibition „Tom of Finland: Made in Germany“ opening at Galerie Judin this autumn, we discovered a fascinating change of the artist's practice and its perception: From the 1970s onwards, Tom of Finland was finally seen less as an illustrator "just" making advertisements and comic books but as a proper artist. Surprisingly, all that is due to a German network. In this time, the artist starts paying more attention to the details of his compositions and signs them proudly. Also, from then on the name TOM – quite like a brand – is often integrated in the drawings, for example on clothing or the license plates of motorcycles. It seems as if he was empowering himself and empowering his peers at the same time. Today, this message is probably more universal than ever before. Whether belonging to the LGBTQI family or not: There's a 'joie de vivre' in those drawings that lifts spirits and inspires everyone to actually become and enjoy who you are.

It's interesting how we pick up on art as we grow up. There are some artists you discover on school visits to galleries, some artists you grow up with each time you open a tin of biscuits, and when you're older and do galleries on your own, you start personalizing the art you see. It's a little bit smash, a little bit grab, but you soon build up your collection of what is the essential "you" in postcard form. But some artists you have to discover in "specialist shops". And my first such nervous purchase as a very embarrassed late-late teenager was a magazine for the "discerning male" featuring Tom of Finland. It was a rite of passage done by so many of us across the world. In our millions probably. If you grew up gay in the 60's, 70's or 80's there's no way that you wouldn't have come across a Tom of Finland character. They are defined by their outstanding masculinity, their enormous virility, they are the homo erectus maximus in any and every possible sense of the double entendre. They appear as lumberjacks, policemen, soldiers and sailors in a quite unthreatening way - the only thing they shoot is their load. These mountains of manhood have grins as broad as their shoulders, their eyes flash with a knowing yet playful desire - to be honest these men are more Labrador than Doberman. And as for the actual sex? Well those male members are rather daunting, but it's important to emphasize that the scenarios are consensual, mutual and extremely sensual. It's men who are real men playing at being surreally real men...super-real men. It's an exaggeration. It's seriously not serious. It's ironic. It's a paradox. And it's very honest.

TOM OF FINLAND MEANS BEING AT EASE WITH YOURSELF, A LIBERATION OF SEX, A FREEDOM TO EXPLORE, AND STRENGTH OF PRESENCE. IT'S A TENDERLY AGGRESSIVE STATEMENT OF MASCULINITY, A SHARING OF SEXUAL POWER, A LEATHER BOOT KICKING DUST IN THE FACES OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO REGARDED ALL HOMOSEXUALS AS EFFETE AND EFFEMINATE.

I lived in Hamburg in 1982/3, and in my late twenties the leather scene was more dressing-up box than committed life-style. But I now realize that I owe Tom a lot more than I sometimes care to admit. Hamburg's gay scene in the 80's was Tom of Finland writ large. The hub was indeed Tom's Saloon which in its early years had original artwork hanging around the bar. I cruised between there and the post-punk bars which were a short walk away. But Tom's Saloon was a home. People felt comfortable. Cozy and sleazy coexisting in a way you wouldn't necessarily imagine. And that element is in Touko's work. Despite the in-yr-face sexual antics, his art can manage to celebrate the priapic and the erotic, yet somehow, in the context of a Friday-night-out, be perversely as reassuring and comforting as a Constable print in an English country pub. Tom of Finland means being at ease with yourself, a liberation of sex, a freedom to explore, and strength of presence. It's a tenderly aggressive statement of masculinity, a sharing of sexual power, a leather boot kicking dust in the faces of those people who regarded all homosexuals as effete and effeminate.



TOM OF FINLAND UNTITLED, 1977 GRAPHITE ON PAPER 40 x 31.2 CM



TOM OF FINLAND, UNTITLED (1978), GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 40 x 29.6 CM

I talked to Durk Dehner who worked, partnered and collaborated with him from his early years in LA up to his death. His knowledge of Touko's work is encyclopedic. He underlined the generosity of spirit in Tom of Finland's work, and how this spirit is now part of the Tom of Finland Foundation he leads.

Durk, how did the name Tom of Finland come about?

His name was Touko but we called him Tom. When he was given the name Tom of Finland by his agent he was rather upset about it. At that time it was quite common in England and in America for artists working in erotic photography or pornography to actually take on these pseudonyms. And they would often call themselves, using where their origins were from - there was a "Bruce" of L.A. - he was a photographer. And so when the publisher called him "Tom" of Finland, he felt he was somehow going to have to represent his country of Finland. I'll tell you something as a side note on that. He was considering at one point of moving, this was in the 60s, from Finland to England, to London. And he wanted to become "Tom" of London. After evaluating it, and having a close call with some mail that got intercepted, he realized that there was no way that he could actually do what he was doing and be able to function in Britain, because Britain's customs were so invasive in the opening of mail. The Customs had free reign to open anything, and if they opened it and they found pornographic material, they would then potentially be able to pursue the sender and also the recipient. He realized that England was so much worse than even where he was from. And I can confirm that. When we were running our mail order company through the 80s and 90s, and even into the early 00s, when we were sending things to England, we had to repackage them and wrap them in birthday paper! The definition of obscenity was still rather strong in Britain even then.

I am impressed by the way he always wanted to do something for the gay community, and had a clear sense of identity, what drove him to keep on campaigning?

Yes, well Finland wasn't a gay friendly place. Post-war Finland, you have to realize, had the the social pressure of Russia on them. And while they were kept on the outside of the Communist wall, they definitely had the presence of Russia which was very evident in Finland, and they sort of had to watch out. So they didn't get liberalized when the rest of Scandinavia sort of sexually liberated. They never were part of that, because they had Russian controls on them. And so it stayed suppressed, and post-war Finland was rather mean spirited. I want to say that Los Angeles was no better place either, because the police in this town were very anti-homosexual, and they'd raid bars, and they would send in undercover cops in parks. And they would do the same thing as they did in Britain, in that they would expose people through newspapers and destroy their lives. Tom wanted being gay to be normal, to feel proud and comfortable with being homosexual. And he embedded that in his artwork and all of his career and it was really interesting. In his 60s when he was living here in Los Angeles, he was able to speak out about it. How he had that intention right from the beginning. Even though he didn't sit around and think about it a lot, he wanted to see if he could improve and change the self-loathing that homosexuals had had when he started his career, and to enable for them to feel proud of who they were. And crafting that kind of comfortability for us started right in the beginning.

How did Tom of Finland enter your life?

I'm 70 and I grew up in Canada. I never discovered Tom's work till I was twenty-six. Too much self-loathing. Where I grew up, a queer was something to be despised, we were misfits, and we were an aberration of nature. We were mentally not well. And so there was very little to grab on to. But somehow I was able to get through it without being too badly damaged. And so when I discovered his work, I started being involved and working around him. Even back then, although I was so young, what I wanted was for him to have an archive, a foundation. But I had not signed on to that yet. I was too young, and I was helping him with starting his own mail-order company and things like that. But as soon as he started to have public appearances, you know where he would actually be present at an opening or at a bar, he would sign things. I was amazed because I got to sort of stand witness and just shut up and listen. And I got to hear these

young guys sharing with him their stories from right from their heart. That's how important the discovery of his work was in developing them and that it gave them a sense of what they were, and it was amazing.

Why was he so obsessed with this hyper-masculinity?

Don't forget he came out of World War Two. And once he found himself, his own identity, he went straight to work on that. And he went through his own evolutions of expression. He wanted to give homosexuals the thing they were deprived of. And that was masculinity, in that we were represented only by effeminate queens. And he felt that was unfair, and that he should be like a father figure and provide a sense of equality. And so in that way he was very subversive, in that he was providing these masculine super-guys. But the key thing that was so cool about them was that they were homosexual men, and that they were as they were. And so he was very revolutionary in that. And he actually meant, what he wanted was freedom. Equality and freedom of expression of arousal. Tom would actually be absolutely pleased to see that society had actually lightened up, and that they were giving everybody the opportunity to actually express themselves in whatever way that they felt they want, and to love whoever they wanted to love.

Tom's work is going to be shown at the Galerie Judin in Berlin to mark his 100th anniversary. Do you think it's time for a re-evaluation of his work?

I think any artist is going to be re-evaluated, and looked at by new people who will get new things because they're a different generation. And that's how it's kept alive, you know, really wanting to look at the artistic quality in it. He would have wanted to access young developing queers, and wanted them to see his work, and hopefully to be inspired and to feel comforted by it. That was his mainstay. And seeing that duality in his work, because there was a time when his work was being used as masturbatory material under your bed, and yet it was also being used in beautiful crafted art books that were on our coffee-tables. So that's that... And as far as the art world goes, I think that they have run the gauntlet of definitions. He's gone through being a pornographer, to an illustrator, to an artist and, by many, a Master Artist at that. And so there's definitely works within his whole body of work that he did over five decades that really stand out. I would have no problem in acknowledging that. I think that the world is evolving in its appreciation of that. Absolutely. He has these multi-dimensions, and sometimes he's been sold short. Classified below his due rank. But, on another side you know, he didn't mind being classified as a pornographer because he saw the access through this to those young developing homosexuals. He had a very wide spectrum in his works. He was out in nature. He did works set in the dark rooms. He did works that put a smile on your face. And I remember several years back we had an exhibition in Helsinki at one of the museums there. And it had gotten extremely good press. And so there was really a wide attendance and there were families with baby strollers. You know there were the queer couples holding hands and there were straight couples too. A broad spectrum. Elderly women too. And the thing is there are definitely aspects in his work for everybody. At the very least a sense of liberation.

What are the effects of his work on the younger generation of gays?

I think that gays actually are born with a different perspective as to how they view sexuality. You can't separate yourself out from it because it's integrated into who we are. That's one of the gifts that he gives everybody because we're sexual beings. So we've moved the agenda forward and what it means to be a gay male or lesbian. You know I think I got a letter, an e-mail just the other day from a young artist who actually came to our exhibition in London. He wrote me an e-mail, and he told me how empowering it was for him, as an artist and as a young queer to have this kind of show, even in this day and age, when there's all sorts of material out there. That it validated him you know. And so that's something. Running the foundation house here, we have visitors that come every week, and there's pretty much every type of person. Even heterosexual males of the new generation are very comfortable. They're feeling good around his work. You know there's a French photographer, her name is Rachelle Lauren, and I use her quote because she came to an exhibition we had in Paris, and she said because she was beaming, like she was just smiling away. And I asked her if



TOM OF FINLAND, UNTITLED (C. 1967), GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 29.2 x 21 CM

she would reveal to me what was going through your head. And she said, "you know here I stand in front of the works of a man who did not inhibit what was in his heart. And he represents freedom for all of us."

So you feel the "new generation" heterosexual can also identify with Tom's work?

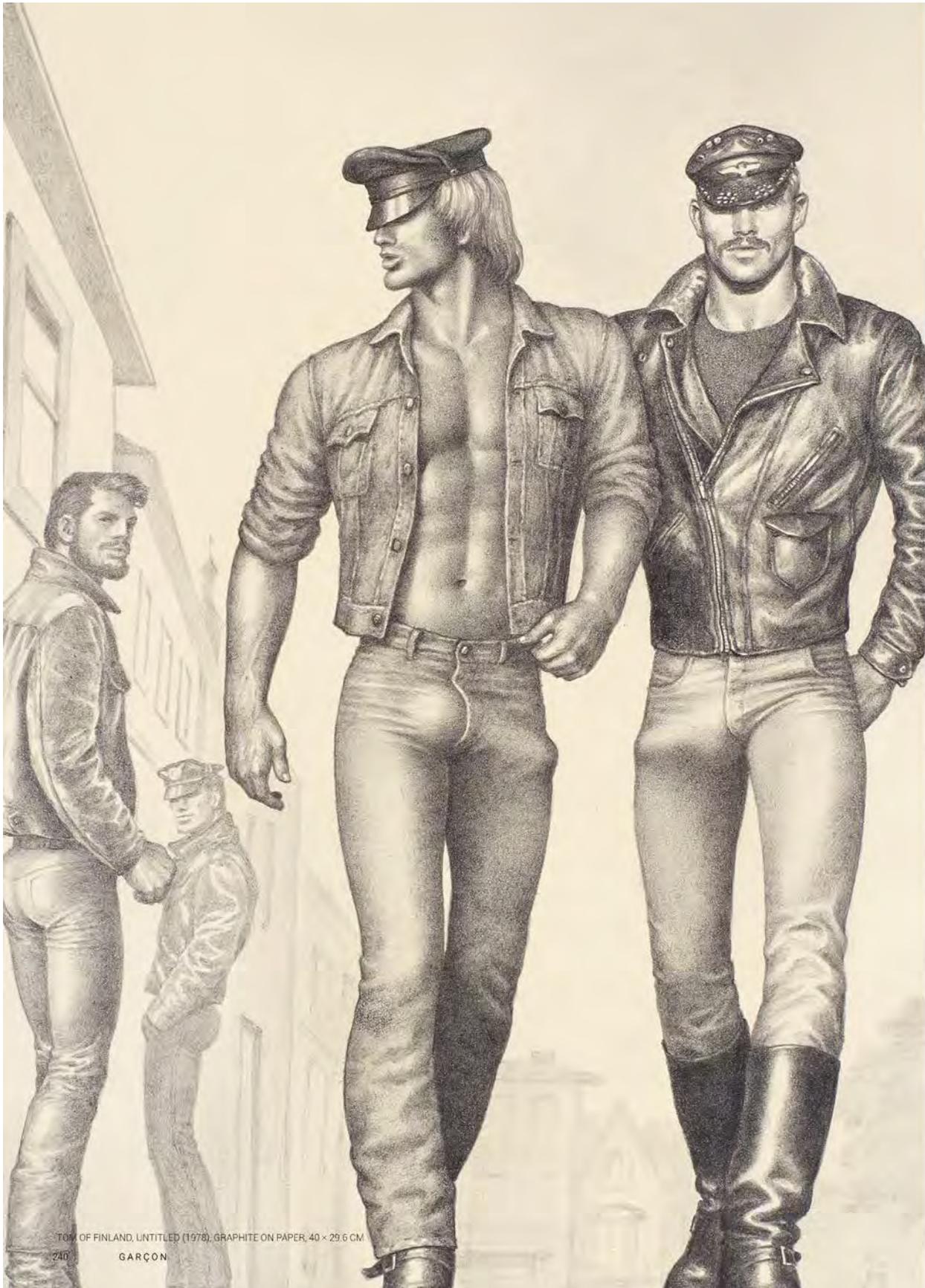
Well for sure. I notice the comfortability of this new generation of heterosexuals. They don't have to come up against the old definitions of what being a full blooded male is. In that there they've been liberalized. You know one of the groups of people who appreciate Tom are women. And young women. They actually really feel that it's finally an opportunity for them to come out, and appreciate sex between men. Men having sex with other men, and really for them to be able to be free enough to enjoy that. And they do. I mean maybe we're moving to a place of space where we're not going to be defined by our birth, as a description of who we are. You know, I have an assistant who works here who's transgender. I never think of him as being anything other than himself, as Alex, the expression of what he is. And that really is freedom. And so with young straight males, I don't know what they're exploring sexually, I haven't actually quizzed them on that, but I know for sure they have access to everything. And their level of comfortability about being around erotic work that depicts the male seems to be there.

Touko worked for the one of the best advertising agencies in the world, McCann Ericsson - do you think it helped him bring together the artistic and commercial sides of his work?

This ability to actually communicate this kind of messaging that they use in advertising, and which is geared to selling a product. And he also wanted to actually do without the written text in his stories very early on, because he realized that that no one would be able to understand it. And they



TOM OF FINLAND, UNTITLED (1973), GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 28.6 x 20.3 CM



TOM OF FINLAND, UNTITLED (1978), GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 40 x 29.6 CM

wouldn't be able to translate it from one language to another. And so he just said I've got to learn how to actually embed my message within the works. Through the way that the men are standing, the way they're looking at each other through the gaze, the exchange of looks. This makes his work global. I mean it's interesting this aspect about him, the artistic and the commercial sides, and how he lives on in both.

Do you think there are other aspects of his work still to be discovered?

The artistic communities are just at the forefront of starting to appreciate his photography. And there's also his collage work that he did on his reference pages, and his doodles. His written prose is another area, and his letter writing. He wrote these very, very beautiful letters. Little pieces of art. There's plenty more for the world to enjoy. Like his travel book. Yes. 1954 when he and his life partner went on a trip to Munich and the surrounding countryside. That's right in the mountains. And it was lovely. I was just showing my assistant the photo of Veli this morning...he's leaning against an old log shed and basking in the sunshine, you know, just on a beautiful morning or something. And Tom took this picture of him, and it was...it's just so charming.

There's an interesting story about the inclusion of African-American men in the drawings, about who originally inspired him...

Yes. He was having access to all of these American publications that were coming through, because of where he worked in the McCann Ericsson advertising agency back in 1961. There were no black guys in Finland, and the only way that he would have access to photographs and things like that were through American magazines. And even then they were very anti-black. The one exception to that was Muhammad Ali. And so the first black guys that Tom was drawing had rather a very strong resemblance to Muhammad Ali, who was of course called Cassius Clay back in the day. Later on we were actually involved in a project about his life, and by then he was an elderly man. But actually there were concerns as to whether they were going to include the drawings that represented him in the book that we were working on, because they didn't want to run the risk of upsetting or offending Muhammad Ali.

Finland never left him as an inspirational force, what other things helped him create?

So going back to Finland I just want to say that his first work was very much about Finland, and was showing his men outside in nature. There were lots of trees. There was sunshine, there was water, all of these elements were very often included. And this is the background to the drawings. I think it was his intention to show that nature is so embedded in things, that these guys can't help themselves, he depicts it because it's part of their life and their death. And that validates these young developing homosexuals in such a positive way, because it shows them as part of mother nature, and there was nothing that they had to be ashamed of. And it really, I think, still carries that message, because of this representation of doing something natural in nature...Sometimes he would transcend into some other altered state when he was drawing, and he would go into what I call his "Tom of Finland world". He stated that his best works were achieved when he was aroused, when he had an erection, and I didn't know how to interpret that in the beginning. And then I started to think about it, and I realized that when you are aroused your senses are all heightened, that your perception of who you're focusing on is enhanced and embellished by it, by the endorphins that get produced, and so of course his works were better then, because he had all of that sensitivity that was being produced at that time.

How did Touko handle his fame as Tom of Finland?

Well he was Finnish first of all. They were trying to get out of this complex that they have been given from generations of being under the thumb of Russia or Sweden. This produced a second class citizenship in that they were they were taught that they were not as good as a Swede or a Russian. So they tended to have their own version of not being good enough. But they were sort of taught to be humble, and certainly not be boastful. But I'll tell you something, when he was going to be honored at this leather convention, there was somewhere between three and five thousand fellows that were in this huge hall. And so he was brought on stage, to be honored, and well we had given him a pill to calm him



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präsentiert

homosexuelle
Originalzeichnungen
und
Gemälde
aus "The Loggers"

von
Tom of Finland

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KAKE und anderen kernigen Typen
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TOM OF FINLAND, HANDSOME (C. 1964), GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 42.5 x 28.8 CM



TOM OF FINLAND IN MITTENWALD NEAR MUNICH, 1955

down. But then they treated like a hero, and by then he was completely comfortable on stage. He was mesmerized. And so he was just waving at the guys. And it's used in the film about him, you've seen it at the end of the film where he's waving. So, yes, he got nervous about certain things, but he would go and speak at art schools. He was an invited guest to talk at at Cal Arts and also Pasadena School of Arts and others. And he would do his best at explaining the circumstances of what surrounded his work, and what life was like, and what Finland was like. He was trying to be educational. And, although English wasn't his native language, he didn't feel like he was limited. But nonetheless he communicated very clearly. He was always very polite and courteous to people, and absolutely did not mind being himself.

Finally, what things do you want the Tom of Finland Foundation to achieve in the future?

I'd like it to keep on having an influence on young artists... Influence. I mean it's a word used around here often, because it's like being inspired by our archives which are filled with hundreds of different artists' work and represent reproductions. And there's so much. We have a plethora of material to indulge oneself in, and it's all there for you take, and to use it to inspire you in creating new works that represent you. In regards to the foundation's contribution to culture, we've got a big role. Some years back there was a sort of breakage of generations. The way we passed on our queer culture in the way that we had done previously, which was by going to bars and and by being parts of clubs that were part of the community, like bowling clubs and camping clubs, I mean they still exist but not in the numbers that they used to. And so I was really concerned about the future for the foundation. But really, what happened was we just started inviting young people to to take advantage of visiting the foundation, taking part in our programs, our residential courses. And it was like so natural, in that they started coming regularly, and started participating. They really wanted to actually learn about who had come before them artistically and so on. And so we created a whole residency program around it. And so there's been new life. That continues to flow through the veins here I think.

"My drawings are primarily meant for guys who may have experienced misunderstanding and oppression and feel that they have somehow failed in their lives. I want to encourage them. I want to encourage this minority group, to tell them not to give up, to think positively about their act and whole being."

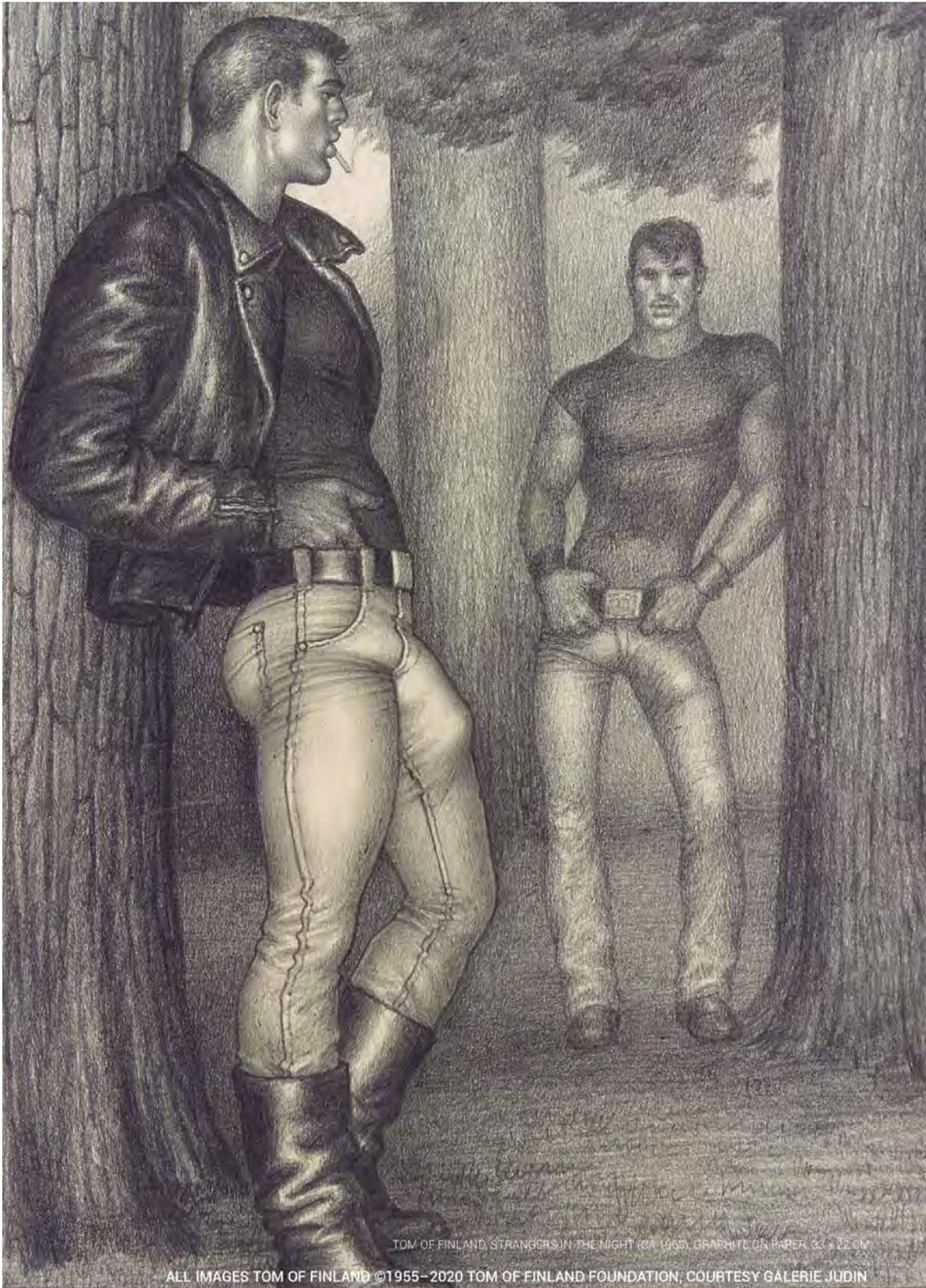
Tom of Finland, 1990



TOM OF FINLAND UNTITLED, 1978 GRAPHITE ON PAPER 41.8 x 31.2 CM



TOM OF FINLAND, UNTITLED (1989), GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 29.2 x 21 CM



STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT



HYPERALLERGIC

Tom of Finland Comes to Japan

Out, proud, and unabashedly homoerotic, the gay artist's iconic imagery has become an international symbol of freedom.

Edward M. Gómez | September 26, 2020



Gallery X at Shibuya Parco, Tokyo, where the Tom of Finland exhibition is now on view (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

TOKYO — In Japan, the kimono's *obi*, or belt, and underlying ties are cinched tight, the better to maintain the elegance of the garment as the body loses itself in its expanses of fine fabric and sculpted form.

Elsewhere, in a world of Eros and good-natured lust, the hunky musclemen who turn up in Tom of Finland's art wear their gear super-tight, too: thigh-hugging jeans; rugged lumberjack shirts; sleek sailor, soldier, or policemen's uniforms; the occasional, well-tailored suit; and leather, leather everywhere — jackets, trousers, chaps, harnesses, jockstraps — the better to reveal *everything* about their endowments, which are generous, ripe, and always ready for action.

Now, in an intriguing cross-cultural encounter that provides some welcome relief from coronavirus angst, along with a last blast of heat — of a different kind — as summer fades, *Reality & Fantasy: The World of Tom of Finland* has opened

at Gallery X at Shibuya Parco, one of Tokyo's most cutting-edge department stores. It will remain on view through October 5.

In many ways, it is an audacious serving of unabashedly homoerotic imagery in a modern, developed country in which, despite a rich history of avant-garde experimentation throughout the arts as well as many pioneering advances in science and technology, "the love that dare not speak its name" is still quietly tolerated — but rarely discussed. Japan is an artistically innovative but socially conservative place.

Nevertheless, the organizers of this latest Tom of Finland exhibition, one of several events taking place internationally this year to commemorate the centennial of the artist's birth — including the publication this month of *Tom of Finland: The Official Life and Work of a Gay Hero*, by F. Valentine Hooven III (Cernunnos, 2020) — are hoping that it might help stimulate discussion about the lives and rights of gay and other marginalized people in Japan.

In fact, newspaper reports in recent years have cited surveys in which large percentages of respondents have expressed support for same-sex marriage in Japan; to date, two prefectures and more than 50 municipalities have begun offering "partnership certificates" for same-sex couples. While not legally equivalent to conventional marriage certificates, these documents are still useful with regard to housing or hospital-visitation rights.

Shai Ohayon, the director of The Container, a small gallery that is one of the leading new-art venues in the Japanese capital, curated the new Tom of Finland exhibition. He began working on the ambitious project two years ago, later gaining the support of the Embassy of Finland and the related Finnish Institute in Japan, which are both located in Tokyo. Citing his background research for the project, he noted, "Some woodblock prints of the Edo period depicted *nanshoku* [which can also be pronounced 'danshoku'], or sex between men in Japan, but later, during the Meiji era, with the advent of sexology and the influence of Western ideas, such activity was discouraged."

Tom of Finland's savvy fans know that the artist was born Touko Valio Laaksonen in southwestern Finland in 1921. His parents were schoolteachers, and Touko grew up in a home filled with art, books, and music. He began learning to play the piano as a young child, and as he grew up he became enamored of the looks of the hardy loggers and farm boys in his rural environs.

Around the age of 19, he began studying marketing and advertising but in 1940 he was called up to serve in the Finnish military in an anti-aircraft unit based in Finland's capital, Helsinki.

During the war, Laaksonen got an eyeful of uniformed sailors, soldiers, and policemen — and during mandatory blackouts, managed to get his hands on some actual specimens, too. After the war, he studied music at Sibelius Academy and worked for an advertising company in Helsinki. In 1956, disguising his real name with the simple signature "Tom," he sent some of the homoerotic drawings he had been producing in private to *Physique Pictorial*, an American magazine whose photos of bodybuilders and classically posed, nearly nude models were



"Reality & Fantasy: The World of Tom of Finland," Gallery X at Shibuya Parco, Tokyo, installation view, with a blow-up of the artist's drawing "Portrait of Pekka" (1975), cover of "Sex in the Shed" (original artwork and enlargement © 1989-2020 Tom of Finland Foundation; photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

ment over the span of a decades-long career. (By the time he died in 1991, he had created some 3500 works.) His precise pencil strokes vividly evoke the textures of his subjects' chest hair or neat haircuts, and his modeling is so deft that the fluffiness of a wool collar, the stiff creases in a pair of jeans, the contours of firm pecs, abs, and butt cheeks, and, notably, the irresistible — for Tom — chiaroscuro of all that leather offer a sense of realism that belies his art's cartoonish exaggeration and fantasy air.

"A naked man is, of course, beautiful," Tom once quipped, adding, "but dress him in black leather or a uniform — [...] then he is sexy!"

Here, a preppy boy meets up with two sailors in white uniforms, their bulbous buttocks ready to pop out of their bell-bottomed trousers; there, two hunks in matching cruisewear — boots, tight jeans, leather jackets and caps — examine a "Who Will Be Mr. Universe?" poster; elsewhere, a tailor checks a visitor's inseam, one end of his measuring tape neatly tucked into his beefy client's crotch. Like many of Tom of Finland's figures, this big lug's perfect, V-shaped torso rises out of a tiny waist that the *grandes dames* who squeezed themselves into Dior's stomach-crushing "New Look" of the late 1940s would have coveted.

The Tokyo show includes a few images, displayed in a little chamber of their own, that are supposedly more risqué. However, given that Japanese heterosexual porn routinely features women bound, gagged, and suspended from ropes, exactly what qualifies here as too transgressive or "obscene"? In the naughty-drawings room, visitors will encounter one of Tom of Finland's most emblematic pieces, a kind of Adoration of the Magi composition in which four lusty lads brimming with Norman Rockwell wholesomeness ogle and dive into a fifth buddy's burgeoning package (he's a cop or soldier spilling out of his uniform) like a gang of Future Farmers of America seizing upon the prize-winning giant zucchini at the county fair.

Tom of Finland's images are all vim, vigor, and gusto; unlike an earlier generation of closeted homosexual artists, like the American Paul Cadmus (1904-1999), whose coded pictures embedded clues for knowing viewers, such as the red neckties that were once gay men's signals to each other, Finland's Tom never had anything to hide. There is no shame, guilt, or self-doubt in his robust, exuberant art.

By the time of the artist's death, the influence of his imagery's fetishized costumes and stylized masculinity could be felt in contemporary photography, fashion, and movies. By email, Durk Dehner, the president and co-founder of the Tom of Finland Foundation, which promotes the artist's legacy, told me, "It seems that, no matter where Tom's work is exhibited, there is one message that is communicated — one of freedom of expression and the freedom of having a sex-positive presence" in society and the world. Daisuke Kobayashi, the head of Shibuya Parco's entertainment division, finds it "fascinating" that by "shining a light on a minority's culture," the Finnish artist's work calls attention to progressive social values.

Tom of Finland once observed that his "dirty drawings" would probably never "hang in the main salons of the Louvre," but mused that, if only the world could learn to "accept all the different ways of loving," then he might someday land "a place in one of [its] smaller side rooms."

For now, in Tokyo, his work has an entire, high-profile venue all to itself — where some visitors might find it hard not to pop a seam, or bust an *obi*, as they take in a batch of pictures that are just too damned hot.

aimed at gay men (overt gay porn was still illegal in the United States at the time).

That magazine's editor scooped up the submissions (Laaksonen called them his "dirty drawings"), named his new contributor "Tom of Finland," and under that moniker, the artist's career as a pioneering creator of thematically assertive, skillfully rendered, enticingly homoerotic imagery was launched.

"I wanted my drawings [...] to show gay men being happy and positive about who they were," Tom of Finland once remarked about his work, which he began showing in exhibitions in Europe and the US in the 1970s, their visibility and increasing popularity coinciding with the emergence of sexual-liberation movements. (This quote, and some of the artist's other *bon mots*, come from the archive of the Los Angeles-based Tom of Finland Foundation and appear as wall texts in the exhibition.)

In Tokyo, 30 of the artist's drawings in pencil, gouache, or marker are on view, offering a concentrated survey of his art's develop-

thejapanimes

The subversive happiness of Tom of Finland's men

John Tran | September 25, 2020



An untitled illustration by Tom of Finland from 1963 | © 1947-2020 TOM OF FINLAND FOUNDATION

With a cornucopia of pert butts and male appendages of heft, "Reality & Fantasy: The World of Tom of Finland," currently on display at Shibuya Parco's Gallery X in Tokyo, is a celebration of transgression, lust, emotional and physical connection.

The artist Tom of Finland's real name, Touko Valio Laaksonen (1920-91), may not be well-known in Japan, but the iconography that he helped popularize — leather vests and captain's caps, handlebar moustaches and biker jackets — has become embedded in the global public consciousness as a defining style of butch gayness both in and out of the LGBTQ community.

The exhibition, which mainly consists of monochrome drawings, comes on the 100th anniversary of Laaksonen's birth, and the solo show of his homoerotic art is a first for Japan. While not necessarily revolutionary in terms of artistic technique, the Tom of Finland image is recognizable for its expert campiness and treatment of the semi-clothed male body that is somewhere between Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Robert Crumb.

As Laaksonen was invested in a medium outside the realm of high art (most of his published work originally appeared in men's magazines), Laaksonen's greatness was first built on fan love, with critical approval from the art world coming later. The exhibition's several satellite events attest as much to the commitment of the events' curator, Shai Ohayon, as to the significance of Tom of Finland's vision for the creation of positive gay culture. The events include screenings of the 2017 biographical film "Tom of Finland" at Parco's White Cine Quinto cinema; an exhibition titled "An Ode to Tom of Finland," which features homoerotic work by contemporary Japanese artists, at The Container in Meguro Ward; online talks organized by The Finnish Institute in Japan; and a night of partying with the pop-up Tokyo night club team FancyHIM.

Had COVID-19 not hit Japan this year, Ohayon says there would also have been a birthday party at the Finnish embassy, and it's notable — inspiring, really — that Laaksonen's in-your-face subversion of heteronormativity has institutional support at a national level. The opening night of the exhibition was attended by the embassy's cultural attache, who was gamely wearing a dark pink Tom of Finland T-shirt with chain design and requisite hunks, and the director of The Finnish Institute in Japan, Anna-Maria Wiljanen.

While standing next to three drawings of shirtless men with perfect abs and drolly bulging packages, we discussed the fact that Laaksonen's work and Finland's more established mainstream export to Japan, the Moomins, share an innocent joy. Wiljanen reminded me that there was another connection between Tom and Tove Jansson, the creator of the Moomins, in that Jansson's greatest romantic attachment was in a same-sex relationship.



'Portrait of Pekka' (1975), an illustration by Tom of Finland for the cover of 'Sex in the Shed' | © 1947-2020 TOM OF FINLAND FOUNDATION

The air of nonchalant happiness that is a feature of Laaksonen's men may have been a consequence of having to evade censorship, but it works differently according to how sexually explicit the images are. In an untitled graphite on paper work from "The Tattooed Sailor" series that appeared in a 1961 issue of *Athletic Model Guild* magazine, a faintly discernible look of pleasure on a tank-top-wearing customer's face can be seen as his inside leg is measured by a moustachioed tailor. As well as being a reaction to physical pleasure, this gentlest of grins can be seen as a sign of complicity with the viewer that he and the artist have together managed to dodge the law.

In more direct images such as a 1946 untitled gouache, created at a time when Laaksonen was not making pictures with thought of publication, three men with dimpled smiles in military uniform grab each other's groins and the message is straightforward: Sex is fun. In the historical context of homosexuality being considered an "affliction" in heteronormative society — something that should be considered shameful, disgusting or aberrant — this happiness is subversive and radical.

As Laaksonen put it in a 1988 interview at California Institute of the Arts: "I always thought that I didn't want to change the way people feel ... but finally I found out that I want to influence people ... I wanted to influence so-called straight people into seeing gayness in a positive way. To be gay was forbidden; they felt guilty, they felt unhappy, they couldn't show that they enjoyed sex ... I wanted to tell them they had (a) right also, even if it was legal or not, but they had a right to enjoy life in their way."

Draftsmanship and stylishness aside, it is this representation of desire as a simultaneously personal and social phenomenon that gives Tom of Finland's work its particular power. The director of the aforementioned "Tom of Finland" biopic, Dome Karukoski, considered Laaksonen's most salient quality to be shamelessness. This makes showing his work in Japan, a country where shame can be considered central to how people operate socially, particularly provocative. Laaksonen's work exemplifies queerness, and American Studies writer Nadine Milde described it in a 2001 essay on gayness and postmodernism, as "something to give to, and not only to beg from, contemporary society."

Along with the smiles there has to be an element of a disturbance to expectations for Tom of Finland's images to work. One image of a man in military trousers and jackboots being held in a chokehold and sexually assaulted is grim, but it's understandable as a fantasy reversal of power, in which the oppressor is forced to endure punishment for their intolerance. On balance, though, just as audiences were more amused than offended by the groundbreaking exhibition of shunga (traditional Japanese erotica) at the Eisei Bunko Museum in 2015, there is more that is comedic than controversial in this exhibition.

On the other hand, there is the converse problem of what happens to Tom of Finland's iconography if it becomes too popular. Writer and activist Arthur Evans, who coined the term "Castro clone" in 1978 to deride the proliferation of the hyper-masculine fetish look in the San Francisco gay community, did not see the mass adoption of this image as a liberation, but rather capitalism preying on gay men's anxiety of being considered a "fairy." In the 21st century, is Japan's first exhibition of Tom of Finland to be a culturally significant moment that unlocks greater introspection on gender roles, or merely presage of an influx of butch fashion and paraphernalia? I'd bet on the latter rather than the former.

Still, I like the idea that curator Ohayon and The Finnish Institute in Japan might have caused Takashi Murata, Japan's ambassador to Finland, to scramble for his dictionary at some point in 2020. Last year, Murata commemorated 100 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries with the comment that "the Finnish and Japanese have many similar characteristics and share common values represented by three Ps, that are 'punctuality, patience and prudence.'" Murata may have to enlarge his vocabulary.

Khan, Tabish, "14 Exhibitions Not To Miss In London This Month: March 2020," *Londonist.com*, March 2020



14 Exhibitions Not To Miss In London This Month: March 2020

By Tabish Khan

We look ahead to London's art and exhibition openings in March 2020 and select the must-see shows to round out the year:

Bulging crotches: Tom of Finland at House of Illustration



Copyright Tom of Finland Foundation.

Hypermasculine ideals such as bikers and sailors stand erect in works where the outlines of penises are visible inside their trousers. Tom of Finland's tributes to gay sexuality and identity are bringing some serious girth to King's Cross — it definitely won't be a flaccid one.

Tom of Finland: Love and Liberation at House of Illustration. 6 March-28 June, £8.80.

Chiaverina, John, "Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland," *NYTimes.com*,
T The New York Times Style Magazine, July 23, 2020



Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland

Touko Valio Laaksonen, who would have been 100 this year, transformed depictions of queer eroticism in art through his hyper-real, hypermasculine style.

By John Chiaverina | July 23, 2020



The artist Tom of Finland at his house in Los Angeles in 1984. Photo by Jack Shear

Tom of Finland's influence is so vast that it can be hard to calculate. Through sheer force of imagination, the artist was able to manifest a hyper-real, hypermasculine style of queer erotic illustration that would end up inspiring not just legions of visual artists but entire subcultures. Any time a stylist puts a young pop star in a leather biker cap for a magazine shoot, the impact of Tom of Finland is not far-off.

The year 2020 marks the centennial of the birth of this artist, born Touko Valio Laaksonen, who died in 1991. Exhibitions, both virtual and in reopened spaces, have been staged or planned in locales as far-flung as Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin and Tallinn, Estonia. These commemorative shows are part of a larger, slower shift over the past few decades, one that has seen the artist's leather-clad figurative work recast more firmly into an institutionally approved art cannon.

In 2013, the artist's work was included in a two-person exhibition with the gay erotic art trailblazer — and, as it happens, the originator of Laaksonen's famous pseudonym — Bob Mizer at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Tom of Finland drawings are in the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Even Laaksonen's home country and namesake, in which homosexuality was criminalized until 1971, has come around to the artist's importance: In 2014, it made a series of stamps honoring Tom of Finland, and a successful 2017 biopic was produced in the country.

But the artist's work has had a long road to wider acceptance. From a young age, he took an interest in leather and uniforms — particularly those of local loggers and farmers — which would become his primary stylistic touchstone: Sailors flex and embrace in his work, and bikers touch bulges. This early attraction was amplified during a stint in the Finnish military, in which Laaksonen saw action in Finland's 1941 Continuation War against the U.S.S.R., which landed his country on the wrong side of World War II history until it switched sides late in 1944, and later through the emergent biker subculture, inspired by Marlon Brando in the 1953 film "The Wild One." (It should be noted that though the uniforms of the German military were an influence on the artist, Laaksonen was decidedly anti-racist.)

Chiaverina, John, "Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland," *NYTimes.com*,
T The New York Times Style Magazine, July 23, 2020



Tom of Finland's "Buddies" (1973). Photo by Brian Forrest. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles



The artist's "Untitled (From Kake Vol. 20 — 'Pleasure Park'). Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation, Los Angeles, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

An initially secretive postwar art practice begun while the artist was working a day job at an advertising agency developed into a career, spurred on by a successful submission, in 1956, to Mizer's magazine, *Physique Pictorial*, which had to be branded as a fitness magazine as a cover, though that didn't always work (Mizer was charged with obscenity in 1954). Early pieces published under the Tom of Finland moniker were more suggestive than explicit, but the artist's work evolved with the loosening of both legal and social constraints. Even so, many of Laaksonen's later, more explicit drawings retained the winking affability seen in his more formative work.

In 1978, Laaksonen made his first trip to Los Angeles, where he would end up establishing the Tom of Finland Company with his muse and close friend Durk Dehner, in order to fight rampant copyright infringement. That company would expand into the nonprofit Tom of Finland Foundation, which to this day retains headquarters in an Echo Park Craftsman house and continues to be an important community hub.

Throughout this timeline, Tom of Finland has remained a quintessential artist's artist. In the early 1960s, the pioneering, boundary-pushing gay artist Robert Mapplethorpe, according to Patti Smith, discovered Tom of Finland's work in a used bookstall in Times Square. Mapplethorpe would become a crucial link in exposing Laaksonen's work to the contemporary art world. Mapplethorpe attended Laaksonen's debut San Francisco exhibition at the pioneering queer art gallery Fey-Way Studios. Dehner facilitated the show, and Mapplethorpe's enthusiasm helped the artist land an exhibition at Robert Samuel Gallery in New York two years later.

In 1985, the artist Mike Kelley brought Tom of Finland to CalArts, the legendary Southern California art school, to give a talk. In his introduction, Kelley called Tom of Finland "an incredible inspiration in my work." In context, it was a bold statement. "CalArts was steeped within the dogma of conceptual art, and Tom, of course, was anything but that," the gallerist David Kordansky, who represents Tom of Finland's work through the foundation, says.

S.R. Sharp, who is the vice-president and curator at the Tom of Finland Foundation, says artists like Kelley revered Tom because his art did nothing less than offer permission to explore sexuality and explicit imagery in their own work. "And they always have remembered that," Sharp says. "And they've carried his legacy for many, many, many years."

T talked to a wide range of artists about Tom of Finland's influence for what would have been his 100th birthday.

Chiaverina, John, "Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland," *NYTimes.com*,
T The New York Times Style Magazine, July 23, 2020



Tom of Finland's house in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, which is now the headquarters of the Tom of Finland Foundation. Photography from the Rizzoli book "Tom House: Tom of Finland in Los Angeles" (2016). Photo © Martyn Thompson

Elmgreen & Dragset, Berlin-based artist duo

Tom of Finland's art is unabashedly gay and celebratory of a subculture and sexual rituals that were considered perverse when his drawings first appeared in public. It seems absolutely devoid of the Protestant reservedness, darkness, angst and pietism that has otherwise affected the Nordic culture. In spite of the depictions of rough sexual practices, there is something almost innocent and sweet about Tom of Finland's drawings, like it's all playacting. Seen in today's light, his leather-clad muscle men don't seem that different from Tove Jansson's Moomintroll fantasy figures.

When we curated the Nordic Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, we installed a whole wall with Tom of Finland drawings. Even at that time his art was considered controversial. It's funny to think that only a few years later Tom of Finland's drawings appeared on national stamps and on bedsheets and cushion covers from the traditional Finnish textile company Finlayson, founded in 1820.

Cassils, Los Angeles-based performance artist

Tom of Finland's is probably the only artwork that I've ever jerked off to. Those hot drawings scalded an impression onto my tender, young queer brain fairly early on. I lived in Echo Park from 2009 to 2016. Visiting Tom's house was a refuge; knowing that it is still care taken by his former lover enacts and makes present a rich, deep history. It's like a portal to the queer culture I always aspired to but has mostly been erased these days by digital platforms and capitalism.

His formal mastery as a draftsman is really remarkable. You don't see people with that kind of skill set anymore. Forget about the subject matter, the ability to draw that well is a pleasure to witness. Also, the absurdity of Tom's house as a living, breathing kinky institution: I recall going there, and seeing this huge, huge butt plug holding open the front door with this ancient Lab snoozing on the mat, and then, looking up to the ceiling and instead of fixing a crack, they'd hired a young queer artist, Hector Silva, to come in and paint a facade that's as if you're looking up somebody's kilt. That incredible amount of detail and labor and eroticism went into absolutely every part of his life.

Chiaverina, John, “Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland,” *NYTimes.com*,
T The New York Times Style Magazine, July 23, 2020



An installation view of “The Collectors,” curated by Elmgreen & Dragset, at the Danish and Nordic Pavilions during the 2009 Venice Biennale.
Photo by Anders Sune Berg

For a long time, there was no language around transness, or folks that were gender nonconforming or nonbinary. And I think, similarly, perhaps when Tom of Finland was forging this iconic style, he really took ownership over his definition of what it was to be a homosexual, which was perhaps, at that time, a term that was viewed as weak or derogatory. For him to manifest this totally fantastical, empowered erotic vision, it was completely contrary to that. So, I think that aspect of his imagining is something that has definitely influenced me as an artist, in terms of me being able to understand and forge a possibility for myself.

John Waters, Baltimore-based filmmaker

Peter Berlin, Kenneth Anger, Joe Dallesandro, Jeff Stryker, Jim Morrison, James Bidgood, John Rechy, even Elvis and James Dean. None of them could have existed without Tom Of Finland’s art coming first. He took the word “butch” and turned it into a lifestyle. No, a reason to live.

Richard Hawkins, Los Angeles-based artist

Working for the Tom of Finland Company for several years, I was able to see firsthand not only the breadth and amazing development of Tom’s characters and story lines but also how widely seen the work became — through distribution of Tom’s own publications but, more important, hand to hand and fan to fan. I take from that a very valuable lesson about artistic practice: By pursuing and portraying the particulars of your own personal desires — as idiosyncratic, abhorrent, irresponsible or far too subjective as your current situation may make it seem — you might just someday inspire the lives of others, many of whom may be worlds and lifetimes away.

Catherine Opie, Los Angeles-based photographer

As a longtime Angeleno and definitely someone who has been a part of a larger queer leather community here, I know how important Tom of Finland was in terms of brotherhood. So even though it wasn’t necessarily for me, Tom’s house always provided an amazing community resource. But for me as a dyke, I could not find myself in Tom of Finland’s work beyond drag.

Chiaverina, John, "Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland," *NYTimes.com*,
The New York Times Style Magazine, July 23, 2020



A portion of the ceiling inside Tom of Finland's Los Angeles home. Photography from the Rizzoli book "Tom House: Tom of Finland in Los Angeles" (2016).
Photo © Martyn Thompson

In a certain way, there was always a position of separatism with the leather men compared to the leather dykes. Which is why I'm so interested in the influence that Tom of Finland had on [the Canadian artist and publisher] G. B. Jones. For the first time within G. B. Jones's zines, in which she adopted the style of Tom of Finland, I was able to see my own community and my own self, versus the fantasies that many of us carried of being leather daddies.

Tom of Finland, what he modeled for us in his drawings, was actually a butch drag. We ended up adopting this — it was a way for us to do drag as a community. But G. B. Jones, with her drawings, all of a sudden made it part of our queer culture — we could think of ourselves as being women and leather dykes versus just doing drag.

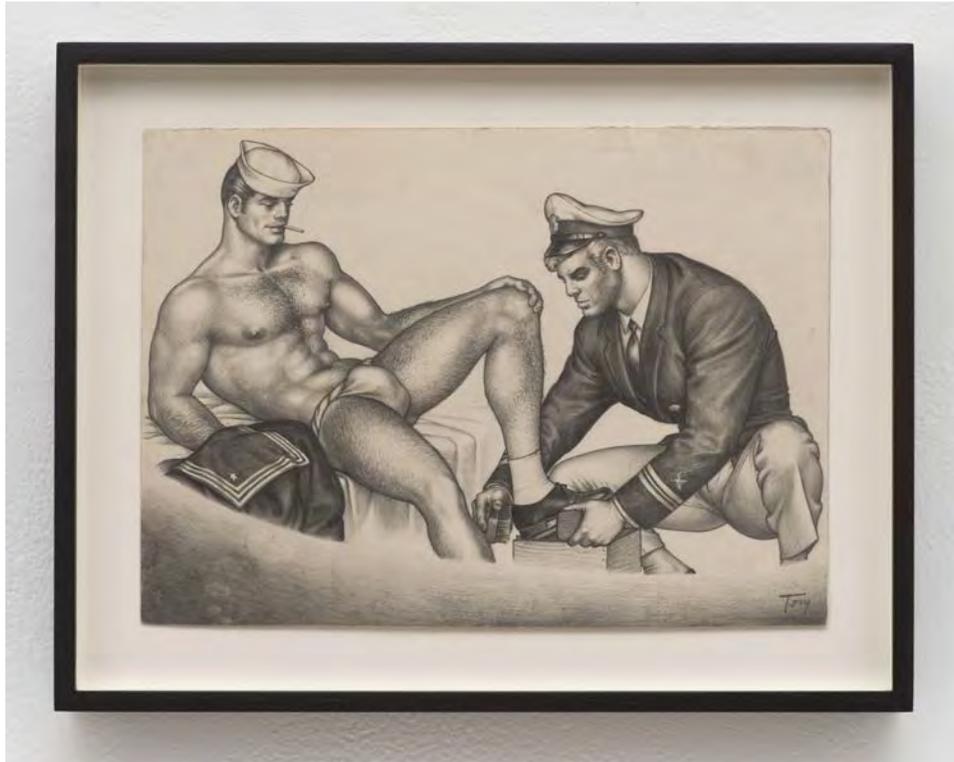
Simon Haas, of the Los Angeles-based artist duo the Haas Brothers

My college boyfriend gave me a Tom of Finland Kake comic for my 21st birthday, when I was studying at the Rhode Island School of Design. I was a recently out-of-the-closet painting student filled with angst about my sexuality and my art, and this was my first exposure to art that made me feel like I belonged. Tom of Finland's deft pencil work and the immediate eroticism are enough to make any young gay boy a quick fan, but after a decade of looking at his drawings, I understand that his work transcends pornography and occupies a space of queer spirituality. I came for the giant phalluses and stayed for the joy of being a gay person. Tom's drawings are unapologetically happy and have not a shred of shame in them — an incredible rarity in any depiction of homosexuality, even now. Tom had the fortitude of spirit to celebrate men at play at a time when most of the world considered gay people to be an abomination. I am 64 years his junior, and I have yet to discover within myself the kind of fearless happiness that Tom manifested in his work. Tom had such an abundance of radical self-acceptance that his work continues to impart the spirit of self-love onto gay men everywhere. I will never know Tom, but I can sincerely say that I love him with all my heart.

Brontez Purnell, Oakland, Calif.-based writer and artist

We kind of take Tom of Finland for granted, because, let's be honest, as gay men, do we really need any more images of super muscular white dudes? No, of course not. But, also, he was an excellent portraitist, probably the last of the greatest of them, in a world where the camera has become omni-accessible.

Chiaverina, John, "Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland," *NYTimes.com*,
T The New York Times Style Magazine, July 23, 2020



Tom of Finland's "Sailor's Dream" (1959). Photo by Brian Forrest. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Also, when he was creating, I don't think anybody really understood how out of vogue or how hyper-questioned hypermasculinity would become. But the thing that was absolutely radical was that he was doing this in the '40s. When you do the residency [Purnell was a resident at the Tom of Finland Foundation in 2019], you get access to his room, and I saw drawings from when he was like 8 years old, and he's doing these little comics about cops and robbers. So, he was definitely all about dudes in uniforms.



G.B. Jones's "Girls Who Are Fans of Sailor Moon" (1996). Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto



Jones's "Tom Girls Go West" (2001). Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto

Chiaverina, John, "Eight Artists on the Influence of Tom of Finland," *NYTimes.com*,
T The New York Times Style Magazine, July 23, 2020



Tom of Finland's "The New Biker Stud" (1969). Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation, Los Angeles, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles



Tom of Finland's "Untitled (Preparatory Drawing for Kake Vol. 16 — 'Sex on the Train')" (1974). Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

When I was the artist in residence there, it says Tom of Finland, so you would expect a bunch of German dudes in leather, but it was a pretty diverse group of people. The people who run that organization are very, very near and dear to me. I think they still have a very, very deep and intentional hand in L.A. queer radical art. The month I was there, I saw that house be a welcoming spot for so many different people — so many walks of queer life.

It's a thing that I think is seemingly dead in San Francisco — the house is maybe the last bastion of the radical, queer, underground meeting place. But also through the filter of these still amazing drawings. With Tom of Finland, it's important to be able to place him in his time period. He was definitely doing something that was going to get his ass killed, but he said, "This is my art. This is the type of beauty I want to enact in the world," and there is no way to not be in awe of that.

Tom Bianchi, Palm Springs, Calif.-based photographer

In the pocket-size *Physique Pictorial* magazines, I first saw Tom of Finland drawings. As a frustrated, horny adolescent thinking myself alone in my perverse desires, I reveled in his mind-blowing sex fantasies. But I never thought those men or what they were up to could be real. In the late '50s and early '60s, few men had the physiques he idealized. And I saw no evidence that Tom's world existed beyond his imagination. But that didn't stop me from joining in his adventures with my dick in hand. Years later, I learned that Tom drew with one hand and held his dick in the other. That revelation speaks to the authenticity of his art.

Tom wanted us to feel the charge of his desires in our loins. I agree with Richard Ellmann's observations on Oscar Wilde, that life would repeat itself tediously were it not for the daemonic changes art forces upon it. I also agree with Ellmann's idea that the artist makes models of experience that people rush to try out. Tom of Finland perfectly exemplifies this observation. Before Tom, the homosexual stereotype was a narrowly limited negative one. But Tom opened a door to an alternate, robust way of being queer. He invited us to dress and play with hypermasculine images of ourselves and illustrated myriad sexual adventures we could realize. Tom of Finland expanded our vision of what was possible for us to experience. How many artists' work has changed our culture so profoundly? That we celebrate Tom's 100th birthday today is a testament to the transformative power of his work.

These interviews have been edited and condensed.

Whitney Biennial

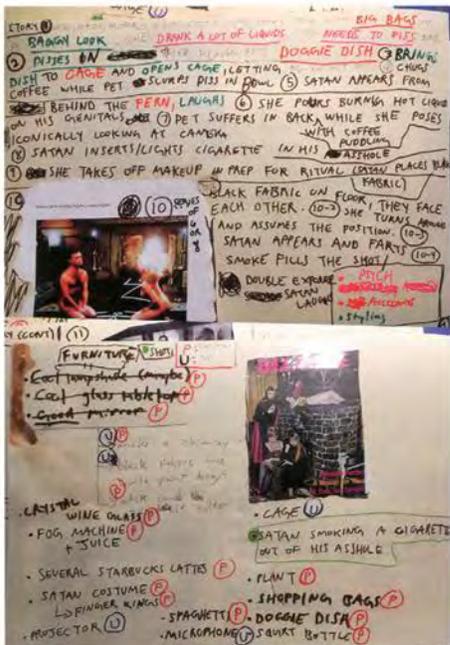
2019



Pepsi commercial featuring Kendall Jenner, 2017. Source image for Garbaggio editorial feature, *Interview* (Berlin), 2017



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1977. Source image for *Basic Precinct* and *We Live in a Society*, 2018



Burke Batelle, Mathieu Malouf, and Heji Shin, sketches for *Fart zur Hölle*, 2018

HEJI SHIN



SHIRIN NESHAT PROVES THE PERSONAL IS UNIVERSAL • BEST EATS UNDER \$10 • SLEATER-KINNEY RETURNS AT THE PALLADIUM

LA WEEKLY

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TOUGHER THAN LEATHER

The Tom of Finland Foundation's fight against censorship continues into the age of social media

BY MICHAEL COOPER

Illustration by [unreadable]

TOUGHER THAN LEATHER

The Tom of Finland Foundation's decades-long fight against censorship continues into the age of social media

BY MICHAEL COOPER



TOM OF FINLAND (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920 - 1991), Untitled, 1985, Graphite on paper © 1985-2019 Tom of Finland Foundation

When it comes to sex and social media, the line between appropriate and potentially offensive has been murky, inconsistent and, more and more often, seemingly discriminatory. We're in uncharted waters with this relatively new technology, but many, especially in the LGBTQ community and sex industry, fear that we're heading down a slippery slope that risks setting us back, countering the cultural progress we've made in acceptance of and attitudes about sexuality.

Just this past summer, Facebook and Instagram limited users from posting the eggplant and peach emojis in reference to sexual statements via an update to their Community Standards guidelines, and the past year has seen the fight for sexual expression go into high gear as users find themselves in "Facebook jail," or limited by an "Instagram suspension," due to content that someone or more likely, some algorithm, at the platform thinks too provocative.

Which brings us to Tom of Finland. For those unfamiliar, the Tom of Finland Foundation is a non-profit that has worked towards "protecting, preserving and promoting erotic art" for the last quarter century. The foundation was started in 1984 by Touko Laaksonen, better known by his pseudonym Tom of Finland, an erotic illustrator from Helsinki (originally from Kaarina, Finland). Tom of Finland's work as an artist and his work with his nonprofit were instrumental in shaping 20th-century gay culture and his impact is still being felt today. ToF has been active on social media since its beginnings, and its content has not changed, but last month the foundation saw its account banned from Instagram. It was reactivated within 18 hours after public outcry, but there remains a lack of clarity about why it happened to begin with.

Though Instagram's guidelines state that, "nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK," the "Free the Nipple" movement, backed by several celebrities on and off the platform, has been pointing out IG's inconsistencies for a few years now. Breastfeeding and mastectomy shots have been allowed — which is progress — but the sexism inherent in allowing shirtless male images versus female is still present. The way the platform has handled LGBTQ content is even more problematic, and while the outright banning ToF suffered was a big setback, it's mobilizing the community, as well as the queer artists associated with it. That Tom of Finland is ready to fight on the frontlines against censorship is not new; it's what the art itself is and always has been all about.

Laaksonen never went to art school, instead moving to Helsinki when he was 19 to start a career in advertising. He came of age fighting in the Finnish army, defending his country against the Soviets during World War II. (His fellow soldier's uniforms would



TOM OF FINLAND (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920 - 1991), Untitled (From "Wild West"), 1982, Graphite on paper © 1982-2019 Tom of Finland Foundation



TOM OF FINLAND (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920 - 1991), Untitled, 1985, Graphite on paper © 1985-2019 Tom of Finland Foundation



end up playing a big role in his artwork and in defining his style).

"Tom drew loving couples and groups engaged in intense scenes—all sex positive," says S.R. Sharp, the Tom of Finland Foundation's vice president and curator for the last couple of decades. "He drew a world so desirable that we started dressing like it, playing like it—living like it."

In fact, Tom of Finland's drawings went hand in hand with the emergence of the gay leather scene in London's underground in the '50s and '60s. "Tom was certainly there. He was associated and friends with one of the early physique photographers who captured a lot of the leather scene," says Sharp. "I'm not going to say he was the creator, [but] I will say he was part of it. And because he rendered leather so well and he captured it so well in drawings, I think his work became iconically associated with [its] beginnings."

Laaksonen viewed his homosexuality as a non-issue, and wanted to normalize it for everyone else in his community at a time when being gay was literally a crime. "In those days, a gay man was made to feel nothing but shame about his feelings and his sexuality. I wanted my drawings to counteract that, to show gay men being happy and positive about who they were," the 71-year-old explained before he died in 1991 from an emphysema-induced stroke. "I didn't sit down to think this all out carefully. But I knew—right from the start—

that my men were going to be proud and happy men," he added.

Indeed, "Tom's Boys," as they came to be known, were pretty much the first sex-positive modern art figures depicting the LGBTQ community. No doubt many have seen Tom's artwork (or a rip-off of it) in a gay bar or in a gay magazine—either one of Tom's famous strapping beefcakes, with bulging muscles, big boots, a visor hat and leather, or a mixture of civilian clothes uniforms. And of course, everything about them is big and unapologetically bold, including their genitals.

"Tom went on to give us revolutionary images—he was a liberator. He saw no reason queer men had to fit into the small compartment that society allowed us," says Sharp. "We were made lesser than—Tom gave us a new vocabulary of who we could be. We could be soldiers, cops, bikers—everything they wouldn't let us be. We could be strong, we could be powerful—he leveled the straight/queer playing field. For as much as he gave homosexuals positive roles models, the heteronormative sphere now could view us as, well, equal."

"Tom of Finland was a part of the sexual revolution and the counterculture. His art made people feel OK to fantasize and not fit a social standard of get married, have kids,

"WE WERE MADE LESSER THAN—TOM GAVE US A NEW VOCABULARY OF WHO WE COULD BE... WE COULD BE STRONG, WE COULD BE POWERFUL—HE LEVELED THE STRAIGHT/QUEER PLAYING FIELD.

—S.R. SHARP

grow old, die," concurs Danny Fuentes of Lethal Amounts, an L.A. art gallery with similar ethos. "Tom of Finland started getting published in the mid-'50s in underground zines and rags because 'gay' was outlawed in most places. A culture of its own had to be created in order to hide it from the rest of the world that wanted to harm those that identified as gay in the '50s. Sometimes it's hard for people to contextualize how outrageous it was to depict two police officers or bikers or military men being homosexual and still masculine."

While Tom's artwork was no doubt innovative, it's fair to question if his "boys" unwittingly promoted the heteronormative image of what a man and masculinity should be. For a gay man who is on the more feminine end of the spectrum, could Tom's work just be seen as reinforcing toxic masculinity and setting an impossible and unrelated standard for more feminine gay men? Sharp doesn't think so. "I think toxic is only when you actually are putting down, demeaning or [lessening] other people. So in other words, masculinity is only achieved by that definition, by suppressing, by demoralizing, by demeaning other people," he says.

Laaksonen gave up his job in advertising so that he could devote himself to his art full time in 1973. The landmark 1962 Supreme Court case *MANual Enterprises, Inc. v. Day* essentially legalized the mailing of male pornographic materials a decade prior, and allowed him the freedom to publish and exhibit his work on a larger scale. In the early '80s, he came to L.A. at the invitation of Durk Dehner, a gay businessman, film director and publisher. Together they started the Tom of Finland Company so that they could publish approved copies of Tom's graphic novels and curtail all the bootlegs that were going around. Tom ended up living in L.A. for half of every year for the rest of his life, and each time he came, he would bring more materials

with him: drawings, letters, uniforms, his stamp collection. As a means of archiving, they established the Tom of Finland Foundation in 1984, with Laaksonen's actual house, located in Silver Lake, serving as headquarters. It now functions as part museum, part event space and a safe place for the LGBTQ community.

After completely cataloging Tom's materials, they focused their attention on other artists, giving them support and a space for their works to be shown via art and culture festivals, drawing sessions, and emerging artist competitions. They added an artist-in-residency program, screenings and most recently, a summer music program too.

Rick Castro is one such artist. The foundation formed a strong relationship with the photographer, a third-generation Angeleno from Monterey Park. Working in the wardrobe industry for 15 years before focusing on photography in the mid-'80s, Castro's work is known for its strong social statements and pushing boundaries. His explorations of various fetish cultures have gotten a lot of attention in particular.

"I personally always identified with fetish, even before I could actually call it that. My draw was [from] BDSM to leather to fetish to that kind of erotic esoteric, which to me goes beyond gay, it's like your own kind of personal interest," says Castro. "So that's what I started to document with my images."

The photographer, who's worked with performance art legend Vaginal Davis (their film *Fertile Latoya Jackson* was just screened as part of the acclaimed queer film series "Dirty Looks"), also directed a film about plushies and furies (currently available on World of Wonder's WOW Presents Plus) and had his own gallery in Hollywood called Antebellum, which still maintains a popular blog. Castro has been a major proponent of fetish culture in the gay community and beyond for decades and has known Durk for many years since publishing his first book with him in the early '90s. He's also shown his work at Tom of Finland events and, more recently, helped produce their art fairs and holds salons at Tom's House, with anti-censorship as a recurring theme.

"I think that the connection for the Tom of Finland Foundation, what it's become, what it's evolved into now is just the place where a lot of people feel safe to express what they don't think they could express in mainstream everyday life, so it gives them a space to have fantasy," says Castro.

In April of this year, Castro had one of his first solo shows at the Tom of Finland House, a

retrospective called "Rick Castro: Fetish King." LGBTQ outlet *The Advocate* advanced the exhibit and posted the article with several images from the show. The more risqué photos required users to press a button confirming they were old enough to view the content; however, when *The Advocate* posted the story on Castro's Facebook page, they suspended his account for 30 days. The image Facebook



TOM OF FINLAND (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920 - 1991), all Untitled, Graphite on paper © Tom of Finland Foundation

objected to featured two lucha libre wrestlers on top of each other, fully clothed.

The Advocate offered to take down the image but Castro strongly objected. "There was no nudity. It was definitely homoerotic, but it was no more homoerotic than a Madonna video," Castro said. "It was very obvious that because it was two men, that's why it was removed. If you look at this stuff that's for heteronormative images, and you look at the exact same thing that a homoerotic might publish, the homoerotic is removed, the heteronormative is still there for the viewing."

Castro says the hypocrisy shown by Face-

book and Instagram (which it owns) goes to a "much deeper, insidious kind of chapter that we're in. I think it's really important to fight back," insists Castro. He decided to write a statement about the Facebook fiasco, which *The Advocate* published as well, along with a (fully clothed) image of the artist sitting on a bench in Chinatown. When that piece was shared on Facebook by friends, Castro and the outlet itself, it was deemed a violation by Facebook, leading to another 30 day ban. "Now I'm banned for 60 days, meaning I can't promote my show on social media," recalls Castro. His curator and gallerist both tried posting the article too, only to be banned along with him. Even Sharp tried posting the piece on Castro's behalf and was also blocked.

When *L.A. Weekly* learned of the censorship, it sought to investigate. After culture editor Lina Lecaro reached out to Facebook about the situation, Facebook's reps reviewed it and determined they were in the



out of what's innocent. Social media rules are impossible to understand. They make no sense and they're updating them constantly and not telling you they're updated."

As for the foundation's banishment from Instagram, the image that was apparently the final straw was from an art catalogue for a Denmark art show Tom was included in — one celebrating the end of a ban on visual pornography in that country. Yes, it's ironic.

According to Instagram, nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, but it obviously wasn't in this case.

In response, Sharp and Castro presented a panel in October at their art festival, "How Do We Communicate On/With Social Media." They invited reps from Facebook and Instagram to join the artists, activists, educators and lawyers on the panel. Neither accepted but Instagram did say they would include ToF in an upcoming West Coast discussion that it hosts on posting guidelines for nudity and art. "They had one in New York last month with artists and art workers. It sounds like they want to progress on their policies," Sharp said hopefully.

In light of Mark Zuckerberg's recent hands-off approach concerning political content, some of which the platform concedes is dishonest, its policing of sexual content feels even more distasteful. While social media platforms should have the freedom to shape their own communities, they should not force-feed us what they think is sexually appropriate. Of course, the way to change policy, be it the government or a big corporation, is to put our money where our mouths are. The alternative is self-censorship, which Sharp sees as "the antithesis of what freedom of expression is all about."

"To censor is to kill off the voice of a person," echoes Fuentes, who recently co-presented an art show with ToF from trans icon Genesis P-Orridge. "Art as a whole should never be censored, I still think art is our society's last sacred thing and I stand with [the] Tom of Finland Foundation in trying to keep art dangerous, provocative and even disturbing, but above all keep the conversation open and ongoing."

And doing so means involving everyone, beyond the gay, fetish or punk communities, which of course social media makes possible. "An unwritten mission of ours is to make art and beauty a part of your life," says Sharp. Despite its recent struggles, the group has continued to do just that. Though the internet didn't exist when Touko Laaksonen created his original images, the fight for them to be seen then versus now isn't that different. And as long as the foundation continues to fulfill its official mission statement, freedom wins. It reads, "Tom of Finland Foundation shall continue to encourage the work of erotic visual artists regardless of race, creed, religion, gender, sexual identity, medium of expression or any other censoring criteria."

wrong, eventually issuing an apology. But by then it was too late — the exhibit was already over. "By the way, since this whole debacle, Facebook has not removed me," Castro notes. "I've been able to post whatever I want there, but on Instagram they're removing a lot of my images with the same kind of dire warning."

"They're perverting us. It's the most perverting thing to ask us to self-censor. I mean, that's the most obscene thing about it, they want us to start thinking the way they think," Sharp says of Facebook and Instagram's inconsistent policies. "So it's very deep and very troubling... and they are making deviants

ARTFORUM

DETROIT

"TOM HOUSE: THE WORK AND LIFE OF TOM OF FINLAND"

Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit

April 19–May 19

Curated by Durk Dehner, S.R. Sharp, and Graeme Flegenheimer

Bust out the poppers: Tom of Finland's leather boys are hitting Detroit. Goons whining about perversion and pornography in the presence of his illustrations don't know sublime weirdness when it strips for them. Classical sculptures on steroids emitting an angelic glow, Finland's bodies have the same sci-fi sexiness as H. R. Giger's aliens, complete with nuclear-missile dicks and flesh that looks like latex. MOCAD shows them off inside Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, amid juicy photographs, ephemera, and works from Finland devotees such as John Waters, Richard Hawkins, and Raymond Pettibon, creating an art-historical biker gang at once homoerotic and magical. They all transform so-called trash into beauty. Free your mind and your ass will follow.

—*Charlie Fox*

DOCUMENT

Curating the curator who “didn’t buy the bullshit” of the art world

Ann Binlot | May 7, 2018

This past weekend, Frieze New York’s first curated section celebrated the legendary curator Hudson, whose lone vision shaped the contemporary art world as we know it.

When Frieze invited Matthew Higgs, the director and chief curator of White Columns to propose an idea for Frieze New York’s first curated section, he knew immediately what he wanted to do. “My only thought was to do a section about Hudson,” said Higgs of the legendary art dealer who was simply and singularly known as “Hudson.” Hudson’s gallery, Feature Inc., was a requisite stop for Higgs when he first started making forays into New York City in the early 90s. “He followed his own logic, his own intuition, he had the most extraordinary, visionary sense of what was important, even if people didn’t get it at the time,” said Higgs. Feature Inc.’s legend easily travelled across the pond. “I would read about Feature in the art press, I was captivated even at a distance.”

Frieze embraced the idea for the 2018 art fair opened “For Your Infotainment,” a section comprised of eight booths that will run at Frieze New York through May 5. It highlights the work of major artists who either had their gallery debuts at Feature Inc., or long-standing relationships with Hudson and the space. It’s a fitting tribute for the art-world legend who passed away from AIDS-related complications in 2014 at the age of 63. Gagosian displayed a booth of Sailor Moon-esque sculptures juxtaposed against abstract canvas by Takashi Murakami, who first showed in the United States with Hudson. David Zwirner presented a selection of illustrations by Raymond Pettibon. (“When Hudson started showing him, he was still associated with west coast punk subculture,” commented Higgs.) **David Kordansky Gallery showed a series of homoerotic graphite-on-paper sketches by the late Tom of Finland—another artist who Hudson championed early on.** Feature Hudson Foundation, the foundation dedicated to preserving Hudson’s legacy, showed a selection of 14 artists—Richard Kern, Lisa Beck, Dave Shaw, and Judy Linn are among them—curated by Higgs. “Hudson is the art dealer’s art dealer,” said Higgs, “because in a way every art dealer respected him and understood he had this extraordinary eye.”



Tom of Finland. ‘Untitled (Preparatory Drawing),’ 1970. Photographed by Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.



Tom of Finland. ‘Untitled (Preparatory Drawing),’ 1983. Photographed by Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.

There are art dealers who prioritize sales and money, and there are dealers who champion artists and their art. Hudson is considered to be apart of the latter. A former dancer and performance artist who only went by his last name, Hudson would eventually become one of New York’s most influential art dealers. In 1984 he opened his gallery Feature Inc. in Chicago with a show of consisting of “re-photographs” by a then little-known artist named Richard Prince. Prince would go on to become, well, the Richard Prince, currently represented by Gagosian, one of the biggest blue-chip galleries in the world. This trend would replicate itself numerous times over the course of Hudson’s 30-year stint as an art dealer—he would take a risk on an unknown artist, who eventually would blow up resulting in the attention of top-tier galleries. Four years after Future Inc.’s opening, Hudson set up shop in New York City, opening spaces in SoHo, Chelsea, and, finally, the Lower East Side.

“What was amazing for the entire life of his gallery, he was sat behind the front desk,” remembered Higgs. “So when you go to Gagosian, Larry Gagosian is not sat there anymore. When you go to David Zwirner, David Zwirner is not there anymore, but Hudson was always there as this sort of conduit for the art, and the artists, and the public, and he was very passionate about sharing his enthusiasms, and I think the reason for doing this is to celebrate Hudson, and for me it’s important that we don’t forget him.”

Ironically, Hudson didn't believe in art fairs until later in his career and never showed at Frieze. "He would sit at the Armory and read a book and not talk to anyone," recalled David Shaw, another artist championed by Hudson. "If someone asked him something he would." It wasn't until he first showed at the Dallas Art Fair around 2012 that he changed his mind. "When he came back, he was like, 'I loved it,'" recalled Shaw, "Later in his life he started to do some art fairs, and he really enjoyed it," said Higgs. "He enjoyed meeting people, he enjoyed all the random nature of his audience, and for him it was just a big stage to share his enthusiasm. So I think in a small sense, he regretted not doing them sooner."

Hudson also started to feel the pinch that is now commonplace amongst small and mid-size galleries about a decade ago. "Even in that he was ahead of the curve, because he was struggling 10 years ago," said Higgs. "He had a great eye, he showed great artists, and some of those artists left to go to bigger galleries, but he created economies for those artists." Hudson showed no bitterness as his artists left for bigger blue-chip galleries. "He was very relaxed about it, and he always said, 'People move on,' and that's it," recalled Jimi Dams, who served as a director at Feature Inc. from 1997 to 2005 and now acts as chairman of Feature Hudson Foundation. "The only thing he wanted to do was show art that he thought needed to be seen. Whether it made money or not, that was of no importance."

In the Feature Hudson Foundation booth hangs a sculpture by Shaw made from a piece of broken plywood that snapped when he wedged it into his 30-ton studio elevator in Sunset Park, Brooklyn and pressed up. What viewers don't know by looking at it is that it stemmed from a conversation that the artist, Shaw, had with Hudson about "the destruction of self in relationship to the creation of identity," Shaw tells me. Hudson was the first gallerist to give Shaw an opportunity to exhibit in a gallery in 1989. "He made my career," said the artist. A decade later, Shaw finally got his first solo show with Hudson (where the plywood sculpture first appeared) titled "Inuverse." "He gave full license to the artist," said Shaw. "He wouldn't interfere unless you asked him a question."

And what sort of lessons did Higgs, Dams and Shaw learn from Hudson? "He told me about self-determination, independence, sticking to your guns, supporting the things you believe in, never change course, and that eventually you'll be proved right," said Higgs.

Said Dams, "People need to be reminded there is a better way."

"He taught me you can make your own way," replied Shaw. "That's we he taught me, and that's what he did. He didn't buy the bullshit."

APOLLO

What's in store at Frieze and 1-54 in New York this week



Floater No. 28 (unicorn) (detail; 2016), Derrick Adams. Courtesy Vigo Gallery

The late New York gallerist Hudson (1950–2014), who went only by his last name, was known for breaking new ground; he handed debuts to Charles Ray, Raymond Pettibon and Tom Friedman in the 1980s from his unostentatious quarters at Feature Inc., and spoke of his responsibility as a gallerist to ‘push for pluralism and multiplicity’. As Frieze New York (3–6 May) returns, with more than 190 galleries representing 30 countries (including newcomers from Hungary, Iran and Japan), it seems fitting that the fair’s first ever themed section is devoted to artists who benefited from Hudson’s prescience. ‘For your Infotainment/Hudson and Feature Inc.’, curated by Matthew Higgs, includes shows by Takashi Murakami at Gagosian and Andrew Masullo at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, **as well as the notorious, sexually explicit drawings of Tom of Finland at David Kordansky Gallery.**

Another first at Frieze this year is the winning commission by the recipient of the inaugural Frieze Artist Award. Kapwani Kiwanga’s ‘Shady’ blends metals with fabrics in a structure shot through with holes, to explore themes of freedom of movement and colonial appropriation of land and materials. The title is partly drawn from Shade Cloth, used extensively in African farming and employed in this architectural installation outside the fair’s entrance.

The main section of the fair features an impressive roster of galleries, both US and international; look out for Roy Lichtenstein at Castelli, Anni Albers at Alan Cristea, and David Hockney at Pace. This year’s Spotlight section, with a record 35 presentations, explores new perspectives on art since 1960 – a strong showing of Japanese avant-garde work includes the gestural, swirling forms of Atsuko Tanaka’s ‘83F’, at Sakurado Fine Arts.

Across the city at Brooklyn’s Pioneer Works, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair returns for its fourth New York edition (4–6 May). Twenty-one galleries convene from Africa, Europe and the US, to present a survey of contemporary African artists. Many recent works by well-known figures are on display – including Derrick Adams’ *Floater No. 28 (unicorn)*, a buoyant acrylic and fabric collage, at Vigo Gallery – alongside works by emerging artists. High-lights include the grotesque, fleshy figures of Nigerian artist Uthman Wahaab, depicted with anarchic wit, as in *Nude (comb)* (2017), at SAPAR Contemporary.

Elsewhere in New York, there’s still time to catch Acquavella’s exhibition of Uruguay-born modernist Joaquín Torres-García (‘The Worlds of Joaquín Torres-García’, until 25 May). With the range of work on show in New York this weekend, perhaps Hudson’s pluralist vision for New York’s art scene has begun to be realised.

Frieze New York is at Randall’s Island Park from 3–6 May.



Tom of Finland's Explicit Art Radically Changed How We View Gay Sexuality

By Mikelle Street | April 26, 2018

The legendary queer artist is famous for his photo-realistic drawings of gay men enjoying sex.



When Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, began publishing and exhibiting his drawings of muscled and mustachioed gay men in the 1950s, his artwork was still illegal in many places. Anti-gay censorship laws meant he and his collectors could be imprisoned for owning same-sex erotica. But over the course of his artistic career, which spanned more than 60 years and produced over 3,500 works, Tom of Finland inspired a legion of queer artists and changed the way the world views gay masculinity and sexuality.

Born in rural Finland in 1920, Laaksonen was a talented artist from an early age, and his schoolteacher parents encouraged his academic and creative pursuits. But according to his biographers, he also spent his childhood spying on the muscular boys working on neighboring farms. In 1939, he went to art school in Helsinki, where more cosmopolitan expressions of masculinity caught his imagination. Over time, depictions of gay men dressed as day laborers, seafarers, and motorcyclists became a motif that appeared in much of his work. When Stalin invaded Finland during World War II, Laaksonen was drafted into the military, and during blackouts he started having clandestine sex with uniformed men on both sides of the conflict. Peace brought an end to these encounters, and

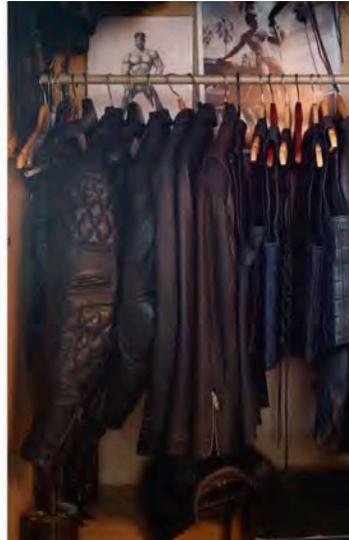
Courtesy the Collection of Rob Hennig (L) and the Tom of Finland Foundation and David Kordansky Gallery (R), Los Angeles, California

Laaksonen went back to studying art, largely confining his desires to his sketchpad except for chance cruising encounters. In 1956, he submitted an illustration of a muscular lumberjack with a bulging crotch to *Physique Pictorial*, an American magazine that passed itself off as a sports rag to skirt censorship. It was popular with gay men who'd lust after the nude or semi-nude bodies of the muscled models. To protect his identity, Laaksonen simply signed the work "Tom." When the drawing landed on the cover in the spring of 1957, the editors changed his name to "Tom of Finland," and a cultural icon was born. In the 50s and 60s, beefcake art focused on depictions of beautiful male bodies, sometimes in proximity to one another, but never interacting in a sexual sense. "What Tom recognized was that a lot of the depictions [in queer culture] were beefcake," S.R. Sharp, the Vice President of the Tom of Finland Foundation, told VICE.

"We were just voyeurs looking at models that we didn't know anything about. Were they just models? Were they gay? Were they straight? Were they being paid? We didn't know. We were just voyeurs looking at beefcake. Tom said, 'I can fix that,' and so he made a deliberate effort to bring beefcake into [fine art,]" Sharp added. Though many of Tom's early works didn't explicitly depict sex, their characters still interact, gazing at one another with lust that, to that point, had not been a hallmark of the genre. "When you saw Tom's subjects, even when they were fully clothed in the mid 50s, you knew they had a 'gaze' about them," Sharp said. "They had a way that they looked at each other—a way that they cruised each other—that let you know they were, indeed, queer." As Laaksonen's star rose, he continued publishing works that subtly pushed the envelope, while taking on more explicit private commissions. But it wasn't until the mid-70s that Tom of Finland became renowned for his raunchy, photorealistic illustrations of muscular gay men enjoying sex. It was a paradigm shift that helped fundamentally change the way gay sexual-



Left: Tom Of Finland, *Untitled*, 1947. Right: Tom of Finland, *Untitled (From Kake vol. 20 - Pleasure Park)*, 1977. Courtesy Tom of Finland Foundation and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California



Left: Laaksonen and his protégé Durk Dehner at a fundraiser for the Foundation at the Eagle in San Francisco, 1985. Photo: Robert Pruzan. Right: Leather jackets hanging inside TOM House, Los Angeles. Photo: Martyn Thompson. As featured in the book *TOM HOUSE*, published by Rizzoli.

with no motorcycles" that were the beginnings of the leather community. In addition to this generation of gay men, his work influenced a generation of artists. As Laaksonen began spending more time in America, he grew close to artists like Etienne and Robert Mapplethorpe, inviting them to his home for salons and viewings, since opportunities to show their work at public institutions were scarce. "I think Tom gave them permission to use erotica as a part of their practice," Sharp said. "He made them think that they could examine what they were doing and know that they could incorporate sexuality into their work." Their art changed the visuals of queer culture, not only by showing work in magazines and later galleries, but also by doing the graphics for iconic fetish clubs like Mineshaft and The Lure, gay bathhouses, and a variety of other queer establishments. That influence continues to resonate with artists today, as noted in books like *My Gay Eye*, which includes current working artists like Gio Black Peter, who recently helped conceptualize the artistic direction for the legendary New York queer fetish event The Black Party.

Tom of Finland's enduring legacy is woven into a new exhibition, *TOM House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland*, within Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). Featuring a newly-built fireplace and oriental rugs, the single-story ranch house has been redecorated to look like the TOM House in Echo Park, Los Angeles, where Laaksonen spent half of each year in the final decade of his life. It was the space where he socialized and interacted with many of the queer artists he influenced. At MOCAD, Tom of Finland pieces hang alongside work by Mapplethorpe, Raymond Pettibon, John Waters, and other contemporaries influenced by his art.

Early drawings and reference materials—Laaksonen's work was often an amalgamation of his imagination and men in his life—are shown alongside more polished drawings. One hallway features his *Pleasure Park* series, depicting a figure named Kake on a cruising trip-turned-orgy in the woods. In the garage, four vitrines feature ephemera, like fliers from 1999 for the punk band Limp Wrist featuring appropriated Tom of Finland illustrations. "Tom of Finland's work has the power to change people's lives and make people feel like who they are is important," said Elysia Borowy-Reeder, the Executive Director of (MOCAD). "That has a big political message, particularly today."

His work was undoubtedly formative—not only for queer artists and the gay community at large, but for societal misfits of all walks of life. Most notably, it offered a level of visibility for queer men in ways that hadn't popularly been depicted in art before. But more than that, the pieces specifically affirmed queer sex in its many expressions, in ways that flew in the face of respectability politics and changed the way society viewed gay sexuality forever.

ity was viewed by the mainstream. Very few artists were working in the same way as Tom of Finland, injecting same-sex lust and tension into their art. But it's worth noting that Roland Caillaux, a lesser known actor and artist, was creating similar work in Paris a decade before Tom of Finland found success. He was treading similar ground, depicting men in naval uniforms and states of undress. They were leaner than Laaksonen's, but had the same gaze about them, fondling one another and engaging in sex. But with a groundswell of American support, Tom of Finland became more widely shared, sparking kinship and recognition in the men who viewed his art. "It made it so we could see a relationship, and even if you were in a small town and you were 15 years old and didn't know how to identify yourself, you knew there was a similarity between yourself and what you were seeing on paper," Sharp explained. That recognition translated into visibility for the queer community and helped lay the blueprint, in part, for leather and fetish communities that were beginning to form.

In the 1970s, men were using the art to re-enact scenes that Laaksonen had experienced during the war, finding each other in seedy bars, alleys, and cruising spots in parks around the world. They dressed themselves like Tom of Finland characters, starting "motorcycle clubs



Interior of TOM House, Los Angeles. Photo: Martyn Thompson. As featured in the book *TOM HOUSE*, published by Rizzoli.

CULTURE

Stripped down

MOCAD brings the work of gay icon Tom of Finland to Detroit

By Lee DeVito

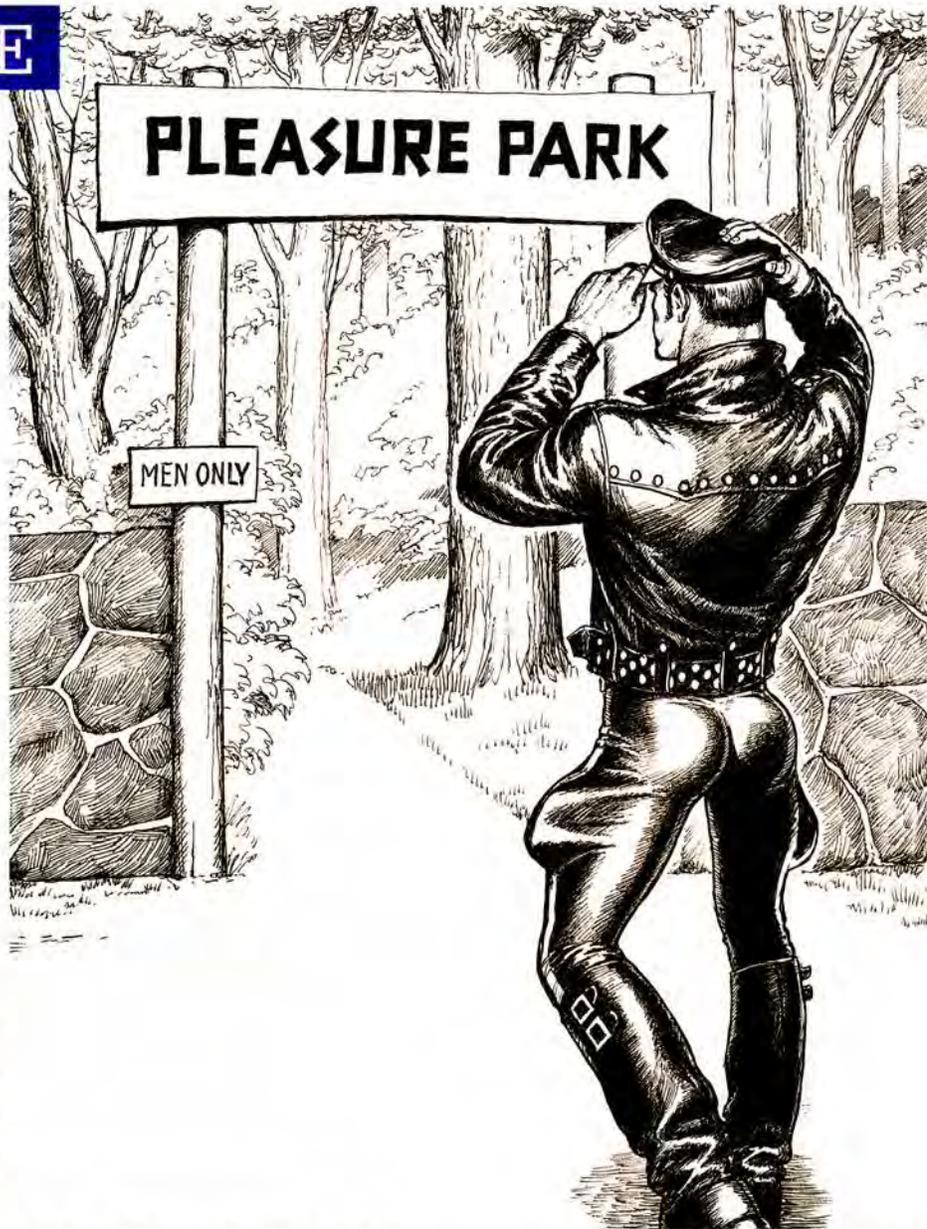
Even if you don't know the artist Tom of Finland by name, you almost certainly know of his legacy. Born Touko Laaksonen, the Finnish World War II vet and artist is known for his smoldering, homoerotic drawings of brawny, hyper-masculine men. Once deemed pornographic by the mainstream, the images had a deep influence on gay culture in the second half of the 20th century, leaving Laaksonen's mark on everything from the underground BDSM and leather scenes to even a mainstream disco act like the Village People.

The artist is the focus of *Tom House: The Life and Work of Tom of Finland*, a new exhibition opening Thursday at Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. The show will feature the prolific artist's sexually charged drawings as well as work from contemporaries and like-minded artists, including Richard Hawkins, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jim Shaw, and John Waters.

The show was co-curated by Graeme Flegenheimer, the owner of Southwest Detroit music venue El Club and an admirer of Tom of Finland's work. Flegenheimer cites Laaksonen's art as helping him explore and come to terms with his own sexuality, having first encountered his work at a book fair when he lived in Los Angeles in his early 20s.

"I remember being like, 'Whoa, this is really cool — super hot guys in leather, and dicks everywhere,'" Flegenheimer says. "I had not fully accepted my sexuality at that point. And then seeing that was very positive for me, you know. I was like, 'What is this?' It was more like, look at these gay men who are not fitting in this [stereotype] that's publicly shown on television or in movies."

That encounter wound up being the origin of how the Tom of Finland show would eventually come to Detroit. Flegenheimer soon became acquainted with S.R. Sharp, the vice president of the Tom of Finland Foundation. The



An image from Tom of Finland's "Pleasure Park" series.

COURTESY OF THE TOM OF FINLAND FOUNDATION

organization runs a museum out of the artist's former home in L.A.'s Echo Park neighborhood, which includes thousands of the prolific artist's works — including some 3,500 finished drawings and 1,500 preparatory drawings.

"I went to the house in Echo Park when I was still living in Los Angeles, and just kept showing up," Flegenheimer says. "I just kept bothering them. I was like, 'I really want to do something.' So this show is realistically almost five years in the making."

Too sexy

After the war, Laaksonen got a job working as an art director for the advertising agency McCann-Erickson in Finland. Already, Laaksonen was earning a reputation for his erotic images.

"He started out doing illustration, but somehow they thought that the father that he was drawing for a refrigerator ad was too sexy," Sharp explains. "They didn't fire him — they just kicked him up to management."

Eventually, Laaksonen was able to split

his time between Finland and Los Angeles. But it was in L.A. where Laaksonen felt he could truly be himself. "When Tom was here, he could be Tom all the time," Sharp says. "But in Finland, he sort of made a commitment to his family that he wouldn't use his real name."

Laaksonen wouldn't have to live a double life forever. By the late '80s, he was diagnosed with emphysema. The Tom of Finland Foundation was set up to become the steward of his work, and it set to solidify Laaksonen's place in

art history, commissioning a biography and a documentary film from a Finnish production company before the artist died in 1991.

"Before Tom died, we had a deadline," Sharp says. "He got to see the documentary on VHS from his bed."

Since then, the foundation has helped cement Laaksonen's role as an important Finnish artist, with the country's post office even issuing a commemorative Tom of Finland stamp in 2014. "I think through all this effort, we've given Finland a new national hero," Sharp says. "He's certainly a part of the country's identity. They now present themselves as a gay-friendly destination."

Sharp says he could see the attitudes about Laaksonen change throughout his time working with the foundation.

"When we go to Finland, we sort of gauge it by our cab drivers," he says. "So we'd say, 'Hi, we're from the Tom of Finland Foundation. And they used to say, 'Who?' And then five years later they'd say, 'No, he's not from Finland.' And then we go now and they go, 'Wow, that is so cool!'"

A perfect fit

Detroit's MOCAD turns out to be a rather appropriate venue for a Tom of Finland show. The museum is the permanent location of the Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead, and Detroit artist Kelley

was a big supporter of Tom of Finland. In 1988, Kelley invited Laaksonen to speak for his class when he was teaching at the California Institute of the Arts.

"I don't know that Mike Kelly was necessarily influenced by Tom of Finland," says MOCAD executive director Elysia Borowy-Reeder. "But he certainly had a high regard for what he was doing as an artist."

Hence, the exhibition's central theme: "Tom's house at Mike's house." By replicating Laaksonen's L.A. home, the exhibition shows how the artist blurred the lines between his professional and personal selves. "I think art is life, life is art. Tom of Finland embodies that," Borowy-Reeder says. "His house is a work of art, the way that he's curated his collection. There are no professional and personal boundaries. His personal life is reflected in the art. I think to be an incredible artist that stands the test of time, that's what it takes."

Beyond that, Borowy-Reeder sees power in the simplicity of Laaksonen's work. Much of his work is done in pencil on sketch paper, but Laaksonen demonstrates a technical mastery of the medium and depicting the male form.

"I think it's kind of like the power of the human voice against the brick wall," she says. "I like that it's stripped down — it stands in contrast to the high production of artwork right now."

The show features explicit subject matter — Laaksonen frequently depicted his subjects engaged in all manner of sex acts. For that reason, MOCAD has attached a sensitive material warning to the exhibition, and youth are not permitted to view the work unless accompanied by an adult who has had a chance to preview it.

But Borowy-Reeder says despite the adult subject matter, it was never an option for the museum to shy away from Tom of Finland's work. "I always think museums and museum education should be in the service of young people," she says. "Museums are not the ones to decide what is appropriate, because then we're censoring."

"It's really cool that MOCAD said yes," Flegenheimer says. "I wish it was a more dramatic story for you. But there was not a dramatic, 'We have to think about it.'"

Even at his most pornographic, there is something equally humorous and absurd about Laaksonen's drawings of comically beefy, uniformed men engaged in sex acts — but also a sensitivity and reverence. In that way — simply by reflecting life — Borowy-Reeder sees Tom of Finland as a political artist.

"He saw how LGBT populations didn't have the same rights," Borowy-Reeder says. "He was an activist too; not in an overt political way, but in the way that he saw activism. I think he did expand the

whole conversation."

Flegenheimer agrees. "The people Tom was drawing were persecuted," he says. "Those are the people who fought for the comfortability of my life today as a gay man. ... He was protecting and preserving and promoting this culture, and that was a really important thing for me to get across with the show."

And Laaksonen's legacy is not only confined to his influence in gay culture. "Tom of Finland not only gave homosexuals a strong, empowered identity. If you look at the other side, straights were looking at us with a different eye," Sharp says. "We suddenly were cops, and sailors, and policeman, and all the men that Tom depicted in his work. We started becoming those people. We weren't just nurses and interior decorators. He gave us permission in that way to be who we wanted to be."

Tom House: The Life and Work of Tom of Finland opens from 6-9 p.m. on Thursday, April 19 at MOCAD, 4454 Woodward Ave., Detroit; 313-832-6622; mocadetroit.org. The museum will screen the documentary Tom of Finland at 4 p.m. on Sunday, April 22.



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VISUAL ARTS

GAY-MALE EROTICA AT MOCAD

Groundbreaking soft- and hard-core male imagery of Tom of Finland

BY MICHAEL H. HODGES

Detroit News Fine Arts Writer

It's just about the gayest thing to ever hit Detroit.

"TOM House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland," an exhibition of male erotica by an artist who became an icon within the gay community, opens Thursday at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. It's up through May 19.

The imagery, mostly drawings, wood-block prints and magic-marker portraits, range from PG-rated studies of virile lumberjacks, motorcycle cops and other hyper-masculinized, mustachioed men to beautifully rendered scenes of similar men engaged in hard-core sex.

"It's elegant pornography," said Graeme Flegenheimer, the impresario behind El Club Detroit and the motive force in bringing the "TOM" show to the Motor City, as well as a co-curator.

"There's real craftsmanship in the drawings," Flegenheimer said. "There's no denying Tom's a real artist."

The art is displayed in the Mike Kelley "Mobile Homestead" behind the museum, an appropriate setting, since the two men were friends.

The show consists of an intimate series of small rooms decked out to resemble the Tom of Finland house in Echo Park, a neighborhood in Los Angeles.

Guaranteed to shock some, the exhibition undeniably pushes boundaries in a metro area not known for highly visible signs of gay sexuality.

"That makes me very happy" said co-curator Marc Ransdell Bellenger of the LA-based Tom of Finland Foundation. "We even

have a billboard (advertising the show) up near the Detroit hotel where I'm staying at Trumbull and Porter."

Touko Laaksonen, the man behind the "Tom" brand, was born in a small town in Finland in 1921. He was, by all accounts, that rarest type of gay man in that era — never willing to hide who or what he was.

"Tom was never in the closet," Bellenger said, "but Finns don't broadcast. They're very reserved about everything. Everyone knew, but no one talked about it."

Moving to Los Angeles in 1981 when he was 60 revolutionized the artist's life.

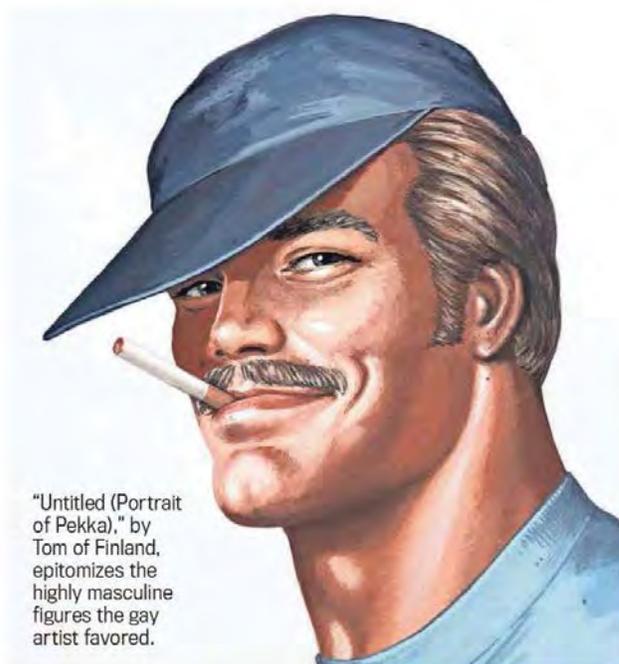
Tom worked most of his career in the Helsinki offices of the U.S. ad giant McCann Erickson, but once in California, devoted himself entirely to his artwork, which achieved huge popularity with its representation of gay men utterly untroubled by their homosexuality.

Tom died in 1991, but there have been recent moves to honor his legacy.

"We need to pay tribute to those people like Tom of Finland," said Flegenheimer, "who gave me the luxury of not having to worry about paddy wagons, or walking down the street dressed all in leather. He's a hero."

Last year, the feature film "Tom of Finland" was the official Finnish entry in the foreign-language category at the Academy Awards.

Even more surprising, four years ago Finland issued three postage stamps commemorating the artist — stamps which did little to hide the sexual nature of his work.



"Untitled (Portrait of Pekka)," by Tom of Finland, epitomizes the highly masculine figures the gay artist favored.

Tom of Finland Foundation / David Kordansky Gallery

'TOM House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland'

Thursday-May 19

6-9 p.m.; Opening reception

Museum of Contemporary Art
Detroit, 4454 Woodward, Detroit

Hours: 11 a.m. - 8 p.m. Thurs. - Fri.
11 a.m. - 5 p.m. Wed., Sat. & Sun.

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Another Man

How Tom of Finland Inspired a Generation of Queer Image-Makers

By Miss Rosen | April 18, 2018



Tom of Finland, *Untitled (Portrait of Durk Dehner)*, 1984
Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation

Without Touko Laaksonen's risqué illustrations, the landscape of queer art would look radically different. Here, we explore his influence on five different artists, from Robert Mapplethorpe to John Waters.

Even from a young age, Touko Laaksonen (aka Tom of Finland) was having erotic fantasies of grown men in his neighborhood. "I had a very strong fetish for some reason for leather and boots and all of it was combined with masculine professions and image," Laaksonen said during a guest lecture at CalArts in 1988. Mike Kelley had invited the Finnish artist to speak about the groundbreaking work he had done living in a nation where homosexuality was illegal until 1971 and laws forbidding the "promotion" of same-sex love were in effect until 1999 – eight years after his death.

Tom of Finland's distinctive blend of beauty and lust inspired a generation of queer image-makers to openly embrace their identities in their lives and in their work. In honor of his vital legacy, Tom of Finland Foundation, Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, and Graeme Flegenhimer present *TOM House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland*, a new exhibition that recreates his home in Echo Park, Los Angeles, where he spent his final years, showcasing works throughout his career alongside artists he inspired over the years.

The underlying theme of the exhibition is relationships: between artists and between men. For Tom of Finland Foundation curator Marc Ransdell-Bellenger, the connection is personal. "The very first Tom of Finland drawing I ever saw as a kid living in Kentucky is in this exhibition. It led me to realise I was not alone. It's actually a G-rated drawing and it happens to be a drawing of Durk Dehner – my boss, my roommate, and my surrogate father," he explains. "I remember the day I was working in the vault and came across that drawing; I was instantly transported back to that day in Kentucky and was brought to tears because I suddenly realised I had become what I wanted to be and I escaped that oppressive environment to enjoy this freedom that I live in now." Here, Ransdell-Bellenger and Flegenhimer share insights into the artists inspired by the freedom to love and lust that Tom of Finland gave to the world.

Robert Mapplethorpe

In the late 70s/early 80s, Robert Mapplethorpe contacted Tom, asking to visit and see the men he was drawing for himself. Mapplethorpe spent a couple of weeks with Tom in Helsinki where they did a portrait exchange. The exhibition includes Mapplethorpe's photograph of Tom. "They struck up a brief friendship," Ransdell-Bellenger reveals. "Robert gave Tom one of his first major New York exhibitions – then ended up screwing him over and stealing work and money from him, so that severed their relationship. No surprise: Robert was



Tom of Finland, *Portrait of Durk*, 1980. Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1947. Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation

a notorious asshole. Tom was a very trusting, genuine kind of guy and I don't think he was used to being around that kind of ambition."

John Waters

In the *Tom of Finland XXL* book from Taschen, John Waters gave a detailed description of meeting Durk Dehner and his unique experiences in TOM House: having a young leather-clad man to service him in any way he saw fit. The idea of home inspired the famed filmmaker to create a piece in tribute to Mike Kelley, a little vignette with a chair sitting next to a fireplace. "We are installing a fireplace in the mobile homestead to recreate the feeling of the Los Angeles house. It's a sweet little gem," Ransdell-Bellenger says. "One of the things we deal with is an open and honest sexuality. We don't try to hide it. There's no reason to. It's one of the great reasons to live and celebrate who we are."

Jim Shaw

Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw were members of Destroy All Monsters, the Detroit punk/psychedelic/metal band that described their sound as "anti-rock." "Mike was truly a weirdo and outcast in punk," Flegenheimer reveals. "It makes sense that punks, misfits, and outcasts gravitated towards Tom and protected his legacy. Then finally the fine art world woke up and realised this was beyond erotic art, it was beyond gay – it was someone's beautiful craft."

Seth Bogart

As a member of the San Francisco punk band Hunx and His Punx, Seth Bogart draws inspiration from the men depicted in Tom's work. "Music is an interesting through line in the exhibition. Essentially punk and the underground really preserved Tom until he got the acclaim from the fine art world," Flegenheimer notes. "Seth is was very indebted to Tom's men. His piece for the show is called *Jerking Off*, and it's an oil-based piece of a man jerking off. A piece like that wouldn't have existed without Tom's contribution."

Raymond Pettibon

For a long time, the art world did not know what to make of Tom's work – but the punk scene, which had no rules, got it immediately. "Tom was this quintessential punk," Flegenheimer explains. "Punk has been one of the main genres that has protected Tom during the more turbulent times of resistance for gay men when they were being persecuted." Raymond Pettibon, one of the premier visionaries of the West Coast punk scene, supported and admired Tom's work throughout his career. As the mastermind behind the Black Flag logo, record covers, and promotional flyers, Pettibon's work is emblematic of the freethinking, D.I.Y. ethos of Tom's oeuvre.



How Tom of Finland's Celebratory, Sexy Visions of Gay Love Have Empowered Others for over 60 Years

By Alexxa Gotthardt | April 12, 2018



Tom of Finland, *Untitled (Portrait of Pekka)*, 1975. Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.

It was 1988, and an image of two muscular, happy men staring at each other lustily flashed onto the wall of a CalArts classroom in Los Angeles. It was a drawing by artist and former ad-man Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland. He'd been invited by his friend and fellow artist, Mike Kelley, to give a lecture at the university.

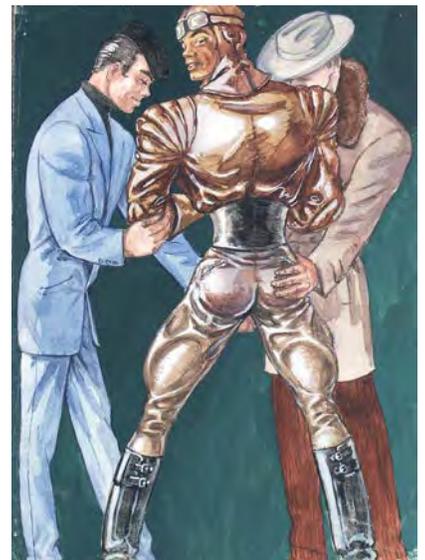
Students sat rapt as he explained his seductive drawings of gay men, which had become emblems of both erotic art and equal rights since he began showing them in the 1950s. "This was very typical of how eroticism was expressed at that time," Tom of Finland said, in a thick Finnish accent, as he clicked through a series of his early works from the 1950s and '60s. One showed a man sausage into a leather jacket, standing next to a sailor; they eyed each other at a bar, pants bulging. In the mid-20th century, sexually explicit imagery was mostly banned, "but some eye contact and hints of what might happen next [were allowed]," the artist explained. "You don't necessarily need to show a sexual action to express the erotic."

Tom of Finland did go on to make more explicit work. But whether or not his drawings depicted full-frontal nudity, they all represented a joyous celebration of homosexuality and a fight against discrimination. The gay community recognized this, and his work has become not only a sensation, but a "beacon of hope," said curator Graeme Fleggenheimer. "It says, 'it's okay to be whoever you are.'" Tom of Finland's daring practice—and its impact on the artists who've come after him—is the subject of a show opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) next week. "Tom House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland" will assemble art from every stage of Laaksonen's output—from childhood sketches to pieces he made in the last years of his life (he died in 1991). These will mingle with objects relocated from his

former home in Los Angeles, which now operates as the Tom of Finland Foundation, and work by artists including Kelley, John Waters, Raymond Pettibon, and others who were influenced by his vision. All of this will be brought together within a small house-cum-artwork that sits outside of the museum: Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* (2012), a recreation of the artist's childhood home, which now operates as an unconventional art space (it's built to travel with ease). Inside, MOCAD's team and the Tom of Finland Foundation recreated the interior of Laaksonen's own Los Angeles perch, which Kelley frequented as both a friend and a collector. "It's sort of a love letter between the two of them," said Fleggenheimer, who organized the exhibition with the foundation's Marc Ransdell-Bellenger and S.R. Sharp.

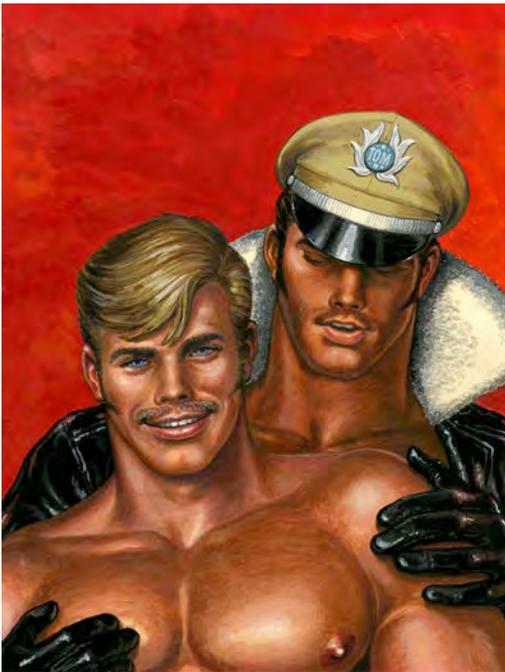
"The show is all about the people who supported and admired Tom, and about what the foundation does now—which is promoting, preserving, and protecting homoerotic and queer art. Tom's work has the power to change people's lives," Bellenger elaborated from the foundation's headquarters in Echo Park, Los Angeles. "And one thing I want to get out of this exhibition is that Tom was a real man—and a lot of [his subjects] were, and are, real men." Indeed, tangible, intimate elements from Laaksonen's world will be front and center in the show. Erotic drawings he made in secret during World War II, when he was fighting for the Finnish army, will hang not far from the pencils he often used to make his work, along with his cigarette case; a condom packet he illustrated; and his leather Harley Davidson cap. Together, these bits of Laaksonen's life hint at his struggles as an out gay man, as well as his passionate commitment to living as one. (Homosexuality was illegal in Finland until 1971; it remained against the law to "promote" same-sex love until 1999.)

"That's the luxury we have of being a foundation: uniting the humanity with the artwork," explained Sharp. "Connecting Tom to the world in which he lived." Laaksonen was born in the rural town of Kaarina, Finland, in 1920. At a young age, he was already attracted to the handsome men in his community. "I had a very strong fetish...with leather and boots and all that was combined with masculine professions," he later remembered. "Nearly everybody in the countryside wears boots, because of the heavy snow....I saw in all that something *different*," he continued, smiling mischievously.



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1947. Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.

Gotthardt, Alexa, "How Tom of Finland's Celebratory, Sexy Visions of Gay Love Have Empowered Others for over 60 Years," *Artsy.net*, April 12, 2018



Tom of Finland, *Buddies*, 1973. Courtesy of the Collection of Rob Hennig, Los Angeles, CA.

At age 19, Laaksonen was drafted into the Finnish army, and it was there he had his first sexual experiences with men and began drawing the strong, uniformed soldiers with whom he came in contact. After the war, he studied piano and worked part-time as a graphic designer, later securing a gig as senior art director at McCann Erickson, a global advertising agency with an office in Helsinki. All the while, Laaksonen sketched, gleaned inspiration from the buff men he saw in advertisements, as well as his own memories of the Finnish countryside and the war. "I saw them in *my way*," he said of the male imagery that filled magazines and newspapers. "And I wanted to put my erotic fantasies in those pictures." One piece on view at MOCAD, from 1957, shows two young, chiseled studs jousting with big sticks. They both wear high boots that graze their buttocks. Both their joy—and the innuendo at play—is clear. "He had this wonderful artistic ability, and a great sense of humor," explained Bellenger. "It's very subversive, but it also gets you horny!"

In the 1950s, Laaksonen's personal work remained mostly clandestine. But after he heard about the Los Angeles magazine *Physique Pictorial*—widely considered America's first gay publication—all of that changed. He sent drawings to its editor, the photographer Bob Mizer, and they were published on the cover soon after. Mizer, who didn't think Laaksonen's full name was straightforward enough for his American audience, suggested the pseudonym Tom of Finland. It stuck, and by 1957, Tom of Finland's career as an erotic artist had effectively begun. "Tom House" includes some of Laaksonen's first work for *Physique Pictorial*, along with the comics, drawings, and collages he made from the '50s until the end of his life. As he began to spend more time outside of Finland—in liberal hubs like Berlin, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—the artist's work became more explicit. He became more comfortable as an out gay man; in parallel, his subjects became freer with their sexuality, too. In one

of his famous cartoons, a strapping, smiling, leather-wearing man named Kake enters a "Pleasure Park," where he's free to explore his homosexual desires with other equally hunky men. Laaksonen continued to produce positive images of gay culture during the AIDS crisis, and in 1987 made a now-famous drawing encouraging safe sex. In it, an apple-bottomed man in leather chaps gives a thumbs up next to the phrase "Use a Rubber." "In his drawings, homosexuality is perfectly normal. In contrast to a common stereotype about gay men, his men are not weak or ashamed," explained Florian Hetz, a young Berlin-based photographer who was an artist-in-residence at the Tom of Finland Foundation last year. "They enjoy life and sex, and don't hide in the dark."

From the 1970s until his death, Laaksonen spent an increasing amount of time in Los Angeles, where his friend and early agent Durk Dehner lived. Dehner's arts and crafts-like house in Echo Park, surrounded by a lush garden, became Laaksonen's second home. Its attic became "Tom's Room," where he made many of his late drawings and hung his ever-growing collection of leather jackets. Today, the whole property is now called "Tom House," and it contains not only Laaksonen's archive, but also his collection of erotic art (a game of "count the phalluses" would be difficult there). The space also hosts the Tom of Finland Foundation's activities and employees (Sharp and Bellenger both live there, as do a rotating cast of artists-in-residence). It's become a haven for the gay community, and gay artists in particular—and they are all welcome to visit. "People always remark on the feeling with which they leave this house," said Sharp. "Upon crossing the threshold, they're always impressed with the energy here."

Sharp and Bellenger both aim to import that feeling in the MOCAD exhibition. "We're going to crate up some of that energy and send it to Detroit," Sharp said. They hope the sense of community that Laaksonen's drawings have inspired will also come through in work by other artists in the show. Los Angeles-based artist Jess Scott, whose painting is included in "Tom House," remembers seeing his work for the first time in a lesbian-run bookstore in her small, liberal hometown of Santa Cruz, California. "I think it is probably a testament to the relatively broad adoration for Tom that he was hanging in a lesbian bookstore," she told *Artsy*. "If you're a gay artist making anything remotely sexy, Tom is always loitering in the background. You aren't taking pen to paper and thinking, 'be as Tom,'" she continued. "You always feel lucky he even happened at all." Other artists included in the show agree. "Tom's work influenced not only the way I look at gay culture, but also how I interpret it," said performance and multimedia artist Jordan Michael Green, who is currently an artist-in-residence at the Foundation. "Seeing so many different forms of gay masculine expression has expanded my view of our community for the better." "Tom lived his life as an out-and-loud artist and gay man and that is inspirational," said London-based artist Stuart Sandford, another resident. "I always wanted my work to be joyful and fun, a little bit cheeky, and most definitely celebratory, and Tom had the same intentions."

When Laaksonen spoke to CalArts students in 1988, one of them asked if he was "trying to influence gay culture" with his work. The artist's answer was typically modest. "I didn't want to, but I'm afraid I might have," he smiled. A few beats later, however, he admitted that he'd been lying to himself: "I did want to influence other people, I wanted to change their opinion," he confessed. "I wanted to tell [people] that they had a right to enjoy their life, in their way. That was my purpose...to teach [people] to change their habits, to accept themselves, to accept others, and to be accepted."



From left: "Portrait of Pekka" by Tom of Finland, 1975; "Untitled" by Tom of Finland, 1959. Courtesy of Tom of Finland Foundation and David Kordansky Gallery

Tom of Finland Meets Mike Kelley

For much of his last decade, Touko Valio Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, the Finnish-born master of homoerotic art, lived in Los Angeles, where he produced his signature drawings of leather-clad bikers and tightly uniformed cops at his Craftsman-style home in Echo Park. Opening this month at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, the intimate exhibition "TOM House: The Work and Life of Tom of Finland" will give visitors a glimpse of the artist's former home and studio, bringing together over 200 works and objects. Rare sketches (including his last preparatory drawing from 1991, the year that he died) are displayed side-by-side with personal effects, like childhood prints from the 1920s, an illustrated condom packet and Laaksonen's leather Harley cap. "I would imagine this exhibition will bring joy and lots of pleasure," said Durk Dehner, the co-founder and president of the Tom of Finland Foundation.

The show also creates a cross-generational dialogue by incorporating the works of artists who were inspired by Laaksonen's avant-garde, queer aesthetics: from Robert Mapplethorpe and Jim Shaw to Jess Scott and Raymond Pettibon. Also in conversation with Laaksonen is the late American artist Mike Kelley, whose Mobile Homestead (a permanent, public-art project replicating his childhood home) provides an appropriately domestic setting for the show. "What a pair of bad boys," the director John Waters, also featured in the exhibition, told T. "One straight. One gay. Both crooked." On view from April 19 to May 19 at Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead, MOCAD, 4454 Woodward Avenue, Detroit.

THE CUT

The Hypersexual and Controversial Art of a Gay Icon

By Sarah Spellings

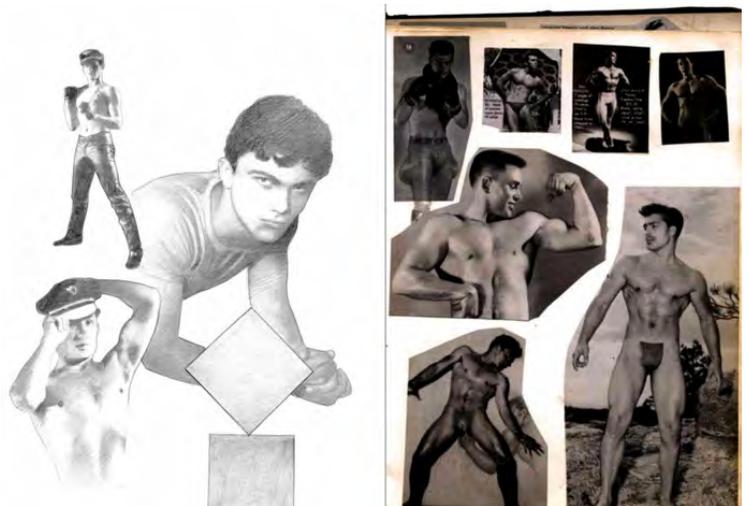


Artist Silvia Prada's drawings (left), and Tom of Finland's archives.

pseudonym "Tom." One editor added "of Finland" to his byline, and the nom de plume was born. Finland cultivated many photo scrapbooks (his archives) and re-created them as pencil drawings — gay fantasies that became part of the beefcake genre put forth by other photographers, including his friend Robert Mapplethorpe. His early work featured macho-bikers in leather jackets, which challenged public perceptions of gay men as weak at the time. The drawings continued to face adversity due to discriminatory U.S. state anti-sodomy laws prohibiting sex between men in the '60s and '70s. After male nudity was decriminalized in the latter decade, Finland gained popularity with a mainstream U.S. audience and quit his day job as an advertiser.

Now Finland is remembered as a key figure in gay culture in the 20th century, though controversial. Critics have said his fetishization of men in uniform — including policemen, sailors, and cops — included problematic depictions of erotic men in Nazi uniforms and hypersexualized black men. Others who support Finland have noted that he often drew interracial partners in his artwork, and that he was influenced by his experience in the Second World War, where the Finns fought on the side of the Nazis. For some closeted men at the time, Finland's artwork may have provided the only connection to their sexuality. The artist embraced this sentiment, saying in 1990, "My drawings are primarily meant for guys who may have experienced misunderstanding and oppression and feel that they have somehow failed in their lives. ... I want to encourage this minority group, to tell them not to give up, to think positively about their act and whole being."

Prada, on the other hand, is known for her pop-art sketches of celebrities. She says she became "obsessed" with Finland after reading about him in one of Andy Warhol's editions of *Interview* magazine. Like Finland, she works a lot in pencil and draws photo-realistic images of icons, which is one reason why the Tom of Finland Foundation reached out to Prada to make the new book. In her drawings for TOM, Prada wanted to pay homage to the difficulties of being a gay man at the height of Finland's fame in the mid-20th century, but also approach it with her own femininity. "All the gay culture we can never forget," she says. "We need to be more aware of that time when the struggle of being a gay man was part of the art. I think the female perspective comes through in a way that's more emotional and erotic than sexual. It's also a little bit chic."

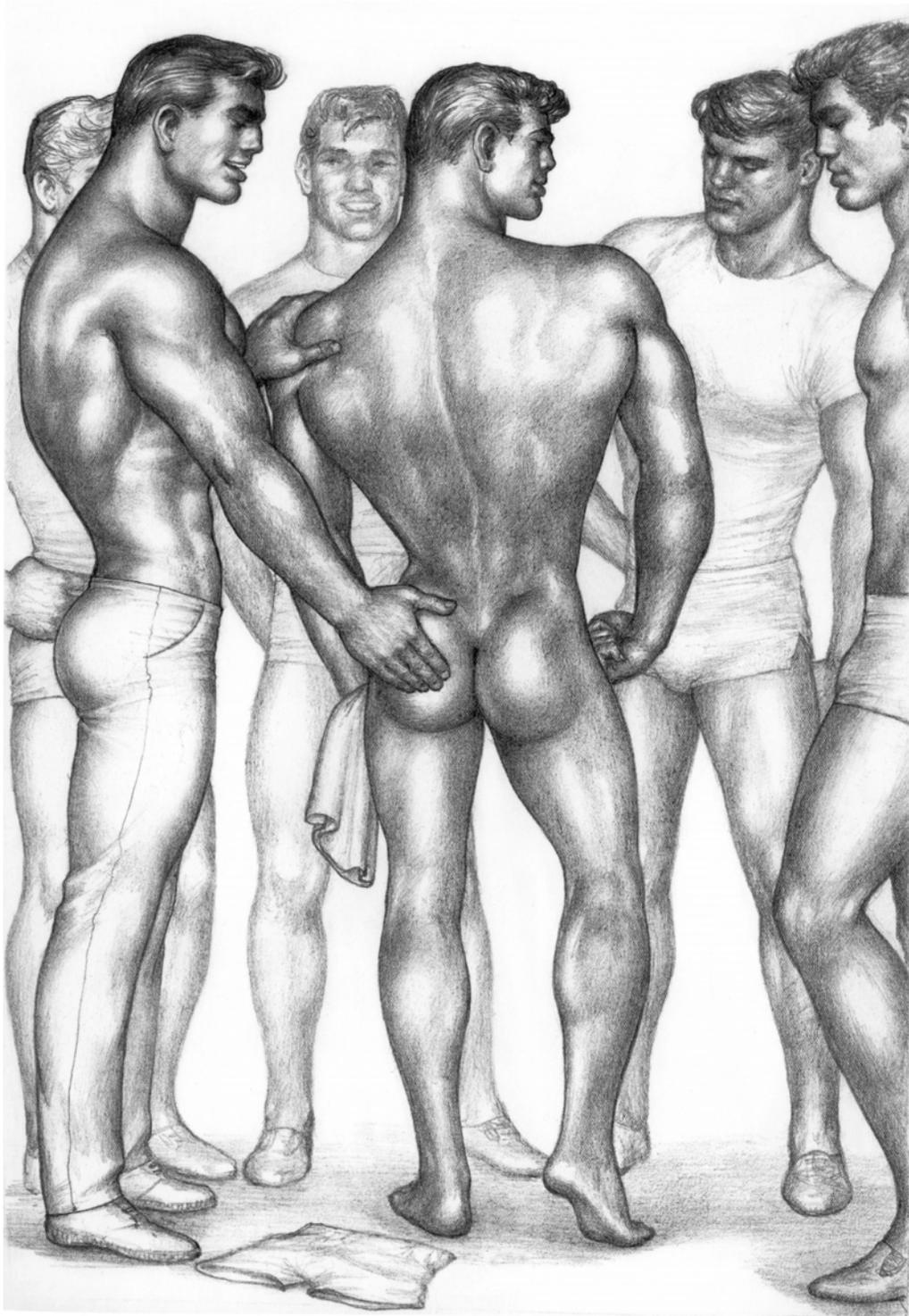


A spread from the book TOM.

By day, Touko Valio Laaksonen was a corporate advertiser in Helsinki, Finland. By night, he was Tom of Finland, a revolutionary artist whose drawings of hypermasculine men brought gay pornographic images into the mainstream in the 1960s and '70s. Almost 70 years after he started his career, the new book TOM, by artist Silvia Prada, re-illustrates his work and archive through her eyes. Each page juxtaposes Finland's work or scrapbooks with Prada's delicate graphite sketches. Prada was the first woman to be given unlimited access to Finland's archives through the Tom of Finland Foundation, which has managed Finland's archives and maintained an art gallery in Los Angeles since 1984.

Finland began his career in the 1950s by submitting illustrations to American magazines, at a time when male nudity was censored in the U.S. He sent drawings of well-endowed, muscular men — often in uniform — under the

"Tom of Finland," *The Art of the Erotic*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2017, pp. 129, 243



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1963

Tom of Finland (Touko Valio Laaksonen, 1920-1991)
Untitled, 1963, graphite on paper, 30.8 × 23.2 cm
(12 1/8 × 9 1/8 in), Tom of Finland Foundation
Permanent Collection
SEE PAGE 129

Tom of Finland, born Touko Valio Laaksonen, was a Finnish illustrator, an adroit draughtsman who put his considerable skill at the service of highly charged homoerotic images that move well beyond beefcake. Laaksonen has been called the Norman Rockwell of gay erotica, and his art has frequently been labelled fetishistic for the recurrence of sadomasochistic encounters between men – often in uniform – with oversized penises. His work was first published in the United States in the 1950s, when censorship laws expressly condemned the male nude body as obscene. Laaksonen's drawings were published in *Physique Pictorial*, an example of the kind of homoerotic magazine that circulated under the thinly veiled disguise of health and physical fitness, thereby rendering acceptable the focus on and admiration of male physique. Two decades after his first images were published, censorship laws had eased and homosexuality was no longer quite the taboo it had been at mid-century. Thus, by the 1970s Laaksonen, who had been employed in the field of advertising, was able to support himself with his art; the first exhibition of his work was also held during that decade, in Germany.

This image features the typical Tom of Finland type: herculean in their musculature, with chiselled facial features, and, when not naked, clad in tight, nearly transparent clothes. The six men stand in a close circle, gazing in admiration at the physique of the only naked figure. His brawny back, rotund buttocks and muscular thighs are clearly the focus. Not only is he central in the composition, but also one of his compatriots calls further attention to him by reaching out an equally strapping arm to clasp his behind, while resting his other arm on the central figure's shoulder. The illustration reads as a homoerotic Judgement of Paris, a subject treated innumerable times in Western art history. The Judgement of Paris, a contest between the three most resplendent goddesses of Greek mythology, was a popular theme because it afforded an artist the opportunity to depict an idealized body in front, back and profile views. Laaksonen has here replaced the three goddesses with male figures whose virile masculinity strains both at their clothing and at believability – their overly developed torsos, slender waists, high, round buttocks and slim, sinewy legs represent Laaksonen's ideal. In contrast to the many images in which he depicted sexual intercourse, this one seems almost demure. Nevertheless, the closeness of the group, the various stages of undress and the openly admiring glances conspire to intimate that the moment pictured is the precursor to a possible orgy.

DRAWING IS PUTTING A LINE AROUND DESIRE

We are attracted to drawings, and particularly sketches, because their modesty of means and their unfinishedness allow an unobstructed insight into an artist's intention and vision. What we find in them is spontaneity, immediacy, bareness, subconsciousness and humor. Drawings are an artist's instant declaration of what is important and what is not. Sometimes their discontinuity and fragmentation confuse us. Their personal and often uninhibited content might make us feel uncomfortable. Yet the vigor, creative speculation and artistic freedom they offer will nevertheless draw us in. No pun intended. All of this holds true for the drawings of Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland.

If we can agree upon the definition that great artists must be radical in the terms of their own time and have the power to change the way we see the world, then Tom of Finland undoubtedly counts among the great and truly influential artists of the latter 20th century. He managed to gain a huge international following outside the usual precincts of museums and galleries. Through his iconic images, he almost single-handedly changed the way gay men were perceived by society, and – maybe even more important – how gay men perceived themselves. The massive oeuvre that he produced over the course of a career spanning nearly six decades is devoted almost entirely to this one topic – men, their bodies and their spirits. This extraordinary consistency in subject-matter was matched by a life-long passion for the supreme discipline of freehand drawing. All he needed to create a universe of dazzlingly gorgeous hunks was a pencil and a sheet of paper. And he most likely drew every day of his life. Drawing, it seems, was an exercise for his restless imagination and desire.

Tom's world was populated by cowboys, mechanics, cops, punks and thugs – all indulging their desires with great camaraderie and without guilt or prejudice. This book assembles a cross-section of these characters as dreamt up by Tom in rough sketches or more carefully executed studies. Mostly they served as preliminary drawings for the highly finished works intended for publication and thus a wide audience. The format of a sketch book lets the viewer take an intimate glance over the artist's shoulder and share in his exuberant *joie de vivre*. It is not a facsimile of an actual sketch book used by Tom of Finland, although we have sought to be as faithful to the originals as technically possible. Instead, the playful appearance of this book reflects the joy that Tom's art has brought us over the years. All drawings in this book belong to the Tom of Finland Foundation, and we are deeply grateful to Durk Dehner, who in 1984 established the Foundation with Tom, and his fellow campaigners for their support and trust.

J.J. and P.M.K.

ARTFORUM



John Waters

FILMMAKER JOHN WATERS' EIGHTEEN-CITY SPOKEN-WORD TOUR, "A JOHN WATERS CHRISTMAS," BEGAN ON NOVEMBER 27 IN CHICAGO. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

1 **BABY DRIVER** (Edgar Wright) The best movie of the year is a popcorn thriller, an art film, and a gearhead classic that grossed over \$100 million. It deserved to! Watching the star turn of Ansel Elgort was like seeing John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* for the first time.

2 **I, OLGA HEPNAROVÁ** (Petr Kazda and Tomáš Weinreb) A hypnotic black-and-white docudrama based on the case of a pretty, twenty-two-year-old chain-smoking lesbian from Prague who in 1973 hopped in a truck and mowed down twenty pedestrians on a sidewalk. Deadpan indeed.

3 **THE STRANGE ONES** (Christopher Radcliff and Lauren Wolkstein) This brilliantly conceived, slow-to-reveal-itself

drama pulls the rug out from under any audience's comfort zone by asking them questions about adult-teen sexual relationships they'd never even want to consider.

4 **NOCTURAMA** (Bertrand Bonello) A long, thoroughly irresponsible film about teenage French terrorists who blow up buildings in Paris for no apparent reason, then hide from the police in a luxury mall, where they watch coverage of their exploits on big-screen TVs they wish they could afford.

5 **WONDERSTRUCK** (Todd Haynes) Want an IQ test for your cinephile children? Just take them to see this beautifully made, feel-good kids' movie about the hearing-impaired, starring a little girl who looks exactly like Simone Signoret. If your small-fry like the

film, they're smart. If they don't, they're stupid.

6 **GRADUATION** (Cristian Mungiu) This quietly harrowing tale of corruption and family dysfunction in Romania has the intensity of Bergman and the humor of Fassbinder . . . if he had been heterosexual.

7 **THE WIZARD OF LIES** (Barry Levinson) A jarringly perceptive portrait of the Madoff family's behind-the-scenes panic and denial over their greed. De Niro's performance is restrained to perfection as Bernie, and Michelle Pfeiffer is downright astonishing as his wife. This ain't no TV movie—give 'em both Oscars.

8 **LADY MACBETH** (William Oldroyd) The exact opposite of *Get Out*—here the bad

white liberals actually win. Viciously funny and maybe the meanest movie of the decade

9 **WONDER WHEEL** (Woody Allen) An impeccably acted potboiler in which Woody channels Tennessee Williams meets *The Honeymooners*, with a pyromaniac kid thrown in to add a touch of *Bad Seed* flavor. Say what you will, Mr. Allen has never made a bad movie. This is one of his best.

10 **TOM OF FINLAND** (Dome Karukoski) This dirty but dignified, oddly commercial biopic of the artist who inspired the modern-day s/m gay leather scene is now the Finnish government's official entry in the 2017 foreign-film Oscar race. That's what I call patriotic penis progress, and I hope it wins. □

Page-Kirby, Kristen, “‘Tom of Finland’ tells a story of the power of art to create community,” *WashingtonPost.com*, December 5, 2017

The Washington Post

‘Tom of Finland’ tells a story of the power of art to create community

by Kristen Page-Kirby | December 5, 2017



Pekka Strang as Touko Laaksonen, a.k.a. Tom of Finland. (Photo by Josef Persson/Kino Lorber)

“Tom of Finland” opens on a great expanse of a room, as two men sit on a bench, discussing a rabbit. We don’t know who they (or the rabbit) are, or what they are waiting for. Just as you begin to wonder whether you’re watching a bunny-based “Waiting for Godot,” we are transported to Finland, on the front lines of World War II.

One of the men, as we learn, is Touko Laaksonen (Pekka Strang), a wide-eyed, high-cheekboned Finnish officer who doesn’t quite fit in. “Tom of Finland” is the dramatization of his real-life story. Laaksonen, who died in 1991, is known for sexually charged drawings of leather-clad, impossibly handsome men with impossibly high buttocks — images reproduced in comics and magazines that became beloved throughout the gay communities of the world. (Not, however, in Laaksonen’s home country, where public sentiment regarding gays was, at the time, as cold as the weather.)

“Tom of Finland,” which takes its name from the artist’s nom de porn, tracks Laaksonen’s life from the 1940s through the 1980s, by which time his pictures had become icons of gay culture. The entire story rests on the sloping shoulders of Strang, who captures the emotional reticence of a man who can find sexual release and emotional comfort only in dark parks, at poker games where not a lot of gambling goes on, and sometimes in underground — literally — bars. Strang is at his best in these scenes, in which men make connections with each other via coded language and loaded glances, knowing that if they look too long at the wrong guy it could end in violence. Celebrated Finnish director Dome Karukoski and cinematographer Lasse Frank use the interplay of light and shadow — some scenes are illuminated as if by Caravaggio — to underscore how Laaksonen and his few friends must remain hidden for their own safety (not just physical, but financial and familial). Even in their sanctuaries, the looming threat of discovery is real.

Later, when Laaksonen’s art becomes a sensation, particularly in the United States, the film accentuates the stark difference between relatively freewheeling Los Angeles and repressive Helsinki by contrasting the blue California sky with the claustrophobic gray atmosphere of Scandinavia. Yet even when Laaksonen travels to L.A., where he finds a freedom he’s never known and a hearty welcome — it turns out that the first scene takes place just before Laaksonen is greeted by a cheering crowd of fans — Strang plays him as someone who’s almost crippled by a life lived in fear. It’s a moving performance, rendering a character who, even when the sun is out, can’t quite bring himself to emerge from the shadows.

In the end, the overarching theme of “Tom of Finland” is the power of art, even — or maybe especially — so-called deviant art. Laaksonen’s drawings are something more than salacious, the film suggests, signaling to generations of teenage boys who looked at them with flashlights under bedcovers that they weren’t the only ones who felt what they felt, and wanted what they wanted. In the end, it’s not a story about naughty pictures at all, but about how one artist’s loneliness helped create a global community.

Unrated. At Landmark’s E Street Cinema. Contains nudity, sex, coarse language and smoking. In English, Finnish and German. 115 minutes.



How the Tom of Finland Biopic Brought the Erotica Master's Life to Screen

Tom of Finland's impact on gay culture is hard to overstate, but the story of his life is less well known. A new film hopes to change that.

By Eric Sasson
October 13, 2017



Pekka Strang as Tom in *Tom of Finland*

In certain circles, the drawings of Tom of Finland are ubiquitous: intricately detailed sketches of beefy, muscle-bound men, often with facial hair, wearing leather or some kind of uniform, sometimes alone but often getting it on while sporting some fantastically large penises. His work's influence on the gay psyche can barely be overstated. First published in beefcake magazines in the late 50s, Tom's drawings are easily among the most recognized gay erotica out there, and were a pioneering influence in the mainstreaming of fetish culture. For many gay men in the 60s and 70s, Tom of Finland allowed them to feel normal and comfortable with more outré ideas about sexuality and masculinity (while also offering a great source of jerk-off material).

The artist behind it all was named Touko Laaksonen. Since his death in 1991, Tom's fame has only grown—yet far less is known about Laaksonen's life story. With *Tom of Finland* in select theaters today, director Dome Karoukoski seeks to change that by fictionalizing Laaksonen's life on screen. VICE spoke with Karoukoski about the challenges of adapting the story for the screen, and the role that the Tom of Finland brand have had on gay male identity, fetish culture and the queer liberation movement.

VICE: Touko's life story isn't one you would usually associate with a film biopic. What challenges did you encounter translating his story to screen?

Dome Karoukoski: When we started, we were like, "do we make this about the art, or is it about the character behind the art?" It's easy, when his images are as explosive as they are, to start with how that explosion began. But what we found most interesting was his life story. You would assume these drawings have been made by a free man with a boisterous, flamboyant life, but no—it's kind of a Superman/Clark Kent story. This man had to make all these drawings while it was illegal in Finland. He had to be very resourceful to get his art outside of the country and find places to publish it. That story of what happened behind these drawings became something we related to very strongly.

The challenge when doing a film about Tom of Finland is that everyone has an opinion on how to do a film about Tom of Finland. Of course you could go with what the fans are expecting, but when you're dealing an artist like

Touko, you have to, in a way, do it for him. In a way, it's not about making a biopic—it was also making a statement that Touko would have made. That is a film that encourages young men to be open towards joy and living without shame. And that was at the core of the film, and very much Touko's art as well.

One of the most significant aspects of Tom's work was the way it challenged the prevailing stereotype about gay males, especially at the time, as being effeminate or weak. What impact do you think Tom's art had on gay men's self-regard at the time, and by extension gay sexual liberation?

There definitely was an impact. He gave hyper-masculine gay men the chance to be free. I met a guy in LA who left Minnesota, where he'd been a quarterback in high school, and he said when he was younger he thought his feelings were quite odd and he wasn't sure he could actually be a gay man. And then he saw Tom of Finland's drawings, and felt, "I am gay and I understand this." At the same time, if you look at the whole embodiment of his work, it's not just hypermasculine men. He did dandy men also; his early work wasn't about masculinity but very much about joy. There were a lot of gay men who felt that pressure: *Should I be hypermasculine and muscular like that?* Tom's ideas might have caused some men at some point to feel shame about their own bodies. But that would be totally against what Tom would say. He never wanted that everyone should look like that. So in that sense, the film tries to promote the inner joy, the inner proudness of being a Tom's man. You can be a Tom's man without the body. Basically anyone can be a Tom's man, you don't have to look like a Muscle Beach sensation.

One criticism of Tom's work was that it sometimes depicted men in Nazi uniforms; some thought it was sympathetic towards or glamorized Nazis. Laaksonen himself denounced that interpretation. The film doesn't bring that controversy up, but it does mention how his desires were influenced by the time he spent as a soldier in World War II, with a particular focus on a Russian paratrooper he stabs, who appears as a vision-like figure in the movie. Why do you think it was important for you to make the connection between Laaksonen's wartime experiences and his art?

Well, if you look at his body of art, uniforms and the influence of authority are very much Tom's sexuality. I find it very intriguing because war, as he stated, was the best time of his life in many ways, because the sex was so free. I think that's why war is so essential in the film—he always said that paratrooper was the most beautiful man he had ever seen. We don't know if that's more universally true, or if it's from memory, because if you kill someone, how do you remember the beauty of that man? He also shot down a plane which we could assume had many men in it. And we can assume that after killing men—the most beautiful thing he loved—he'd want to bring them back to life through his art. During the AIDS era, he would actually draw these men that were dying "into life." There would be these beautiful portraits to give to their boyfriends, to hold onto as a memory. He would draw death into life, shame into joy.

We didn't touch the Nazi element because it's so difficult. Then you add ten minutes where you are trying to explain a misinterpretation. and then it's gonna feel like the film is trying to prove it was a misinterpretation. In all honesty, in Finland, we didn't support the Nazi ideology. We didn't get the concentration camps, the ghettos. So I would assume the men of Finland, in his mind, were innocent, not really understanding what they were doing. Explaining that in the film is really difficult to make the drama work. What you have to remember is that this is not a documentary. It's a feature film with fictional elements. It is based on the truth, but you have to make the drama work. Otherwise it becomes a biopic. And biopics try to prove a point—they begin to preach, and that is totally not what Tom would have wanted. He would have wanted something of joy, to make you cry, laugh, leave the cinema dancing and moving your ass, and hopefully ending the night with some really, really good sex. He would have wanted that and we aimed to do that. That was the movie we wanted to make.

Interview has been condensed and edited.

Kenigsberg, Ben, "Review: 'Tom of Finland' IS a Portrait of a Boundary-Pushing Artist," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2017, p. C11

The New York Times

Review: 'Tom of Finland' Is a Portrait of a Boundary-Pushing Artist

By Ben Kenigsberg | October 12, 2017



Pekka Strang as Touko Laaksonen in "Tom of Finland."

A biopic can take any life, no matter how transgressive or interesting, and reduce it to check marks on a list. In "Tom of Finland," a primarily Finnish-language feature from Dome Karukoski, the biography is that of Touko Laaksonen (Pekka Strang), the Finnish advertising designer who, under the name Tom of Finland, published drawings of hyper-muscular, well-endowed men and became famous for expanding perceptions on the portrayal of gay life in art.

While Mr. Laaksonen devoted his life (1920-91) to challenging conventions, the film is committed to honoring them. The movie traces Mr. Laaksonen's service in World War II, his experience with public-park cruising and discrimination, and his early illustrations of aggrandized masculinity. (He says the pictures would be easier to publish in the Vatican than in Finland, where homosexuality was outlawed at the time.) His sister (Jessica Grabowsky), a fellow artist, suspicious of his sexuality, dares him to kiss a woman in a game of truth-or-dare.

Tom's eureka moment comes when he visits California. Police officers raid a party, appearing as if they're about to arrest the gay revelers. False alarm: "We're looking for a suspect who just robbed a mini mart down on Sunset," one officer says.

If the film emphasizes the power that Mr. Laaksonen's drawings held for the gay community, it's less interested in his reception as a boundary-breaking artist, a kindred spirit to the filmmaker Kenneth Anger, among others. For those seeking more information, the closing credits actually direct viewers to a website.

theguardian

Artist who created iconic gay aesthetic

Tom of Finland won global fame through his subversive, funny drawings, says Alex Needham

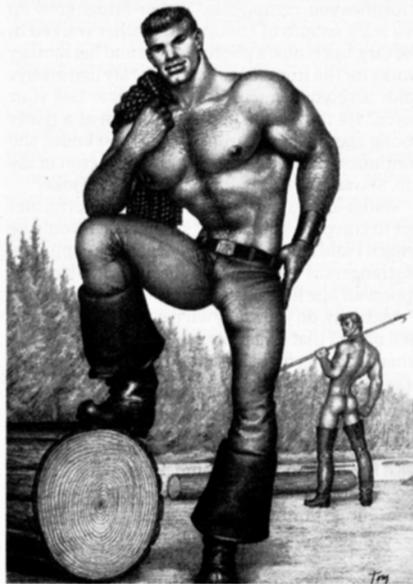
While sex between men was partially decriminalised 50 years ago in the UK, in Finland it took until 1971. And it wasn't until recently that the Finns openly acknowledged one of their country's most famous exports. In 2014, they put his artwork on a set of stamps; this year, a biopic became a multiplex hit. Almost 100 years after his birth in the town of Kaarina, Tom of Finland had come home.

Tom's real name was Touko Laaksonen. By day, he was a senior art director at an advertising agency. In his spare time, however, Laaksonen drew his sexual fantasies - bikers and lumberjacks, mounties and policemen going at it hammer and tongs in forests, prisons and parks, the smiles on their faces almost as big as their tumescent penises. Initially published in American gay proto-porn magazines, they were disseminated worldwide in dime stores, sex shops or leather bars through an international underground of fans, despite laws against the distribution of such explicit material.

Laaksonen's pictures fuelled both the sexual fantasies and the aesthetic of many gay men. The fetish for police and military uniforms and the leather-clad look - often including a cap, chaps and biker jacket - worn by Freddie Mercury, Frankie Goes to Hollywood and, of course, Glenn Hughes, the leatherman from the Village People, was directly inspired by his work. Initially drawing men in riding breeches and army officers in brown leather bomber jackets, he got into the biker look after seeing Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. Thereafter, says Durk Dehner, a Canadian friend of Laaksonen's and now the custodian of his work, Laaksonen and the nascent gay leather scene would inspire one another. Laaksonen would draw his fantasies and send them to friends. They would get a tailor to replicate the garments in the pictures, photograph themselves in them, and send the pictures back to the artist. "Then he'd get more ideas - it was evolving," says Dehner.

Yet, while they were avowedly pornographic, there was a subversion to the images, too. "In his drawings he's basically ridiculing the authorities," says Dome Karukoski, director of the Tom of Finland film. "The cops are beating [gays] in the park and then he's inviting them for sex."

"What he represents to us is freedom," says Dehner. He runs the Tom of Finland Foundation, which is based in his and Laaksonen's house in the Echo Park district of Los



Fantasy and humour ... below, Touko Laaksonen in Los Angeles circa 1984; above, his illustrations



Angeles. "There was a French contemporary photographer I saw at an exhibition of Tom's work and she was radiant. I asked her to share what she was feeling and she said: 'Here's a man who did not inhibit what was in his heart.'" Or, indeed, his pants.

While Laaksonen's fantasies were fuelled by his experiences in the second world war (the Finns fought on the side of the Nazis; although he despised the ideology, Laaksonen admitted to loving the jackboots), he was anti-racist, depicting interracial gay couplings when they were taboo.

It's this playful rebelliousness that has made Laaksonen's work resonate beyond the audience for which it was intended. "In Finland, you can see 15-year-old

girls walking around with Tom of Finland T-shirts," says Karukoski. "It's cool, it's sexy, it's edgy, the drawings are magnificent - there's something about the attitude that also entices young women." The audience for his film, he says, was 65% female.

Laaksonen died of emphysema in 1991, aged 71. He had been unknown to most Finns until his obituary appeared in the Helsinki Times. An hour-long documentary, *Tom of Finland: Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, came out shortly after his death; now the artist's story has been told in Karukoski's film. Starring Pekka Strang in what the Finnish actor describes as "the role of a lifetime", the film takes us from Laaksonen's formative time in the army to his later years as a cult hero. "It's almost a Superman story, where the Clark Kent that works in an ad agency wearing a suit comes to LA and puts his leather gear on - the hero's arrived!" says Karukoski.

Like Laaksonen, Karukoski is Finnish; very much unlike the artist, he is heterosexual (as is Strang), although he tried hard to get in the right frame of mind. "In a way, [making the film] was me just watching very hot guys for five years," says the director. "I look at a man differently now. I see different elements in his beauty, his sexuality. Of course I would never understand the appraisal of the dick in an erotic way, but then again ..."

Considering the film's subject matter, it actually contains very little sex. Instead, much of the film focuses on the struggles Laaksonen endured as a gay man in conservative Finland, from facing jail as a young man after a pick-up went awry, to facing constant pressure from his younger sister never to express his true identity, since she believed it would bring shame on the family. "Even when I told her about him being accepted into the permanent collection at MoMA, her response was: 'Well, what were they thinking?'" says Dehner, still hurt by the memory. The film, he says, is "touching - how terrible society has been to us and how conditional the love is from family members".

Dehner fell in love with Laaksonen's work aged 26 when he saw it in a New York leather bar. He wrote a fan letter inviting him to the US. He became, he says, Laaksonen's "business partner, his publicist, his best friend, his confidant, his muse, his pimp, his sex partner". Although not life partner - that was Finnish dancer Veli Mäkinen, with whom the artist spent 28 years until Mäkinen's death from throat cancer in 1981, and whose story is explored in Karukoski's film.

The Tom of Finland stamps issued by the Finnish postal service were a runaway hit. "Finns absolutely love the fact that they could mail a postcard to someone they knew in Russia with a butt on it," Dehner says. "Of course Tom would have been tickled."

He says his main issue with the film, on which Dehner was a consultant but had no artistic control, is that Strang doesn't smile enough - "He smiled a whole bunch more." Laaksonen "was understated but not insecure at all, very self-assured and humour was a big part", Dehner says. Then there's the styling: "I think that Tom's leathers could have fitted him a little tighter, a little better in the film. Jean Paul Gaultier whispered in my ear at the premiere: 'If you do another production, please ask me to be involved.'"

Dehner's dream is for a Broadway musical about Laaksonen's life to be staged. In the meantime, he nurtures gay artists at the Tom of Finland Foundation. Called Tom's House, it is crammed with Laaksonen's drawings and decor. In true Laaksonen style, it also boasts a dungeon, a must-visit for Tom's international army of fans. As Karukoski tells me: "I'm sure if you want to they can show you the games."

DAZED

The story behind Tom of Finland's chiselled promised land

As a biopic about the beefcake trailblazer hits theatres, we explore the legacy of the Finnish erotic artist with the film's director

By Michael-Oliver Harding | August 18, 2017



Touko Laaksonen (Pekka Strang) photography Jose Persson

About halfway into the new *Tom of Finland* biopic, there's a poolside scene that perfectly encapsulates the exhilaration experienced by iconic, provocative Scandinavian artist Touko Laaksonen (his real name) upon first setting foot in California. It's the late 1970s, and Tom/Touko has just been acquainted with his number one fan (and future business partner) Durk Dehner, as the SoCal sexual revolution is in full bloom. "Kid in a candy store" doesn't come close to describing Touko's glee as he snaps pictures of men in leather chest harnesses and others in snug-fitting swim trunks whacking away at each other with inflatable penises. When the local police storm the party, Touko assumes it's a morality raid akin to what he's known in Helsinki, where LGBTQ peers and friends would get locked up for the simple act of congregating. But when the uniformed men (a focal point of Tom's beefcake erotica) explain they're looking for a mini-market robbery suspect, before kindly wishing the partygoers well, it's a eureka moment for Touko. It dawns on our humble homo hero that the promised land he'd been conjuring for years via illustrations of well-endowed lumberjacks, law enforcement officers and leathermen might actually exist in some capacity. "It's a true story," *Tom of Finland* filmmaker Dome Karukoski tells me when I bring up the scene. "In reality, there were 20 cops who showed up to the party, but we could only afford 8. All of the craziest things we depict in the film actually happened. His life was so cinematic and crazy that we didn't even need to focus on his drawings. That's what struck me most after five years researching him."

He has a point. While the famed homoerotic artist's 3,500+ illustrations helped fuel the 1970s gay liberation movement as well as an international leather scene, Karukoski's biopic looks beyond his transgressive art to explore the life of a mysterious and unconventional hero. From Touko's time as a second lieutenant during the Second World War and his career as a successful art director in advertising to his longstanding relationship with partner Veli, at a time when gay men still risked castration and incarceration, *Tom of Finland* broadens our understanding of this true trailblazer. As the film continues its theatrical run in the UK, we examine the legacy of Touko's signature square-jawed, unusually beefy and super-phallic fantasy men with Finnish director Dome Karukoski.

ONCE REGARDED WITH SHAME BY FINNS, HE'S NOW A SOURCE OF NATIONAL PRIDE

Karukoski was but a teenager when Laaksonen passed away of emphysema in 1991 and was revealed to be Finnish. "I remember there was a national sense of shame that this person was Finnish," he recalls. "Like, 'now everyone in America and Australia will think we're leather gays with big dicks.' It continued until recently, when the national conscience shifted to being proud of him. It has taken many, many years to change how we view him and his art." While Finland didn't decriminalise sex between men until 1971, the country has indeed orchestrated quite the about-face over the last decade. In 2014, their postal service embraced its once-ostracised sexual pioneer by way of commemorative stamps (of record-breaking popularity, and which Russia tried to ban, obviously). This year, the country legalised same-sex marriage, named a "national" emoji in honour of TOF and made Karukoski's biopic a serious box-office smash. "It has changed tremendously in the last 5 years. I think the main reason for that is the government stance. It was such a scandal in 2014 that we as a nation were officially recognising him; the Conservatives were so against it. I remember ridiculous comments about how we should give the stamp to a war veteran instead, not realising Tom of Finland was, in fact, a war veteran."

GENERATIONS OF MEN LEARNED TO EMBRACE THEIR DESIRES THROUGH HIS ILLUSTRATIONS

Shame around same-sex desire was the watchword when Tom's homoerotic illustrations were first published in American magazine *Physique Pictorial* in the late 1950s, as censors forbade depictions of "overt homosexual acts." As courts gradually loosened their prudish grip, what continued to set Tom's drawings apart (beyond the BDSM, bulging biceps and generous genitalia) was the unwaveringly confidence of his characters. "Tom of Finland characters are always smiling; they carry no shame about their sexuality, fetishes or fantasies," reasons Karukoski. "It's about joy. I think turning sex into a joyful experience is something that still affects people in 2017. You don't have to be in Chechnya to experience the liberation it provides. This idea that whatever your fantasies are, they're okay, as long as people are with it and are having fun with you. With (screenwriter) Aleksi Bardy, we wanted to make a film where the audience would leave the cinema wanting to dance, love, have sex and enjoy their lives to the fullest. We wanted the film to express what Tom was conveying through his art."

HE'S REMEMBERED AS A CLARK KENT-ESQUE SUPERHERO WHO LED A DOUBLE LIFE

When Touko is caught red-handed in Berlin with what was considered a filthy man-on-man doodle, the film illustrates how he learns stealth is the only way to keep doing what he does. The friend he calls on to bail him out offers a sobering warning: "It's not just a piece of paper. It's an atomic bomb. You could go to prison for that. The police will search your house – and interrogate family and colleagues." Yet Tom continued to demonstrate tremendous resolve in leading a double life according to the classic superhero blueprint. "Clark Kent and Superman is a particularly fitting comparison, as TOF could work in an ad agency wearing a tweed suit one minute, then hop into a limousine the next and put his leather gear on," remarks Karukoski. "He'd arrive at JFK airport and a limo would be waiting with his leather gear inside. There was a guy holding a gin & tonic for him. We tried to make that scene as close as possible to real life."

HE COMPLETELY TORE DOWN THE CORRELATION BETWEEN GAY MEN AND WEAKNESS

"My whole life, I have done nothing but interpret my dreams of ultimate masculinity, and draw them," Touko once summed up. While we now call out (and justifiably so) a mainstream gay culture that too often rewards men for "masc" or "straight-acting" behaviour – pointing to the inherent homophobia and misogyny wrapped up in such judgment calls – Tom of Finland's macho illustrations of moustachioed bikers and buff, boot-clad hunks were among the first representations of gay men to challenge the prevailing "pansy" stereotypes of the time. Finnish medicine manuals back then even seemed to suggest gay men had lower testosterone levels, Karukoski tells me. "During research, I met a butchy guy in L.A. who told me he was a quarterback in North Carolina growing up," says Karukoski. "He had these erotic thoughts but never thought he could be gay. Then he saw Tom's artwork and understood, based on the drawings, that he in fact could be. So he immediately left for L.A. and has been living there for 40+ years. Tom was part of a group of artists who embodied the Santa Monica phenomenon, where gay men pumped themselves up at Muscle Beach to become something other than the stereotype of the flamboyant gay man. TOF very intentionally drew gay men differently than how society perceived them."

WERE HE STILL ALIVE, HE'D BE DRAWING ISIS FIGHTERS GETTING IT ON

After Tom is detained in Berlin for possession of lewd material, as we see in the film, he begins to sketch out sexual fantasies with prison guards. The artist was always driven by a yearning to ridicule his oppressors. "He was cautious because he might get beaten, go to jail, get castrated or lobotomised, but he bore no shame nor fear," explains Karukoski. "If the cops beat him, his next drawing would feature cops having sex in a park." I ask the filmmaker whether reports of The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army fighting ISIS alongside the Kurdish army in Northern Syria is something he'd be proud of, as a former military lieutenant. "I think he'd be very happy," he considers. "I always joke that if he made his drawings today, he'd probably draw Chechen military men. He loved that: to ridicule the people oppressing his kind. He'd also probably have made drawings of ISIS fighters having sex."

TOUKO WOULDN'T MIND THE CORPORATE LOVE AFFAIR WITH TOM OF FINLAND ONE BIT

Finland's embrace of their prodigal son took nearly 50 years. Another group that's recently begun worshipping at the altar of the underground icon is corporate culture – skateboards, colognes, super-premium vodkas, coffee beans, sex toys, bedding and a capsule collection for Nicola Formichetti's Nicopanda line have sprouted up on the market of late, all marketed with the artist's fleshy, cheeky stamp. Would Touko be rolling over in his grave, I wonder? "No, he would be so proud," Karukoski insists. "He worked at an ad agency for 15 years and was extremely proud of his work. The licenses to use his likeness are given out by the TOF Foundation, which is run by Tom's great friend Durk according to Touko's direction, one of which being to make his art visible. So whether it is in a movie, a coffee jar or on a sheet of linen, it's continuing the legacy he wanted to keep alive. If Tom were to see a 15-year-old girl walking around the streets of Helsinki with a T-shirt emblazoned with his illustrations, I can guarantee to you, 100 percent, he'd be proud of it."

Bradshaw, Peter, "Tom of Finland review - intriguing biopic of a gay liberation hero," *TheGuardian.com*, August 10, 2017

theguardian

Tom of Finland review – intriguing biopic of a gay liberation hero

Pekka Strang stars as the Finnish wartime artist Touko Laaksonen, whose homoerotic illustrations helped create the iconography

By Peter Bradshaw | August 10, 2017



A scene from Tom of Finland. Photograph: Josef Persson

Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen, known by his nom de plume Tom of Finland, is brought above the radar of cultural history in this well-acted biopic.

In postwar Helsinki, in conditions of the gravest illegality, Laaksonen produced thousands on thousands of homoerotic fetish illustrations, showing bulgingly endowed leather-clad guys having an unapologetic good time. Tom of Finland's work reached the liberated US in the 1960s via mail order, and he became a counter-culture hero of gay liberation, virtually inventing a whole language of hedonism that influenced Queen, the Village People and the club scene.

Pekka Strang is very good as Tom; the movie suggests that he was traumatised by his wartime experiences – Finland being a co-belligerent of Hitler's axis powers. The film shows a perhaps imagined episode of Laaksonen killing a Russian parachutist. But something in his creative alchemy responded to the brutality of Nazis and Soviets in uniform, and then to the uniforms of the police employed to break up cottaging in the parks. His eroticism subversively reclaimed these styles.

So what was Tom of Finland, ultimately? A gay version of R Crumb? Not exactly. Interestingly, the movie doesn't locate a happy ending for him in being accepted by the contemporary art establishment: a much-discussed exhibition never happens in this film. Tom of Finland is perhaps closer to the 50s fetish pinup Bettie Page.

Either way, this drama suggests his importance is in something less culturally high-flown: simply being a rock'n'roll standard-bearer for gay men, he was the means by which happiness could be achieved. It is arguably a structural problem that the movie ends just as the HIV-Aids debate begins, with Laaksonen depicted fearing that he will be blamed, and rather earnestly promoting condom use.

Still: an intriguing demonstration of how eroticism in gay culture became overt, while straight porn retains its furtiveness and hiddenness.

Saunders, Tristram Fane, "The real Tom of Finland: how a leather-loving artist gave men their muscle," *Telegraph.co.uk*, August 7, 2017

The Telegraph

The real Tom of Finland: how a leather-loving artist gave men their muscle



Pekka Strang as Laaksonen in Tom of Finland

Stamp-collecting isn't usually considered sexy. But in 2014, Finland's postal service released a limited series that had philatelists hot under the collar. Two of the stamps showed a police officer with his naked, moustachioed lover sprawled between his legs. The third featured a pair of pert male buttocks. Touko Laaksonen – the pioneer of gay erotica better known as "Tom of Finland" – would have loved seeing his pictures posted around the world, being a keen stamp-collector himself. Unusually for an erotic artist, Laaksonen has been embraced by the world of high art, particularly in America, where his famous fans included Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe. But for decades the Finnish artist had to work in secret, smuggling his illustrations out of the country and publishing under a pseudonym. It's only now, 26 years on from his death, that he has come to be celebrated in his homeland as a national treasure. A new film about the artist has been a major hit in Finland, and arrives in UK cinemas on August 11. Its director, Dome Karukoski, the filmmaker behind Nordic blockbusters such as 2010's *Lapland Odyssey* (which beat that year's *Harry Potter* and *Sex and the City* movies at the Finnish box-office), spent five years researching the artist's life, interviewing his friends and admirers.

"It's a classic rags-to-riches story," says Karukoski. "There are elements that are very universal. I never saw this as a 'gay film.'" Anyone hoping for an explicit shock-fest may be disappointed; Karukoski's thoughtful biopic is surprisingly restrained. "People were expecting a provocation – after all, it's a Tom of Finland film! We actually had script versions where there was more nudity, but his core fans said, 'The sex is there in the drawings, what we want is his story.' It's funny, because a lot of heterosexual critics have written that there should be *more sex*." Laaksonen is revered in the gay leather community. His instantly recognizable black-and-white sketches of leather-clad "Tom's Men" didn't just capture that aesthetic – they helped to create it. For Karukoski, though, the adulation was an obstacle in learning about the real man. "I remember, I asked the fans what he was like in our opening meetings," he tells me. "They said, 'Well, he was a Nordic god!' But how do you build a character from that?" It was a single photograph of the artist as a young man, however, that captured the filmmaker's imagination. "There was a shot of 10 soldiers, and nine of them were quite shy, as Finns are. But then there's Tom, just holding a smoke and flirting with the camera. And he's 20. I think that defines a lot of his character: he never carried any shame."

Born in 1920, Laaksonen was conscripted during the Winter War of 1939-40, defending Finland's borders against Stalin's invading army. "It was the best and the worst time in his life," says Karukoski. In one scene of the film, we watch as he tenderly cradles the face of a Russian soldier he has just killed. "He would always say that was the most tragic part of his life, having to kill something so beautiful." In the chaos of war, however, the closeted artist found a brief window of sexual freedom. "When people think death is imminent, the laws of sex are gone," Karukoski continues. "Meeting people in the heavy moonlight, and perhaps not recognising them the next day... How liberated men in danger can be!" These liaisons would leave a lasting impression on his art. "A fully dressed man is more erotic than a naked one," Laaksonen once said, and a man in uniform was, in his mind, the most erotic of all. For the rest of his life, he would sketch tightly-dressed military officers, as well as policemen, prison wardens and the muscly lumberjacks he remembered from his childhood in a rural logging district of southern Finland. At a time when the popular stereotype of a homosexual was weak, foppish and effeminate, Tom's Men were strong, working-class and bulging with virile confidence. "That's why he was so subversive," his friend, business partner and occasional model Durk Dehner has said. "He took heterosexual, super-male imagery, and gave it to the queer boys!"

Saunders, Tristram Fane, "The real Tom of Finland: how a leather-loving artist gave men their muscle," *Telegraph.co.uk*, August 7, 2017



Touko Laaksonen, aka Tom of Finland



Pekka Strang as Laaksonen

Dehner was one of a generation of young American men who felt moved and emboldened by Tom, whose art had been published since the Fifties in leading US "beefcake" magazine *Physique Pictorial*, a "fitness" journal which later gave up its claims of educational value and moved into overt erotica. In the film, we watch as Doug (a fictionalised version of Dehner) nervously flirts with another young man at the gym by showing him a Tom of Finland pin-up. Dehner became one of his keenest advocates in the US, regularly inviting the artist over for exhibitions where he was swamped by his fans. "He liberated a whole class of people without one word," Dehner recalled in 2010. "These young guys were so thankful to him for giving him imagery that they could identify with and feel good about." That simple feel-good message is something Laaksonen also sees in the pictures. "The men who are sexual objects in his drawings, they're proud and happy when somebody looks at them. They're proud to have a hard-on and a bulge. It's making the inappropriate appropriate," he says. "It's saying there's a world where you don't feel ashamed." Laaksonen toiled away his a day-job in a Helsinki advertising agency until 1973, and for many years only made a modest income from his secret double-life. On one trip to Berlin, his entire portfolio was stolen from his hotel-room; the missing pictures later turned up in cheap, pirated American editions.

It was Dehner who encouraged the artist to take more commercial control over his work. Together, they created a new company under his name, and in 1984 launched The Tom of Finland Foundation in Los Angeles, a charity supporting and promoting erotic artists. For the last decade of his life, the artist would spend half the year living in LA as leather-clad local hero Tom, and half the year back in Helsinki as quiet, unassuming Touko. "He was a liberator," Karukoski tells me. "He was one of the most influential artists of the Seventies and Eighties... But growing up, I thought he was American. It was only revealed that he was actually Finnish when he died [in 1991]. "I remember there was a lot of people around me that felt ashamed. They worried that in the rest of the world they would think that we are all leather gays! It was this weird, primitive fear, and I think that for a long time stopped Finland from accepting him as one of our biggest artists," he continues. "But now it's changed totally. We are in a situation where the Finns are very proud of him. We hold him as a national artist – next to the Moomintrolls!" To underline this point, Karukoski pulls out his phone to show me a magazine cover of Tove Jansson's cuddly animals flexing in fetish gear, beside the headline "Moomin of Finland". It's funny, but the fact that the parody works at all is proof of how distinctive the "Tom" look is. "It leaves something in people's eyes," says Karukoski. "They see it once, and they can describe the essence of Tom of Finland - the pose and the attitude." That pose can be seen everywhere, from Calvin Klein's underwear adverts to Frankie Goes to Hollywood's music videos. But Laaksonen's dense, fine pencil-work harder to imitate. "For years, the Tom of Finland Foundation have been looking for someone to restore his works, but they haven't found anyone who could imitate his hand, his line," Karukoski continues. "He would spend a day drawing a man's head, and then throw it away if it wasn't perfect."

Laaksonen was serious about his work, but he had a wicked sense of humour. In drawing men in uniform happily playing hide-the-truncheon, he was both indulging his own fetishes and also making a satirical point. In one of his cartoon-strips, a policeman catches two men having sex in a park at night – and decides to join in. Context is everything: homosexuality was illegal in Finland until 1971, and the consequences of being caught were severe. When Laaksonen's friends were being violently abused by police officers, what better revenge could there be than to draw the homophobes in a way they would hate? Decades before Banksy stencilled his kissing coppers, Tom of Finland made the same point with more courage. Today, his fans can buy a T-shirt from the Tom of Finland clothing line with the slogan "f--- the police", above a picture of a handsome biker doing exactly that. LGBT rights in Finland have come a long way since Laaksonen's death. In March this year, the country followed its Nordic neighbours Denmark, Sweden and Norway in introducing same-sex marriage. But across the eastern border, things are different. "My films usually get distribution in Russia," says Laaksonen. "But I'm not sure a distributor would dare at the moment to distribute this there."

When the Tom of Finland stamps were released, at least one Russian politician demanded that any envelopes carrying them should be sent back. It's a reminder that, even in 2017, Tom's Men still haven't lost their ability to shock.

Needham, Alex, "World of leather: how Tom of Finland created a legendary gay aesthetic," *TheGuardian.com*, August 1, 2017

theguardian

World of leather: how Tom of Finland created a legendary gay aesthetic

His subversive drawings ridiculed authority figures and inspired the look of Freddie Mercury and the Village People. A new film tells the story of Touko Laaksonen's rise to become Europe's kinkiest art export



A Tom of Finland illustration Photograph: Tom of Finland Foundation

While sex between men was partially decriminalised 50 years ago in the UK, in Finland it took until 1971. And it wasn't until very recently that the Finns were relaxed enough about homosexuality to openly acknowledge one of their country's most famous exports. In 2014, they put his unmistakably erotic artwork on a set of stamps; this year, a biopic became a mainstream hit at the nation's multiplexes. Almost 100 years after his birth in the town of Kaarina, Tom of Finland had come home. Tom's real name was Touko Laaksonen. By day, he was a senior art director at advertising agency McCann Erickson. In his spare time, however, Laaksonen drew his sexual fantasies – bikers and lumberjacks, mounties and policemen going at it hammer and tongs in forests, prisons and parks, the smiles on their faces almost as big as their enormously tumescent penises. Initially published in American gay proto-porn magazines such as *Physique Pictorial*, they were disseminated worldwide in dime stores, sex shops or leather bars through an international underground of fans, despite laws against the distribution of such explicit material.

Laaksonen's pictures fuelled both the sexual fantasies and the aesthetic of many gay men. The fetish for police and military uniforms and the leather-clad look – often including a cap, chaps and biker jacket – worn by Freddie Mercury, Frankie Goes to Hollywood and, of course, Glenn Hughes, the leatherman from the Village People, was directly inspired by his work. Initially drawing men in riding breeches and army officers in brown leather bomber jackets, he got into the biker look after seeing Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. Thereafter, says Durk Dehner, a Canadian friend of Laaksonen's and now the custodian of his work, Laaksonen and the nascent gay leather scene would inspire one another. Laaksonen would draw his fantasies and send them to friends. They would get a tailor to replicate the sexiest garments in the pictures, photograph themselves in them, and send the pictures back to the artist. "Then he'd get more ideas – it was evolving," says Dehner.

Yet, while they were avowedly pornographic, there was a subversion to the images, too. The scenarios, in which macho authority figures abandon themselves without shame to kinky group sex, provided not just arousal but also humour, affirmation and pride for a then frequently despised minority. "In his drawings he's basically ridiculing the authorities," says Dome Karukoski, director of the Tom of Finland film. "The cops are beating [gays] in the park and then he's inviting them for sex." "What he represents to us is freedom," says Dehner. Dressed in a leather suit and tie when we meet on a warm afternoon in London, he runs the Tom of Finland Foundation, which is based in his and Laaksonen's house in the Echo Park district of Los Angeles. "There was a French contemporary photographer I saw at an exhibition of Tom's work and she was radiant. I asked her to share what she was feeling and she said: 'Here's a man who did not inhibit what was in his heart.'" Or, indeed, his pants. While Laaksonen's fantasies were fuelled by his experiences in the second world war (the Finns fought on the side of the Nazis; although he despised the ideology, Laaksonen admitted to loving the jackboots), he was anti-racist, depicting interracial gay couplings when they were completely taboo. "I think it's good to look at the more progressive aspects of his work, like if the black guy fucked the cop then this is literally fuck the police, and we're talking the 1950s," says Stefan Kalmár, director of the ICA in London, who put on a Tom of Finland exhibition two years ago at his previous gallery, Artists Space in New York. "It's hard to comprehend what it meant to see male stereotypes so – for a want of a better word – perverted."

It's this playful rebelliousness that has made Laaksonen's work resonate beyond the audience for which it was intended. "In Finland, you can see 15-year-old girls walking around with Tom of Finland T-shirts," says Karukoski. "It's cool, it's sexy, it's edgy, the drawings are magnificent – there's something about the attitude that also entices young women." The audience for his film, he says, was 65% female. Dehner says that when he drove around town in a car emblazoned with his drawings for a gay pride parade, "the No 1 type of person that would want to be photographed with it was women between 20 and 30". Unlike many of his friends, Laaksonen weathered the Aids crisis, but he died of emphysema in 1991, aged 71. He had been unknown to most Finns until his obituary appeared in the Helsinki Times. An hour-long documentary, *Tom of Finland: Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, came out shortly after his death; now the artist's story has been told in Karukoski's film. Starring Pekka Strang in what the Finnish actor describes as "the role of a lifetime", the film takes us from Laaksonen's formative time in the army to his later years as a cult hero. "It's almost a Superman story, where the Clark Kent that works in an ad agency wearing a suit comes to LA and puts his leather gear on – the hero's arrived!" says Karukoski.

Needham, Alex, "World of leather: how Tom of Finland created a legendary gay aesthetic," *TheGuardian.com*, August 1, 2017

Like Laaksonen, Karukoski is Finnish; very much unlike the artist, he is heterosexual (as is Strang), although he tried hard to get in the right frame of mind. "In a way, [making the film] was me just watching very hot guys for five years," says the director. "I look at a man differently now. I see different elements in his beauty, his sexuality. Of course I would never understand the appraisal of the dick in an erotic way, but then again ...". Considering the film's subject matter, it actually contains very little sex – the main bedroom scene cuts from a kiss to the morning after. "The core fans were always saying: 'I've seen the drawings, those are my sex, now I want to see the story of the man I idolise,'" says Karukoski. "So the amount of gay sex will come very much from the dramatic need. Where is the line where it becomes provocation? [When] it overrides the emotional balance of the story." Instead, much of the film focuses on the struggles Laaksonen endured as a gay man in conservative Finland, from facing jail as a young man after a pick-up went awry, to facing constant pressure from his younger sister never to express his true identity, since she believed it would bring shame on the family. "Even when I told her about him being accepted into the permanent collection at MoMA, her response was: 'Well, what were they thinking?'" says Dehner, still hurt by the memory. The film, he says, is "touching – how terrible society has been to us and how conditional the love is from family members". Dehner fell in love with Laaksonen's work aged 26 when he saw it in a New York leather bar. He wrote a fan letter inviting him to the US, where he knew Laaksonen's images would find a devoted audience. He became, he says, Laaksonen's "business partner, his publicist, his best friend, his confidant, his muse, his pimp, his sex partner". Although not life partner – that was Finnish dancer Veli Mäkinen, with whom the artist spent 28 years until Mäkinen's death from throat cancer in 1981, and whose story is explored in Karukoski's film.

In LA, "Tom got to be part of a brotherhood," Dehner says. "He wasn't held in awe, he got to be one of the boys and he loved that part." Not that he didn't get some special treatment. "When he had his first exhibition in New York, in *Stompers Boots*, we picked him up at the airport and he was in his tweed suit," Dehner remembers. "Then he got into a Lincoln, a beat-up one, but we had a motorcycle escort into Manhattan as the sun was setting. He changed in the back seat into his leathers, and we had a gin and tonic waiting for him because that was his drink." Andy Warhol attended that first exhibition in a boot shop, in 1978, while Robert Mapplethorpe owned some of his work – he and Laaksonen were friends. Laaksonen's pictures were also admired by straight artists such as Raymond Pettibon and Mike Kelley who picked up on the tension between its sunny appeal – Laaksonen, after all, was an ad man – and its transgressive subject matter. "It's essentially outsider art, and yet how can someone who works for one of the biggest global companies do outsider art?" says Kalmár about the work's ambiguity and the way, pre-internet, it found a worldwide audience. "How can one man create such iconic images that are a bit like Walt Disney and be known around the globe? You can probably go to a village in China and they will have heard of Tom of Finland." Then there's the jaw-dropping nature of those gigantic penises. Karukoski clearly remembers his first viewing of Laaksonen's work at school when he was about 12. "Someone had nicked or found his comic books. We were too young to understand sexuality in any form, I think our wildest dream was Samantha Fox Strip Poker on the Commodore 64. We were looking at it behind the school, and we were like: 'Do the dicks really grow so big?'"

It's perhaps this combination of stylish technique and outrageous content that makes Laaksonen's work so potent. The Tom of Finland stamps issued by the Finnish postal service in 2014 were a runaway hit: orders flooded in from 154 different countries for the chance to lick a stamp adorned with a picture of a naked male bottom, with Laaksonen's hero and alter ego Kake's face peering between the muscular thighs. "Finns absolutely love the fact that they could mail a postcard to someone they knew in Russia with a butt on it," Dehner says. "Of course Tom would have been tickled." Pekka Strang stars as the Finnish wartime artist Touko Laaksonen, whose homoerotic illustrations helped create the iconography of gay culture. He says his main issue with the film, on which Dehner was a consultant but had no artistic control, is that Strang doesn't smile enough – "He smiled a whole bunch more." Laaksonen "was understated but not insecure at all, very self-assured and humour was a big part," Dehner says. Then there's the styling: "I think that Tom's leathers could have fitted him a little tighter, a little better in the film. Jean Paul Gaultier whispered in my ear at the premiere: 'If you do another production, please ask me to be involved.'"

Dehner's dream is for a Broadway musical about Laaksonen's life to be staged, ideally with a gay creative team. In the meantime, he nurtures gay artists at the Tom of Finland Foundation, where they can stay at the house and make work; a biennial erotic art contest has lured judges including Helmut Lang and Elmgreen and Dragset. The Foundation serves as a base where Dehner can disseminate and promote Laaksonen's work, not just to metropolitan centres such as London and New York, but to much less gay-friendly places including Riga in Latvia, which hosted a Tom of Finland exhibition a couple of years ago. Called Tom's House, the Foundation's interior is crammed with Laaksonen's old drawings and decor. Even the armchair cushion comes adorned with a phallus; a temple to one man's sexual fantasies. In true Laaksonen style, it also boasts a dungeon, a must-visit for Tom's international army of lovers, still gathering new recruits. As Karukoski tells me: "I'm sure if you want to they can show you the games."

ADVOCATE

Why Tom of Finland's Sex, Courage, and Joy Matter Today

The director and star of the Tom of Finland biopic discuss the legacy and urgent relevance of the late gay artist.

By Daniel Reynolds | May 24, 2017



Pekka Strang in *Tom of Finland* (2017) next to a Tom of Finland artwork

When Touko Valio Laaksonen — known by his artist's name, Tom of Finland — began drawing erotic images of men in 1940s Europe, such an act was an illegal. Yet for decades, Laaksonen labored for his art, surviving shady dealers on the black market as well as threats from law enforcement, which considered not only his art but his very being as a gay man a threat to society. A sweeping new biopic, *Tom of Finland*, shows Laaksonen's journey as well as the evolving acceptance of gay people throughout the latter half of the 20th century. From World War II to the AIDS crisis, Laaksonen subverts each era's agents of oppression through his art's embrace of sexuality without shame.

At the Tribeca Film Festival premiere of *Tom of Finland*, *The Advocate* spoke with the film's director, Dome Karukoski, and star, Pekka Strang, about the significance of telling Laaksonen's story and illustrating his acts of resistance today. "I think the biggest surprise for me, how cinematic the life was. I mean, how much courage he must have had to do the thing he did," Karukoski said. "Because at this time, when he did his art, it was illegal. It was considered a sickness in Finland. So basically, I think that was the biggest revelation for me to understand how much courage you need to do this." Unfortunately, this lesson of courage in the face of oppression is still needed in the world in pres-

ent day. Horrors like the concentration camps in Chechnya, ISIS throwing suspected gay and bi men off of rooftops, and the high rate of murders of transgender women here in the United States illustrate that for all the gains that have been made in LGBT rights, there is still a terrible backlash that seeks to undermine them.

"When we started making this movie, we started in 2011, and I think we didn't anticipate that the world [would be in] this situation, that [the] right wing has risen again and the conservative thoughts have risen again," Karukoski said. "And I think that goes in cycles in the world. Once the gay community, the LGBT community, has some freedom, then there's a counterstrike from the conservative side." In this reality, it is more vital than ever to have art that declares, "There's no shame or there's no hiding," which is what Laaksonen did in his work and what the filmmakers hope to translate for the present day. Karukoski believes that this story, due to its resonance, also has the potential to reach a mainstream audience eager to resist the powers of regression. "The world is taking steps backwards," Strang said. "So that's why we need to remind [audiences] that history is quite dark and brutal. So we shouldn't go there anymore. I think [Tom's story is] even more important now than when we [filmed] the movie a year ago. We'll see where the world goes." It is also essential to recognize that, not too long ago, it would have been illegal to screen a film like *Tom of Finland* in many now-accepting places, including Finland. There, a law similar to Russia's "gay propaganda" restrictions was on the books until 1999. The production even initially had trouble finding financing due to the very same gay stigma that hindered Laaksonen throughout his career. Thus, it becomes essential that art raises its voice when political administrations like U.S. President Donald Trump's fail to speak out against injustices like the gay humanitarian crisis in Chechnya. "The silence is a brutal act. We should speak up about things we don't agree with. And silence ... it's really close to violence," Strang said, adding, "The role of 'don't ask, don't tell'? We should just change it to ask and tell, and be open about it."

Tom of Finland was a master of opening this closet. His drawings of cops, bikers, soldiers, and more figures of uber-masculinity inspired a movement of gay liberation and pushed back against the stereotypes of the day. Later, his work, by incorporating condoms, also helped raise awareness of sexual health during a time of crisis. "He started to change the world without really knowing it, and he was an amazing man," Strang said. "Just his art is really important — not just because of the content, but because of its beauty." Christopher Harrity, *The Advocate's* art director, attested to the great significance of seeing *Tom of Finland's* work in a time when queer people were repressed in the United States. "They were without self-loathing," he remarked. "While their sex may have been engaged in surreptitiously, there seemed to be no question as to their entitlement of having it, taking it, plundering it. That was quite far from the truth of 1961: Entrapment, blackmail, financial ruin, prison, electroshock treatments, medical castration, and suicide were the norms of the time. In their way, Tom's hunks were living in the future. They created the gay sexual revolution on vellum." In 2017, *Tom of Finland's* work reminds viewers of not only the political importance of embracing one's sexuality and queer identity, but also of this act's emotional and spiritual necessity. "It's about joy. It's about that these characters don't have any shame. And the fantasies — all the fantasies, all the sexual fantasies you can have," said Karukoski, adding, "It's also about pride — pride about yourself and about liberty and freedom of who you want to be." "Life — we all have our time here," Strang concluded. "We should enjoy it. And we should not let people put us down. I think that's one of Tom's — not lessons — but his legacy, is to enjoy life."

Martin, Brittany, "A look at Tom of Finland's Echo Park home's road to historic landmark status," *TimeOut.com*, February 14, 2017



A look at Tom of Finland's Echo Park home's road to historic landmark status



Photograph: Courtesy Tom of Finland House Foundation/Tom House/Martyn Thompso

The Craftsman-style bungalow in Echo Park where artist Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, once lived might look conventional from the outside, but inside you'll find a monument to an unconventional life, a treasure trove of relics of L.A.'s gay history—and lots and lots of leather. Recently, as part of a campaign to recognize and preserve LGBT history across Los Angeles, the house has been granted official historical-cultural landmark status by the city.

Laaksonen began his career as a gay-erotica illustrator in the 1950s, while living in Helsinki, Finland. At the time, U.S. law forbade the sale of anything depicting "overt homosexual acts," so he created images of muscle-bound, leather-clad cops and bikers who left just enough to the imagination for the American fitness magazines that published his works. After a 1962 Supreme Court ruling struck down those censorship laws, Laaksonen found himself free to be as explicit as he wished.

In the 1970s, Laaksonen moved to Los Angeles and took up residence in an Eastside bungalow, where he lived and worked for what would be his most productive years, and up until his death in 1991. While he lived there, the home became an important clubhouse of sorts for the local gay community, often welcoming guests such as Robert Mapplethorpe and John Waters.

Durk Dehner, Laaksonen's business partner and friend, still owns the house, which is now the base of operations for the Tom of Finland Foundation. The foundation hosts occasional events, art classes and the annual Tom of Finland Art and



Photograph: Courtesy Tom of Finland House Foundation/Tom House/Martyn Thompson

Martin, Brittany, "A look at Tom of Finland's Echo Park home's road to historic landmark status," *TimeOut.com*, February 14, 2017

Culture Festival; it also serves as an archive of the artist's work and holds what is believed to be the world's largest collection of gay erotic art.

The foundation led the effort to recognize the house as a landmark to honor the significance of Laaksonen's work, as well as the role the house played as a hotbed of gay activism, organizing and social life. Landmark designation gives the home the legitimacy of official status and ensures the building will be preserved, even if the foundation ceases to be based there.

"We look at the Tom of Finland House as an example of a stepping-stone to how we got to where we are today, says Adrian Scott Fine, director of advocacy for the Los Angeles Conservancy, which supported the landmark application. "These places help us chart the course of LGBTQ history, and, right now, that project seems more timely and relevant than ever."

Tom of Finland House is located at 1421 Laveta Terrace in Echo Park. Check the Tom of Finland Foundation website for a schedule of public events.



Photograph: Courtesy Tom of Finland House Foundation/Tom House/
Marty Thompson



Durk Dehner, (top right) founded the Tom of Finland Foundation in 1984. Headquartered in L.A., Tom House (above) maintains the artist's archives and personal ephemera, including his drawing desk and army uniform.



Leather Bound

A new book goes behind the hedgerows at the Tom of Finland Foundation

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

In the early '90s, creative director Michael Reynolds began collecting photography with a focus on homoerotic works by Peter Hujar, Robert Mapplethorpe, George Platt Lynes and Wilhelm von Gloeden. "Eventually I decided to include illustration, and collect works by Tom of Finland," says Reynolds. In 2001 he bought his gateway pieces: a drawing of a biker spanking another biker from a 1960s fantasy narrative sequence and a late-'70s preparatory drawing of a nude male writhing like a snake on the floor through a forest of leather boots. At the time, Reynolds heard about a turn-of-the-century hilltop home in Echo Park, Los Angeles, where Tom, born Touko Laaksonen, lived and worked during the final decade of his life.

"When I first went there it was a total mind fuck," says Reynolds of his virgin encounter with the property that is now known as Tom House. It was purchased in 1979 by a "band of biker brothers" that included Durk Dehner, a Canadian-born art student who had

previously lived in New York and played model/muse to artists like Bruce Weber and Ken Haak during the last days of disco. Dehner had stumbled upon Tom's work on a poster outside the Manhattan leather bar the Spike. "I saw that drawing and I had an experience," he says.

In fact, it moved him so much that he hosted Tom at his Silver Lake residence in 1977, then began traveling with him to exhibitions and organized a show of his work at the Manhattan boot shop/gallery Stompers, where Tom first met Andy Warhol. Dehner quickly assumed the role of best friend, guardian angel, confidant, model, publicist and business manager. "I said, 'Tom, I love your work and we have to develop an archive for you.'" By 1984, the Tom of Finland Foundation was born.

As the public acceptance of LGBTQ culture grew, so did the house—which has become a sort of Playboy Mansion for the gay leather community—while Tom of Finland's acceptance into the mainstream has

become all but complete: In addition to a 1998 Taschen monograph and a 2013 retrospective at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Finland honored Tom's work with three postage stamps in 2014. The foundation is now represented by David Kordansky Gallery, which opened a brilliant exhibition last spring.

"It is clear that Tom of Finland has finally arrived in the blue chip art world," says Reynolds, who, along with photographer Martyn Thompson and design critic Mayer Rus, collaborated on the substantial new design-art-gay history tome *Tom House: Tom of Finland in Los Angeles* (Rizzoli), which catalogs everything from the whips, chains and cages in the still-active subterranean sex dungeon to Tom's Finnish Army uniforms to never-before-published drawings.

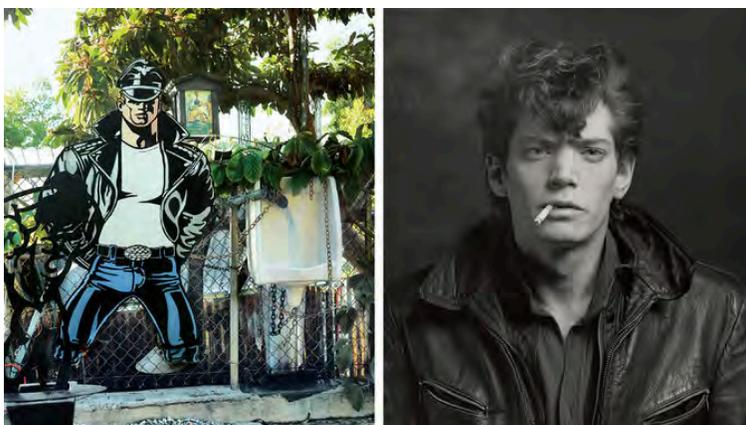
"At the end of the day, it's about a brotherhood of men who have dedicated their lives to preserving erotic art," Reynolds says. "It's a magical place, an absolute rarity in this day and age."

Delavan, Tom, "This Spring, All About Robert Mapplethorpe and Tom of Finland," *NYTimes.com*, T Magazine, February 24, 2016



This Spring, All About Robert Mapplethorpe and Tom of Finland

By TOM DELAVAN
February 24, 2016



From left: an homage to Tom House by the artist Webster; Robert Mapplethorpe.
Credit From left: Martyn Thompson; Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation/Courtesy of HBO.

In her memoir "Just Kids," Patti Smith recounts a day in the 1960s when she and her then-boyfriend **Robert Mapplethorpe** scoured the used-paperback stalls of Times Square, looking for inspiration. "Robert," she writes, "found a few loose pages from a portfolio of sketches of Aryan boys in motorcycle caps by Tom of Finland." Touko "**Tom of Finland**" Laaksonen's work — stylized drawings of hypermasculine gay figures that turned postwar gay stereotypes on their head — would come to have a great impact on Mapplethorpe's famously explicit photographs of male nudes, which were at the center of the culture war of the late '80s and early '90s. (Jesse Helms famously waved them on the Senate floor as an argument against public funding for the arts.)

This spring sees homages to both men, who eventually became friends. Beginning next month, a gargantuan two-part Mapplethorpe retrospective is on view at the Getty and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through July; a documentary called "Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures" premieres on HBO in April 4; and a new book, "Tom House" (Rizzoli, \$55), documents Laaksonen's historic Los Angeles home, which was not only where the artist lived and worked over the last decade of his life, but also the nexus of a gay biker counterculture — in some ways, a setting where the artist's work could come to life.

"Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium" is on view March 15-July 31 at the J. Paul Getty Museum, getty.edu, and March 20-July 31 at Lacma, lacma.org. A book signing for "Tom House" takes place March 12 from 4 to 6 p.m. at David Kordansky Gallery, tomoffinlandhouse.com.

VINCE ALETTI

4

TOM OF FINLAND (ARTISTS SPACE, NEW YORK) The year's sexiest show was also one of its smartest. In the gallery's main space, Tom's meticulously refined drawings—as elegant as they are erotic—were installed in a series of parallel corridors, offering viewers a series of intimate encounters with the works and engendering an excitement not unlike that of cruising. Even when they're not designed as storyboard sequences, his pictures have a terrific narrative compression—an energy straining for the inevitable climax. His pumped-up supermen are ready for anything, often in full view of voyeurs who act as stand-ins for an avid audience. At the satellite gallery on Walker Street, the annex show of densely collaged scrapbook pages—faces, physiques, fetish wear—was a fascinating glimpse into Tom's private library of sources and inspirations.



1. Willi Ruge, *Sekunden vor der Landung* (Seconds Before Landing), 1931, gelatin silver print, 8 3/4 x 5 7/8". From the series "Ich fotografiere mich beim Absturz mit dem Fallschirm" (I Photograph Myself During a Parachute Jump), 1931. From "Modern Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection, 1909–1949." 2. Wolfgang Tillmans, *nackt, 2* (Naked, 2), 2014, inkjet print, 83 3/4 x 57 1/2". 3. View of "Chris Ofili: Night and Day," 2014–15, New Museum, New York, 2014. From left: *Blue Night Watcher*, 2006; *Blue Riders*, 2006; *Blue Steps (fall from grace)*, 2011. Photo: Maris Hutchinson. 4. Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1985, graphite on paper, 13 x 9 1/2".

Wolin, Joseph R, "Tom of Finland: The Pleasure of Play," *Time Out New York*, July 16, 2015



“Tom of Finland: The Pleasure of Play”



Daniel Pérez
Tom of Finland; installation view

Touko Laaksonen (1920–1991), the artist better known as Tom of Finland, helped shaped the sexual desires of generations of gay men. Who knew the erotic potential of muscles, mustaches, and tight leather outfits until Tom’s exquisitely finished drawings found their audience? His images lit up countless fantasies with their impossibly humpy, practically pneumatic men engaged in all sorts of exciting and—to judge by their happy grins—enjoyable activities, from the slightly lewd to the fully pornographic. Like another great gay artist, his younger contemporary, Andy Warhol, Tom came from a background in advertising and illustration. And also like Warhol, he eventually cut a wide swath through popular culture as this largest survey of his oeuvre to date attests.

The works are hung in a series of corridors set diagonally to the gallery itself like a Platonic ideal of a gay cruising ground. Each space is invisible to the others: We can’t see what or who they hold. Instead of a chronological order, the show seems organized into the chapters of an historical narrative. The earliest pieces, a series of gouaches from 1946–47, occupy a hallway in the middle of the gallery. The men in them look like mail-order catalogue models of the time, but often sport jackboots and uniforms as they engage in various acts of rape, military-on-civilian (and vice versa) sex. Considering the date, the unabashed nature of these scenes is astonishing, but, coming hard on the heels of World War II, their combination of uniforms, sex and violence also discomfits.

By the late 1950s, Tom had become a regular contributor to American underground gay magazines, such as Bob Mizer’s Los Angeles-based *Physique Pictorial*. He began to develop the mature work he would refine for the rest of his life: Gorgeous, somewhat cartoony pencil renderings with soft, subtle gradations of tone that picture familiar types (singly, in pairs and groups) reveling in their lascivious, unbridled homosexuality. In an emblematic untitled work from 1976, a naked blond hotty floating in space embraces a beach-ball-size globe and literally fucks the world!

Wolin, Joseph R, "Tom of Finland: The Pleasure of Play," *Time Out New York*, July 16, 2015

Organized like a comic strip, a 1977 series of untitled drawings—unusually made in ballpoint pen—pictures a man dressed head-to-toe in black leather as he encounters a string of horny men (a soldier, a sailor, a cowboy) one-by-one. An alfresco nine-man orgy ensues that remains underway as our leather-clad hero departs, unzipped, dripping and obviously satisfied.

Although risqué and raunchy, Tom's work and the larger gay culture were mutually influential, as his archetypes' resemblance to the Village People (formed in 1977) suggest. By the 1980s, reproductions of Tom's work hung on the walls of gay bars around the world, inspiring the sartorial and bodybuilding habits of countless gay men who wanted to look like the masculine icons he pictured.

But, while Tom's work was liberating, it was rigidly codified, too. His subjects, with very few exceptions, inhabit a single, exclusionary ideal: Jacked-up, big-dicked, working-class, macho and Aryan. Women barely exist in Tom's world; black men appear only slightly more often, and when they do, tend to conform to stereotypes, possessing even more outlandishly large genitalia than their white counterparts. Tom's gay fantasias were personal and idiosyncratic, and while sexual desire seldom lends itself to political correctness, he exhibited a disturbing tendency to fetishize his characters along lines that flirted with racism.

Then there's Tom's Nazi problem. His uniformed Teutonic types, playing their games of power and dominance, were influenced by the presence of German troops in his native Finland during World War II. Tom, in fact, fought in the Finnish army against the Soviet Union's 1940 invasion, a conflict that precipitated an alliance with the Third Reich. This history seems to echo through a pair of untitled sketches, from 1964 and 1988, respectively, hidden in the last row of the exhibition. They make his fascination with fascism explicit with their inclusion of swastika armbands worn by uniformed men. When gay porn rubs up against Nazism in a back room, it becomes awkward, to say the least.

In addition to the main show, Artists Space's satellite gallery on Walker Street features dozens of Tom's "reference pages"—collaged pictures cut from magazines—presented on the walls and in vitrines. Organized by subject—bikers, cops, sailors, Mounties, Nazis (both real and Hollywood versions), leather jackets, jodhpurs, faces, butts, dicks, sucking, fucking—they comprise a compendium of parts that Tom synthesized in his drawings. On some of them, Tom has drawn over the images, beginning their transformation. A wall text argues that the reference pages show the artist "taking apart the representations of maleness" (apparently, even pornographers can be subject to Poststructuralist analysis these days), but in actuality, the collages seem more like simple distillations of desire than anything else.

Hugely popular and radically open in its treatment of sexuality, Tom's classic work, some now more than half a century old, still looks contemporary, and this exhibition seems timely, if a little against the grain. In a domesticating moment of same-sex marriage, it feels more important than ever to remember the revelatory potential of gay sexuality when it was outlawed.—*Joseph R. Wolin*

40/ART

TOM of FINLAND

A NEW EXHIBITION TACKLES THE BOLD, BULGING, AND UNAPOLOGETICALLY BUTCH WORLD OF THE GAYEST ARTWORK OF ALL TIME

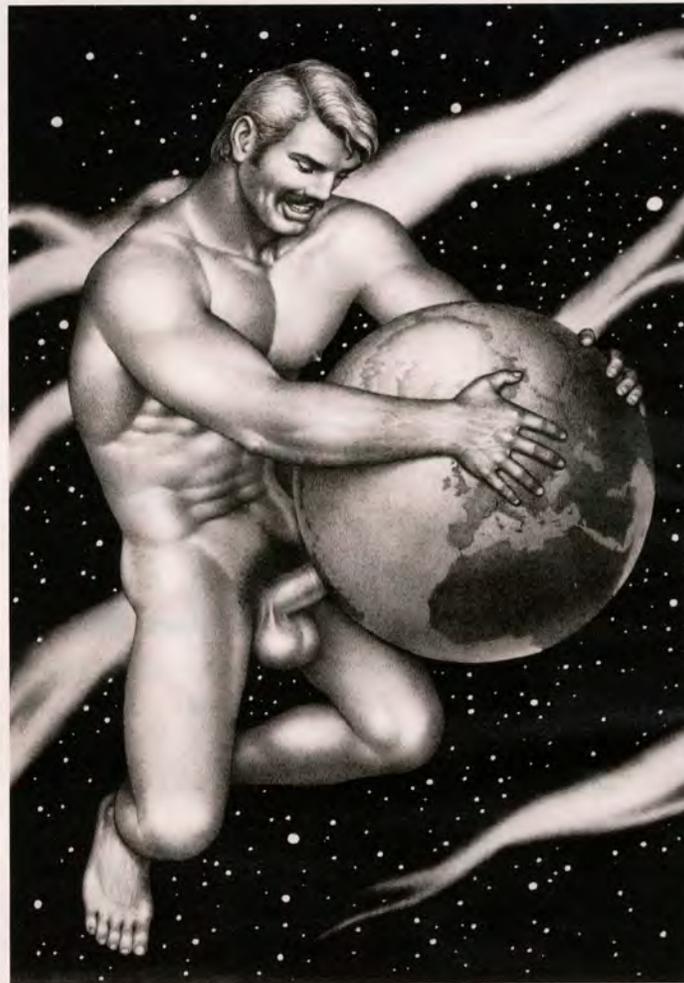
The pneumatic pecs. The bubble butts. The willowy waistlines and accomplished abs. The dicks that could double as fire hoses. Tom of Finland's iconic drawings of idealized gay sexuality are, as a body of work, a buffet of fantastically rendered flesh. But what continues to make Tom's men so incredibly subversive is a quality far less salacious than those by which they are best known: their smiles. Years before gay liberation was conceivable and a half-century before society would see quantifiable proof of its fruits, Tom of Finland (birth name: Touko Laaksonen) was depicting hardcore, all-male sex, often set in public spaces, and he was doing it with a positive sensibility. Tom's men were out, they weren't pathologized, and they were shameless in a time when it seemed impossible for most gay men to be that way.

"I think the liberated smile that his characters have is still progressive," says Stefan Kalmár, the curator of "Tom of Finland: The Pleasure of Play," a comprehensive exhibit of Laaksonen's work that opens in June at New York's Artists Space (where Kalmár is also executive director). "It's not like party-and-play, hidden-hotel-rooms business. This is out in the open and therefore still a valuable discussion today about sexuality that's not about gay marriage."

Laaksonen's work retains its radical function; it challenges the current belief held by many gays that in order to secure equal rights, we must downplay the sex in our sexuality and present ourselves as well behaved and "normal" (whatever that means). Tom of Finland spent his career contradicting the prevailing narratives of neutered and effeminate gay life. Of his subjects, Laaksonen said, "I began to exaggerate their maleness on purpose to point out that all gays don't necessarily need to be just 'those damn queers,' that they could be as handsome, strong, and masculine as any other men."

"The Pleasure of Play" will include more than 180 drawings, often executed in graphite, and 600 photo collages. The work spans Laaksonen's childhood growing up in Kaarina, Finland, as the son of schoolteachers to his 1957 entry into the American market via bodybuilding magazines, all the way to the straightforwardly pornographic work that he did up until his death from emphysema in 1991. Kalmár says the exhibition is focused on "the more perverted stuff," so expect drawings of orgies, leather play, jailhouse scenarios, depictions of sexual versatility, and even some men fucking in Nazi uniforms, which was inspired by the German soldiers who occupied Finland in World War II. "It's hardcore, in a way," says Kalmár. "Even now we think, 'Can we even show this?'"

Kalmár peppers his discussion of Laaksonen's work with unearthed facts about the artist's life, such as his remaining closeted to his family until death and that he wasn't particularly sexually active. "I think he was more of a looker," says Kalmár. In that light, Tom of Finland's body of



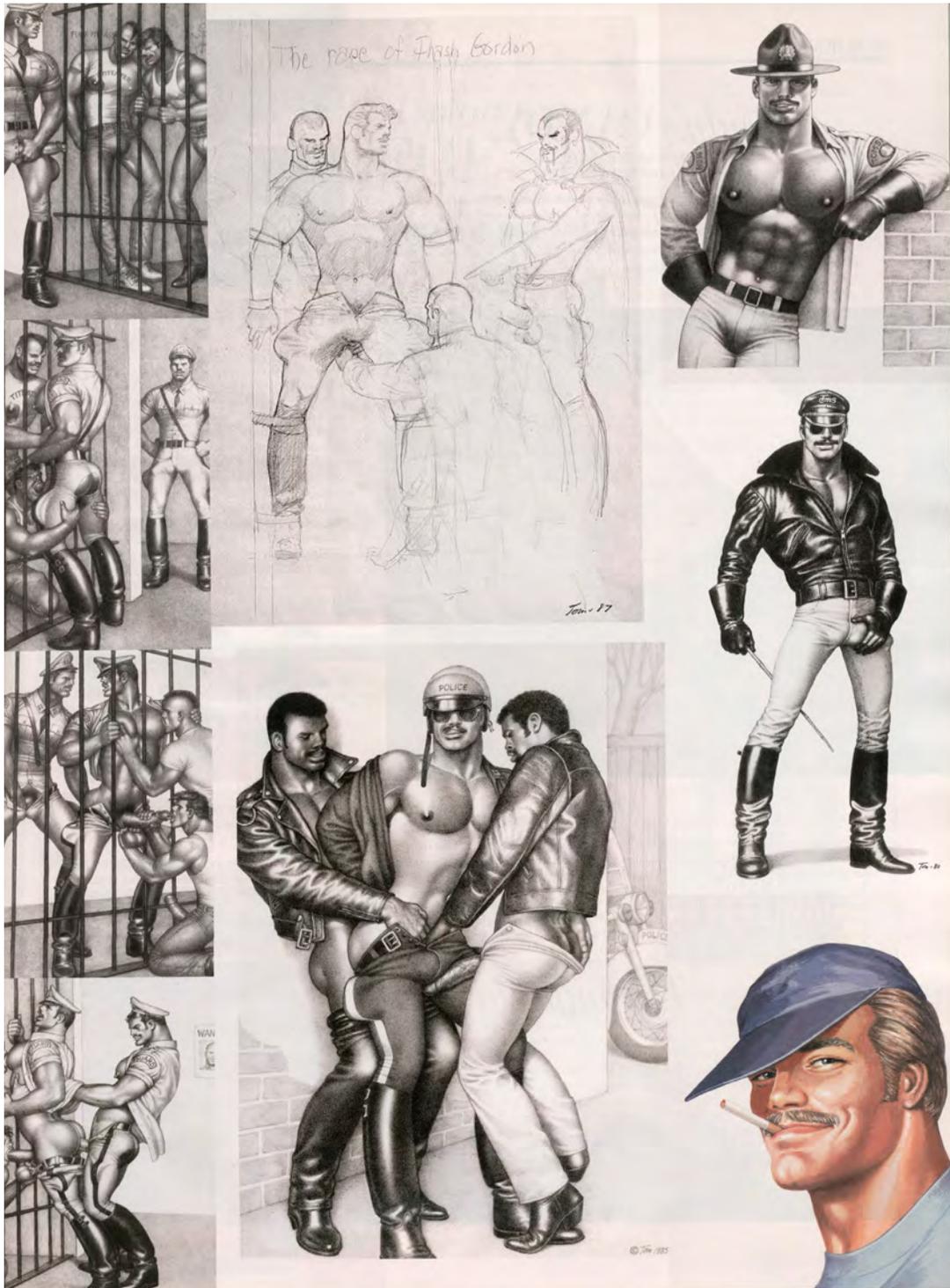
work represents an uncommonly literal expression of sexuality. It is a tangible document of time spent worshipping the male form, time that, for so many of us, is just ejaculated away.

Laaksonen's work was once regarded as utilitarian jerk-off material for men who didn't have access to gay pornography. But then the porn industry exploded and body-modification technology became so advanced that Tom of Finland's "fantasy drawings" became more or less a reality. Time may have diminished the intended usefulness of Laaksonen's work, but it has only affirmed its status as art. In 2015, Tom of Finland is simultaneously nostalgic, prescient, and aspirational. Laaksonen,

who received his artistic nom de plume from the editor of *Physique Pictorial* in 1957, spent his career drawing utopian images of gay sexuality, waiting for the world to catch up, and watching it happen in increments. Those smiles on his men are as blissful as they are knowing. —RICH JUZWIAK

ALL ARTWORK BY TOM OF FINLAND. COURTESY OF THE TOM OF FINLAND FOUNDATION. THIS PAGE: UNTITLED, 1976. GRAPHITE ON PAPER. OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT COLUMN, FROM TOP: UNTITLED, 1987. GRAPHITE ON PAPER. CENTER COLUMN, FROM TOP: THE RAPE OF FLASH GORION (PREPARATORY DRAWING), 1987. GRAPHITE ON PAPER. UNTITLED, 1985. GRAPHITE ON PAPER. RIGHT COLUMN, FROM TOP: UNTITLED, 1987. GRAPHITE ON PAPER. UNTITLED, 1980. GRAPHITE ON PAPER. UNTITLED (FROM *SEX IN THE SHED*), 1975. GOUACHE ON PAPER.

Juzwiak, Rich, "Tom of Finland," *Interview Magazine*, June/July 2015, p. 40-41



Farago, Jason, "Tom of Finland: the Pleasure of Play review - definitely not the marrying kind," The Guardian, June 26, 2015

theguardian

Tom of Finland: the Pleasure of Play review – definitely not the marrying kind

by Jason Farago
June 26, 2015

Artists Space, New York

The bulging muscles, throbbing members and shiny leather of men the illustrator drew defined the sexual tastes of generations of gay men – and expressed not sexual equality, but liberation



Installation view from Tom of Finland: The Pleasure of Play. Photograph: Daniel Pérez/Artists Space

Marriage is “a keystone of our social order”, Anthony Kennedy wrote this week in the supreme court decision legalising gay marriage in the United States. Sex, however, is something else. New York is getting set for a Pride weekend like none other, and the justified elation with which the city has greeted the Obergefell decision has made equality the theme of the celebrations. But gay liberty is just as important as gay equality – and liberty, especially sexual liberty, is a more powerful and dangerous idea.

I was reminded of that on my recent visits to Artists Space, which is hosting a major show of the art of Tom of Finland, a cult illustrator of ithyphallic musclemen, motorcycle fiends and leather gods. The exhibition, spanning two spaces, is the largest showcase ever of Tom’s art: there are more than 180 drawings, featuring more boots than you’ll find in Hermès. At first glance they may seem to be nothing but pornographic fantasies. Yet Tom has had a devoted following among fine artists, especially Raymond Pettibon and the late Mike Kelley, and he played a key role in the dissemination of gay imagery and the fashioning of a nascent gay pride. His men might not be your type. But look with the eye of a historian, and Tom’s drawings appear much weightier than your average smut.

Farago, Jason, "Tom of Finland: the Pleasure of Play review - definitely not the marrying kind," *The Guardian*, June 26, 2015

Tom of Finland was the nom de pornographe of Touko Laaksonen, who lived from 1920 to 1991. He was drafted into the Finnish army, then allied with the Germans against the invading Soviets – and although he unambiguously condemned Nazism throughout his career, he had a not altogether wholesome taste for Wehrmacht soldiers in jackboots. (Most of his early sexual experiences were with Germans.) After the war he went into advertising, and by day he crafted campaigns of happy heterosexual couples buying soft drinks and laundry detergent. By night, he was otherwise occupied.



Just pleased to see you: Tom of Finland's phallic supermen. Photograph: Daniel Pérez/Artists Space

His early colour gouaches, a highlight of this show, are daintier and camper than his more familiar butch look. The men wear trillies and overcoats as they grope one another's groins or simply ogle from the sidelines. In one extraordinarily sweet painting on paper from 1947, a sailor and a man in a bowtie are simply dancing, one's hand on the other's waist, their eyes locked as they sway across the floor. Only later, in the 1960s, did the bodies harden. The quiff gives way to the short-back-and-sides; lounge suits get supplanted by rawhide and jeans. Tom followed shifts in ideals of masculinity, though he crafted them as well. Have a gander at the website for any gay leather emporium – for research purposes only, of course! – and you can find breeches advertised as providing "the Tom of Finland look". For a not small number of gay men, Tom provided a roadmap to self-definition and desire.

Tom's sexual iconography made heavy use of archetypes: individuals were less important than categories, each one with a strict (and tight) uniform. Clothing, so key to gay signaling in the years before decriminalisation, plays a central role in Tom's art; men hint at each other via neckerchiefs and tight trousers, then boots and leather, and even though everyone is fucking almost no-one is nude. In a 20-drawing sequence from 1977, a man kitted out in leather arrives at a verdant, homosocial pleasure garden; the sign outside, a little redundantly in Tom's world, reads "MEN ONLY". He spies a lumberjack on a bench, boots knee high, fly undone. They start going at it, only to be joined by a jockish type in baseball cap and tank top; then those three are joined by a beret-wearing soldier; then a sailor shows up, and then a cowboy – in chaps, naturally – and on it goes in a roundelay of oral and anal and manual exploration. None are named, none have backstories. (Maybe a few of them are even married!) Dignity and decency are neither here nor there. Only pleasure matters, and in Tom's garden of delights pleasure is the highest moral virtue.

Farago, Jason, "Tom of Finland: the Pleasure of Play review - definitely not the marrying kind," The Guardian, June 26, 2015



Privates on parade: Untitled, 1947. Photograph: Daniel Pérez/Artists Space

What pushes Tom's drawings beyond pornography – and they are certainly that, in part – into something more enduring is that epicurean commitment: in the Tom of Finland universe, (homo)sexual pleasure isn't just fun, it's right. That was a bold position to take in an oppressive climate. Pornography was illegal in Finland when Laaksonen began drawing his cops and robbers. Homosexuality itself was illegal too; it was decriminalized in 1971, and "promotion of homosexuality" remained an offence for decades after. Tom was unfazed. His commitment to guiltless, strings-free, unadulterated pleasure – the pleasure of bodies, the pleasure of freedom – is expressed not only in the wealth of phalluses and orifices, but in the smiles of his motorcyclists and soldiers. Everyone is smiling. Whether active or passive, whether alone or in baroque combination, sex is a joy. Prisoners and wardens are grinning as they get it on through the bars of a jail cell. Even the guys in the sadomasochistic scenes are beaming – one chap is chained to a pole by a certain part of his anatomy, and couldn't be happier about it.

My job is to think about these images as works of art, not to say whether this or that does or doesn't turn me on. But I will confess that from my perch the smiles are the sexiest, as well as the most subversive, features of Tom's drawings, while the dirtier aspects can be a bit repetitive. The male sex organ is depicted not so much as a body part, but more as a fetish object in its own right – a thing independent of the male body, worthy of intense, delirious veneration. The penises have lives of their own, protruding from Tom's leathermen and soldiers as sticky, fleshy totems of insubordination. The caudal sides of all these men, on the other hand, are depicted with much less care. Throughout his career, Tom drew bottoms in a cursory, even cartoonish fashion – either cannonball tight, or else lazily sketched as a whisper of curved lines. The sailor in the pleasure park, depicted from the back as he spies on the foursome under way, has almost no buttocks at all, whereas his colossal member can be seen through his thighs: a weird, anatomically aberrant representation.

Farago, Jason, "Tom of Finland: the Pleasure of Play review - definitely not the marrying kind," The Guardian, June 26, 2015



The pictures that inspired Tom of Finland, collected in the exhibition. Photograph: Daniel Pérez/Artists Space

Why the heavy-handedness with knobs and the inattention to asses? Perhaps because, later in his career, Tom was in competition with photographic pornography. When he started out, his illegal drawings were one of the few sources of sexual titillation for men still in the closet; later on, his oversized phalluses offered a means to distinguish his drawings from an avalanche of dirty images. A revealing supplement to this show features Tom's "reference pages", sheets of source material that he clipped from both porn mags and general interest titles. They are glued down in strict typological arrangements, like a perverted version of Gerhard Richter's Atlas. The smiles of Finnish athletes and catalogue models, soon to be redeployed in Tom's subversive purposes, cover dozens of pages. Cases are filled with cut-outs of bikers, soldiers, and indeed those jackbooted Nazis. One Wehrmacht officer is seen from behind, looking over his shoulder in an almost coquettish pose. Another is seated on stairs and smiling; Tom took a pen to that photo, and drew him stroking his penis.

The Artists Space show is right not to shy away from Tom's fascination with the Wehrmacht, or the endurance of a Nazi aesthetic in gay men's later fetishisation of leather and boots. It's an enduring dilemma: back in 1974, Susan Sontag argued that "rightwing movements, however puritanical and repressive the realities they usher in, have an erotic surface". Yet in Tom's vision desire is so omnipotent, and pleasure such a moral imperative, that it has room for even the very people who say they want to exterminate you. And perhaps that is Tom's lesson for us boys revelling in the supreme court's landmark decision: that even though marriage is a fundamental marker of civil equality, it reinforces rather than upsets the makeup of society as such. Pleasure can be a much more radical force, and one still worth fighting for. Marriage makes you a citizen; desire makes you free.

Lehmann, Clarie, "Tom of Finland, Artists Space Exhibitions," Artforum.com, June 20, 2015

ARTFORUM

New York

Tom of Finland

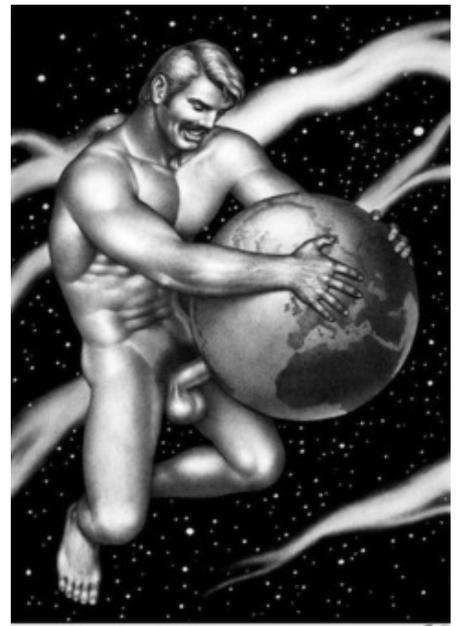
ARTISTS SPACE EXHIBITIONS

38 Greene Street, 3rd Floor

June 25, 2015–August 23, 2015

The subtitle of the Tom of Finland exhibition currently at Artists Space, "The Pleasure of Play," points to a key aspect of the artist's work: its fundamental cheerfulness. Tom, who admired the work of Paul Cadmus and Norman Rockwell alike, gave his homoerotic drawings of well-muscled men in uniform (and in various states of undress) a subtly wholesome bent. He once vowed, "My men were going to be proud and happy men." His young bucks' cocks are mammoth, but often their good-natured grins are bigger. The highly repressive decades during which Tom's work developed could not stem his innate sex-positivity.

This two-part exhibition, the largest to date in the US (where he first became known in the mid-1950s through his drawings for the Los Angeles quarterly *Physique Pictorial*), features nearly two hundred drawings, hung loosely by medium and theme rather than chronology, and an even greater number of reference collages—mass-media clippings arranged by type that helped guide the prominent cleft chins and flared-thigh jodhpurs that defined Tom's hypermasculine ideal. Early gouaches from the mid-1940s feature urbane rakes whose illicit behavior is only occasionally explicit; but soon thereafter, Tom provided close-up views of every possible combination of orifice and appendage, as modeled by bikers, sailors, loggers, and cowboys. A standout in the main exhibition is a twenty-part 1977 series starring Tom's recurring leather-daddy character, Kake, whose cruising instigates an orgy that grows one by one with a stream of onlookers turned joiners. It's remarkable, not least because Tom rendered the profusion of compound convexities—nipples, biceps, asses, abs—in the unforgiving cross-hatching of pen and ink. His skill in graphite is no less extraordinary: Portraits made in the '80s seem lit from within, all oiled skin and gleaming leather. But it's a surreal intergalactic image that endures, providing a suitable analogy for Tom's global effect on gay culture. In it, a brawny, mustachioed Scandinavian penetrates planet Earth in smiling ecstasy.



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1976, graphite on paper, 12 x 9".

— Claire Lehmann

Nordeen, Bradford, "Tom of Finland, Los Angeles, at David Kordansky," *Art in America*, Reviews, May 2015

Art in America

Tom of Finland

LOS ANGELES,

at David Kordansky

by Bradford Nordeen

Tom of Finland: T.V.-Repair (detail), 1972, pen, ink, gouache and cut-and-pasted photo on paper, 21 panels, each 17¼ by 14¼ inches; at David Kordansky.



The cover boys on Tom of Finland catalogues solicited visitors from outside the exhibition "Early Work 1944-1972," offering something of a false promise. From these catalogues, Tom's 1980s illustrations cruise in all of their pictorial glory—fully realized fantasy Adonises confronting the viewer with the eventual telos of the artist's physique renderings: chiseled studs in leather biker caps, with groins swelling in denim baskets and buoyant bottoms bouncing.

The show's 15 early works on paper—most exhibited for the first time—serve as a profoundly dynamic historiography of postwar gay sensibilities. Their preening, posing figures reflect 30 very important years of gay life, spanning from the underground lifestyle of the 1940s to the countercultural gay liberation movement that Tom's musclemen most often represent. Tom (born Touko Laaksonen) began publishing his drawings in periodicals like *Physique Pictorial* in the late 1950s, eventually becoming the best-known creator of homoerotic and fetish art in the world.

Nordeen, Bradford, "Tom of Finland, Los Angeles, at David Kordansky," *Art in America*, Reviews, May 2015

The show's *pièce de résistance* was the 21-panel strip *T.V.-Repair* (1972), depicting one bored stoker's industrious summoning of a "Tom's T.V." repairman (from the phonebook) and the dexterous angles at which this tradesman goes to dutifully render his services. Detailed in grayscale gouache and ink, the panels pop with an advertiser's flair; in fact, the sequence was created in the final year of Tom's employ in advertising, before he committed to his artistic work full-time. Tom places posters of his own illustrations around the John's domestic interior, a playful self-endorsement and a masterstroke of world creation. Yet in this macho kama sutra, there's a disarming sensitivity in the artist's representations of consent, in the gestures and mechanics of homosexual intercourse.

On an adjacent wall, the earliest of Tom's works evinced a startlingly divergent set of gay signifiers from this familiar iconography. Rendered in 1944, these "preparatory sketches" depict homosexual figures with stylings representative of the era—coiffed hair, berets and ascots collide with the artist's first envisionings of virile erections. One exposed subject is far more ephēbe than muscleman. He smiles sweetly as a boyish trick works him with both hands. Another figure is positively effeminate; with collar upturned, he throws us a camp glance, arms planted defiantly on both hips, while a compatriot flicks his tongue across his protruding phallus.

In the work of the 1960s, Tom develops the impeccable graphite control that defines his best-known drawings. He was a master draftsman. That skill transforms isolated body parts into orgiastic offerings at a carnal smorgasbord. Yet even the fetishism offered in these 1960s drawings—by way of riding boots, military garb and circus singlets—is far more sweet or cordial than the impenetrable sheen of the later Tom of Finland musclemen. The popularity of those later poster boys was achieved through a pitch-perfect blend of draftsmanship and advertising aesthetics; their flamboyant masculinity is total, fetishistic, commercial. Here, however, boys romp and play, and Tom finds his way through a furtive period of gay codification into a permissive culture receptive to his fantasias.

Friedman, Julia, "Tom of Finland, David Kordansky Gallery," Critic's Pick, *Artforum.com*, February 11, 2015

ARTFORUM

Tom of Finland
DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY
5130 West Edgewood Place
January 17–March 7

In 1956, Finnish draftsman Touko Laaksonen (1920–1991) submitted a drawing of two strapping lumberjacks to a popular American beef-cake magazine, *Physique Pictorial*. The drawing was accepted as a cover, attributed to Tom of Finland—an Anglicized approximation of Touko with the artist's geographic origin thrown in for tempered exoticism. A contrast between traditional aesthetics and raunchy subject matter in the lumberjacks drawing would characterize his oeuvre for decades. The thirteen drawings, one gouache, and one multipanel narrative on view in this frisky exhibition span the years of 1944 to 1972 and illustrate that by the late seventies Laaksonen's suggestiveness had given way to unabashed homoeroticism. Saturated by Western heroic representation that harkens to the Vatican Laocoön sculpture, these works shun that era's prevailing stereotype of gay effeminacy, instead championing prodigiously vigorous homosexuals pleasuring one another, their expressions glib, their gaze triumphant.



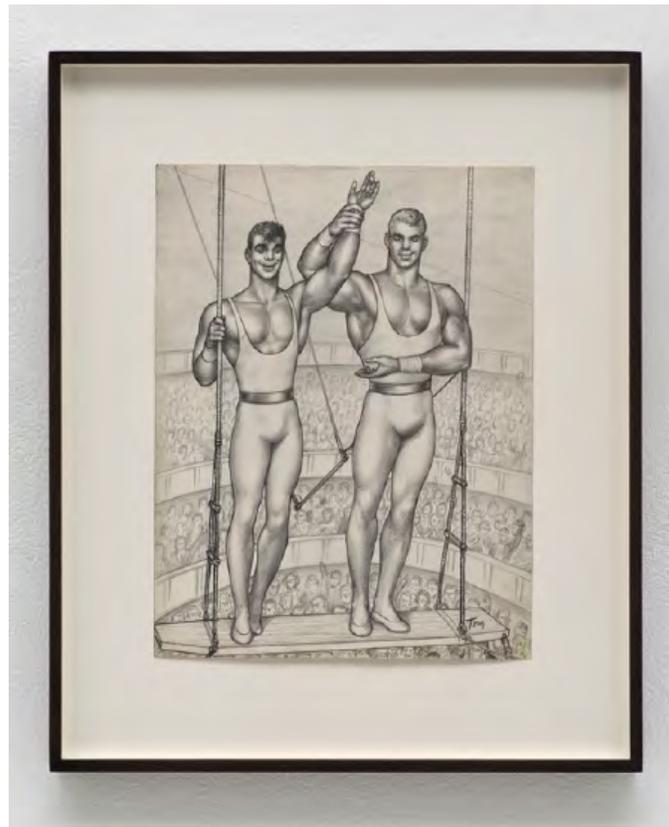
Tom of Finland, *untitled*, 1972, ink, gouache, and cut-and-pasted photo on paper. From the series "TV Repair," 1972.

Those familiar with Laaksonen's larger body of work will probably notice that the 1972 "TV Repair" series, which shows the artist's alter ego—all hard muscled and leather clad—seducing a repairman, is a pendant to his 1946 ink-and-gouache-on-paper series "Bob's Tale, Pt. 1." In the latter, two large and assertive male visitors seduce Bob, who is also modeled after Laaksonen. Both seductions feature his familiar erotic trope—the subject first surprised, then compliant, later ecstatic—but with one significant shift: After twenty-odd years of erotic drawings, the artist's alter ego finally graduated from seduced to seducer, from Touko to Tom. The following year, 1973, Tom of Finland, an advertising designer by day, piano player by night, whose drawings began as a furtive labor of love, launched his official art career with his first art show in Hamburg.

— Julia Friedman

Moffitt, Evan, "Tom of Finland at David Kordansky Gallery in LA," *GayLetter.com*, January 30, 2015

GAYLETTER



IMAGES COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

TOM OF FINLAND AT DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY IN LA

Tom of Finland's Early Work 1944–1972 on view until March 07, 2015.

By Evan Moffitt

Tom of Finland, born Tuoko Laaksonen in 1920, was the granddaddy of modern gay culture. His fetishes and fantasies, inked on paper and seen around the world, reconceptualized what it meant to be a gay man. A series of his drawings spanning 15 years are on view in the inaugural show of David Kordansky's new space, and it's interesting to see pornographic works made for

Moffitt, Evan, "Tom of Finland at David Kordansky Gallery in LA," *GayLetter.com*, January 30, 2015

bedrooms and underground gay bars in the clean white cube of a contemporary art gallery. How times have changed.

Tom's wartime experiences furnished him with the visual vocabulary of hypermasculinity. The show's earliest works, completed in 1944 when Tom was serving in the Finnish Army, depict military men wearing butt-hugging riding pants in explicit sexual trysts. They're a testament to Tom's bravery and openness in a severely homophobic time, when drawing gay sex privately could have landed him in prison. Other graphite drawings show sailors, cowboys, and motorcycle studs with ballooning muscles and impossibly large cocks. In many, the only "sexual" contact is passed off as lockerroom fun or friendly roughhousing, probably because the images were made for circulation and had to pass European censors. But the figures are beautifully detailed, each bronzed hunk glistening under imagined sunlight, further evidence of Tom's expert draftsmanship. By 1972, Tom proudly defied censorship with Kake (pronounced Kah-keh), his leatherdaddy alter-ego, who appears in a comic strip storyboard called T.V. Repair, a centerpiece of the show. Kake lures a hunky TV repairman over by unplugging his set and, well...you can imagine what happens next.



Moffitt, Evan, "Tom of Finland at David Kordansky Gallery in LA," *GayLetter.com*, January 30, 2015



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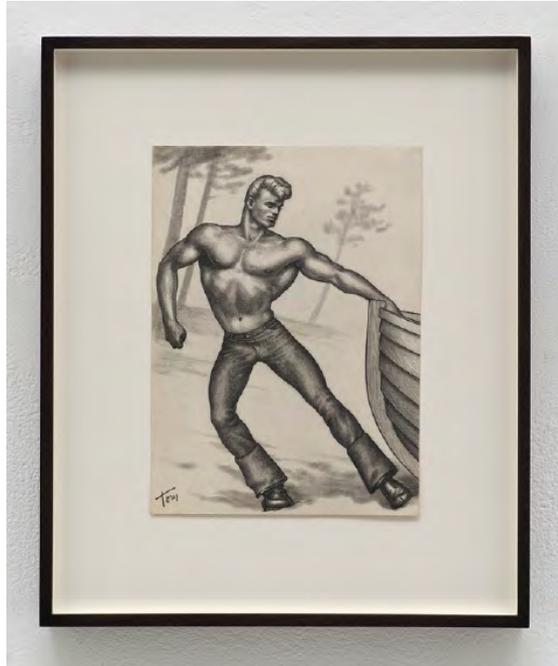
Tom's characters created a new gay culture that queered the masculine codes of straight society and made it possible for men to feel like men while loving other men. His masculine archetypes liberated gay men from homophobia, giving them confidence in a world that stripped them of it. After Stonewall, city streets around the world were packed with Tom's sailors, athletes, and leather daddies. A new culture had been born.



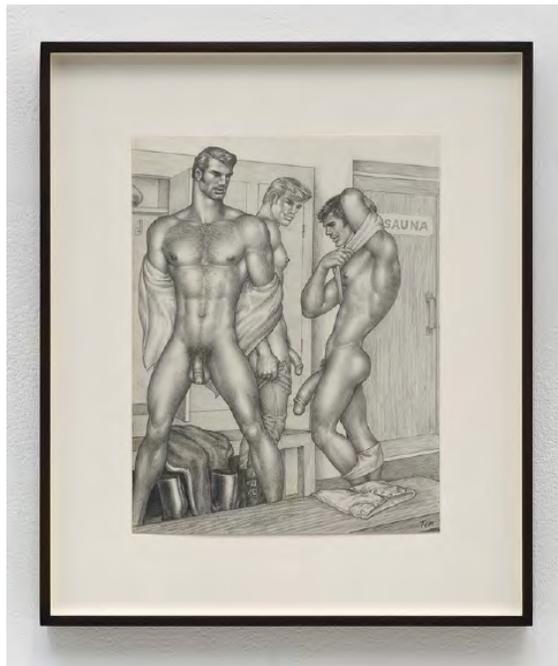
Moffitt, Evan, "Tom of Finland at David Kordansky Gallery in LA," *GayLetter.com*, January 30, 2015



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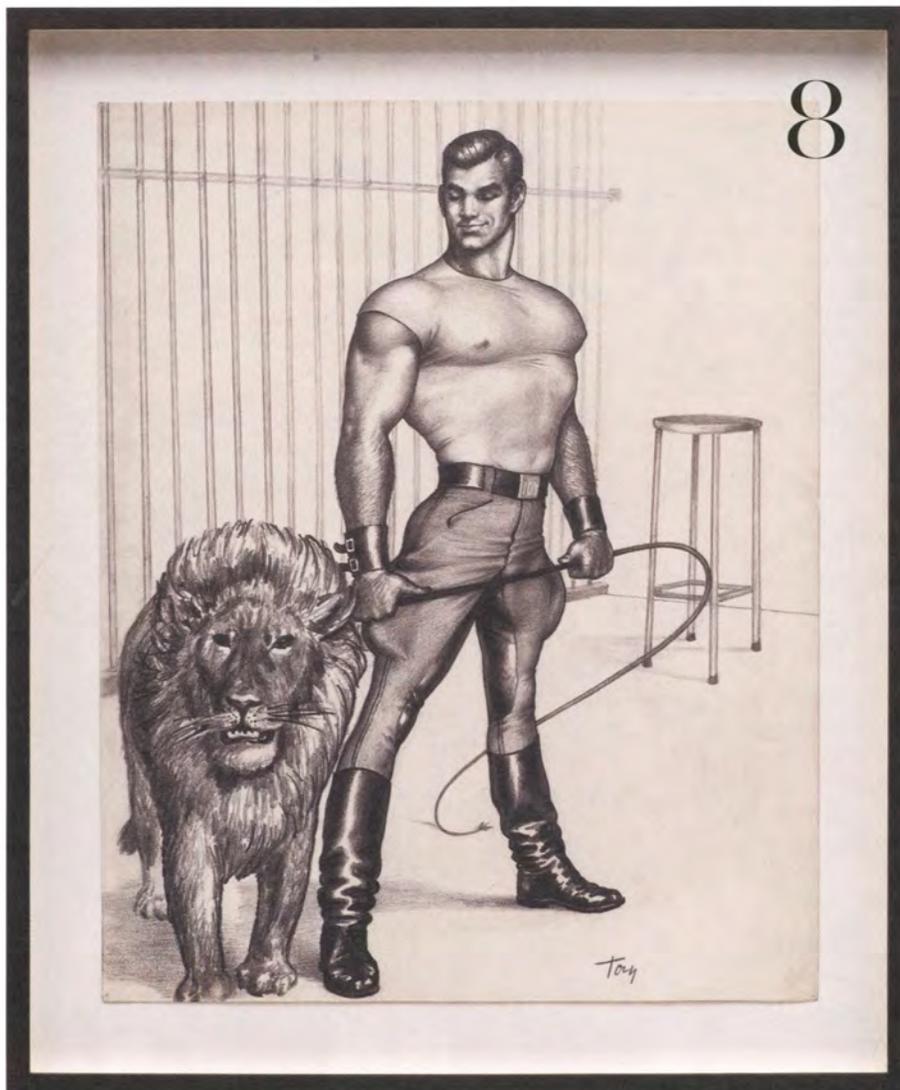


Moffitt, Evan, "Tom of Finland at David Kordansky Gallery in LA," *GayLetter.com*, January 30, 2015



The show is on view at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles until March 07, 2015.

“Muscle Bound,” *Cultured*, Winter 2014, p. 79



Tom of Finland's
Untitled, 1961

MUSCLE BOUND

Tom of Finland (né Touko Laaksonen) is known far and wide for his unmistakable able-bodied strongmen in the throes of passion, but the late artist's first show at David Kordansky Gallery explores the early drawings, gouaches and storyboards he made from age 24 until he quit his job at an ad agency to become a full-time artist. "Tom of Finland: Early Work 1944–1972" is on view January 17 to March 7. davidkordanskygallery.com

Sawyer, Drew, "Leather Men," *Document No. 5*, Fall/Winter 2014, pp. 100-107

DOCUMENT—F/W 2014



DOCUMENT NO. 100

Leather Men

NEW YORK ARCHITECT PETER MARINO SELECTS RARELY
SEEN IMAGES FROM TOM OF FINLAND'S OWN ARCHIVE,
AND TRACES THE ICONIC ARTIST'S INFLUENCE ON ARTIST
ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE AND HIMSELF.

TEXT BY DREW SAWYER IMAGES TOM OF FINLAND FOUNDATION
& PETER MARINO COLLECTION

DOCUMENT—F/W 2014



(Left): Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled (Boots/Gloves)*, 1971. 10" x 8" paper collage and acrylic. Courtesy Peter Marino Collection. (This page): Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920–1991). *Untitled*, mixed media on paper. Tom of Finland permanent collection.

Robert Mapplethorpe's 1979 portrait of Bryan Ridley and Lyle Heeter provides an fitting surrogate for the seemingly contradictory aesthetics of New York architect Peter Marino. In one of the photographer's most well-known images, a couple's black leather clothing (and chains) is juxtaposed with their high-end domestic interior, replete with a wingback chair, oriental rug, and white antler end table. Marino, who is a collector of Mapplethorpe's work, is not only the leading architect for fashion brands and upscale residences but also renowned for his head-to-toe leather biker gear.

Mapplethorpe's photographs and Marino's attire are similarly indebted to motorcycle culture and the drawings of Tom of Finland, which both reflected a growing discontent with mainstream American culture after WWII. Born Touko Laaksonen, Tom

of Finland began producing drawings of idealized and hypersexualized men for beefcake magazines such as *Physique Pictorial*. The artist was particularly attracted to the stylized masculinity of leather-clad bikers, popularized by the actor Marlon Brando in the 1953 film *The Wild One*.

Tom of Finland's now iconic pictures of leathermen have provided inspiration for Marino's custom made wardrobe, and, in a *Document* exclusive, the architect has selected several pages from the artist's own private reference binders of photo-collages. The pages reveal (as similarly demonstrated by an exhibition at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art last winter) that Tom of Finland was more than an illustrator, but a powerful artist who continues to influence our contemporary aesthetics and desires. ♦

This winter, see Marino's own collection at Miami's Bass Museum of Art.



Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920-1991). *Untitled*, mixed media on paper. Tom of Finland permanent collection.

Sawyer, Drew, "Leather Men," *Document No. 5*, Fall/Winter 2014, pp. 100-107



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Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920–1991). *Untitled*, mixed media on paper. Tom of Finland permanent collection.

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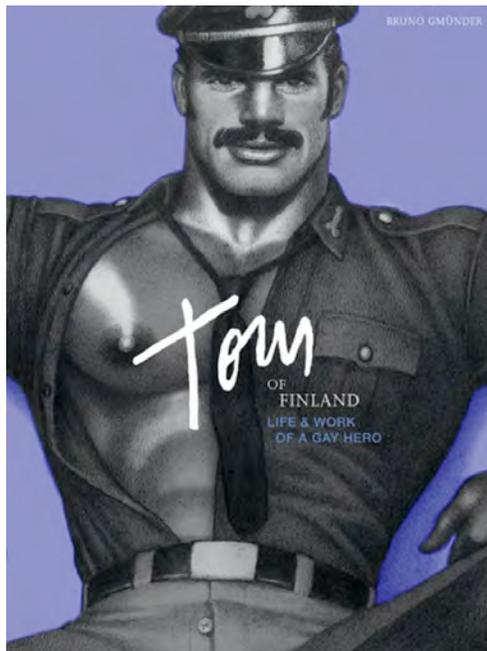
(Above): Robert Mapplethorpe, *Leather Crotch*, 1980. 29" x 28.75" silver gelatin print. (Below and opposite): Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920–1991). *Untitled*, mixed media on paper. Tom of Finland permanent collection.

Freeland, Lucy, "Tom of Finland: Sexual Emancipation Through Homoerotic Art," *TheCultureTrip.com*, October 11, 2014



Tom of Finland: Sexual Emancipation Through Homoerotic Art

By Lucy Freeland, October 11, 2014



The Finnish artist known by the pseudonym 'Tom of Finland' changed the way that the public saw the gay community through his raw and bold homoerotic art. Here we take a closer look at the intriguing character behind these refreshingly unconventional pictures.

There are a lot of adjectives that can be used to describe Tom of Finland's comics: flagrant, controversial, edgy, avant-garde are just some of the ways his exuberant and defiant illustrations are portrayed by the public. Finland, born Touko Laaksonen, was famed for his 'no holds barred' portrayal of gay themes. His body of comic-strip artistic work is not only celebrated by the gay community; more recently, it has also been adopted by the mainstream as experimental works of art displayed in bars and used for branding merchandise.

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Born, as his extended pseudonym suggests, in Finland, Tom did not always possess the reputation of 'rebellious artist' that so precedes him today. Young Finland grew up in a very conventional home, raised by two parents that were both school teachers in Kaarina, a small town in the south of Finland. After leaving Kaarina at the age of nineteen, Finland studied advertising in Helsinki before enrolling in the army and regrettably falling into the clutches of World War II. It was during this period in the armed forces however, that Tom's alternative talent was revealed.

The erotic sketches created during the war, and the men on which they are modelled, largely account for his later fetishistic fascination with men in uniform. These sketches are not burdened with political ideology nor do they enforce any sense of political affiliation, ranging from soft sketches of allied forces to the reputedly 'sexier' uniforms of the Nazis.

After reprising his studies in the mid 1950's, Tom began to intermittently submit sketches and drawings to *Physique Pictorial* – traditionally a magazine catering exclusively for gay men. It was in the spring 1957 issue that his debut images were credited by the pseudonym that was to define him for the entirety of his career: in a collaboration between him and the magazine, 'Tom' was chosen for its similarity to Touko and 'of Finland' as a reference of purely geographical formality.

During this turning point, Tom began to establish himself as an artist and portray the biker culture that claimed to reject post-conflict conformity. Suddenly, his illustrations morphed into pen and ink embodiments of hyper-sexualised, 'beefcake' genre that had been so popular during the 1930s.

Following a 1962 court case in the United States which ruled that nude male photographs were no longer to be considered an obscenity, Tom's drawings assumed an increasingly raw and sexual dimension. Given this increased liberality, the beefcake industry necessarily waned and Tom reacted by creating more homoerotic and explicit images to adapt to the changing climate and retain his commercial edge. What followed was the steady carving of the remarkable legacy he was to leave on gay culture, a legacy based upon asserting a romanticised idea of masculine gay imagery previously overlooked.

This exciting approach to gay art was considered revolutionary; gone were the effeminate, weakened images of men pertaining to a gay stereotype, and instead came Tom's strong, chiselled, hyper-masculine figures. The strong, square jaw-lines, the wry, suggestive grins and the anatomically optimistic bulges, are all common features that make Tom's work iconic. This idealised portrayal emphasises power, virility and a brazen, flirtatious energy that confronts residual social taboo.

This idea of a virulent, almost uncontainable masculinity is emphasised further by the violent sexual behaviour of some of Tom's male figures. In his art, sex becomes an act of conquest,

Freeland, Lucy, "Tom of Finland: Sexual Emancipation Through Homoerotic Art," *TheCultureTrip.com*, October 11, 2014



evaluated in terms of brutality, which is muted only by the hope of coaxing a sadomasochistic appreciation from the viewer. Fetish culture and sadomasochism is exposed and celebrated in his art; gang-rape, handcuffing, gagging and whipping scenarios are presented without judgement and without any hint of trauma upon the face of the victim. Unlike a large amount of heterosexual pornography, the sexual violence implemented by Tom's recurrent protagonist, Kake, is received without subjugation and with a burning, vibrant masculinity seemingly assimilated into the very fibre of the victim.

In addition to the sometimes startling violence depicted in his images, Tom's pejorative representation of women and people of colour was controversial. In works such as the 1971 'Jack 1: The White Hunter' [NSFW link], his arguably insensitive and offensive drawings leave a somewhat distasteful haze over his work. The Jack comics in particular – in which the Caucasian Tarzan-like Jack emerges inevitably victorious in various struggles against black tribesmen and celebrates by copulating with his victims – raises serious ethical concerns about deriving aesthetic satisfaction from a projection of white supremacy. There is however, solace to be taken from the notion that Tom famously removed himself from political comment and stated that no political, social or cultural subtext were to be read into his images. This, and the racial inclusivity seen in his later illustrations, goes some way to re-establishing racial equilibrium.

Freeland, Lucy, "Tom of Finland: Sexual Emancipation Through Homoerotic Art," *TheCultureTrip.com*, October 11, 2014

Tom of Finland's gift to gay culture is essentially one of sexual emancipation. For the members of society struggling with the image of gay people previously perpetuated by the media, Tom opened a bold, shiny new door into the 'club' of traditional masculinity. He created figureheads of a new masculine gay culture which not only strengthened the fight against social stigma but were considered carefully crafted works of skilful art in themselves.

By Lucy Freeland

Killian, Kevin, "Reviews: Bob Mizer and Tom of Finland, MoCA Pacific Design Center," *Artforum*, March 2014

LOS ANGELES

Bob Mizer and Tom of Finland

MoCA PACIFIC DESIGN CENTER

In Victorian times, the site of gay pleasure, sensuality, and communality was the ol' swimming hole, celebrated by artists like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, Thomas Eakins and Henry Scott Tuke. Photographer and publisher Bob Mizer and illustrator Touko Laaksonen ("Tom of Finland") relocated the Victorian Eden to the filling stations, pools, bars, gyms, and barracks of a postwar landscape remarkably like Los Angeles, a sunbaked utopia where every man's a dreamboat and he's bursting out of his jeans to get at you. In recent years, Mizer's and Laaksonen's respective foundations (both artists died in the early 1990s) have attempted to insert their work into a high-art context; the MoCA Pacific Design Center show was only the

REVIEWS



Cover of Bob Mizer's *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 16, no. 4 (April 1968), featuring a 1962 drawing by Tom of Finland.

latest—and perhaps most prominent—manifestation of this ambition.

The exhibition tamed a staggering proliferation into two large galleries and an anteroom, which was packed with ephemera and spreads from Mizer's long-running "fitness magazine," *Physique Pictorial*, suggesting the connections between the artists: Mizer promoted Laaksonen's work in his publication and even gave him his catchy new name, yet eventually lost him when Tom realized he could do better on his own. The Tom room was painted the smudgy black that, in the 1970s, coated the walls of every leather bar from here to Helsinki. Tom's painstaking graphite renderings of bikers, sailors, patrolmen, hitchhikers, and beach boys may look dumb in reproduction, but seeing the originals produces a strong respect for his nimble, witty pleasure creation. The curators, Bennett Simpson of LA MoCA and artist Richard Hawkins, drew no curtains over Tom of Finland's unabashedly sexual work: It is raw and vigorous, but the comic-book-y slide of one drawing into another produces a slo-mo

sense of forward direction. A lot of care went into this show: Simpson and Hawkins reunited story panels that had been separated years ago. But what of the Nazi regalia and the abruptly Fascistic posturing in some of the work? It appeared, bunched on one wall in a "never apologize, never explain" sort of way, but by and large, the agonistic moments served to highlight the ecstatic surfaces of this strange artist's hand (in glove).

Across the threshold, the walls of the Mizer room, painted a Hollywood silver, largely displayed what the photographer called his "catalogue boards," dozens of small prints mounted on heavy stock. These layouts were reduced to grids of numbered thumbnails and reproduced in *Physique Pictorial*, inviting subscribers to order larger prints (and perhaps racier versions) of their favorite models: a naked mechanic repairing his motorcycle, a shirtless rancher lowering his chinos. The fixative has weakened over time, or perhaps visitors to Mizer's studio filched favorite prints now and again, so some of the catalogue boards boast gaps haunted by stains of crumbling rubber cement. In the silver MoCA space, the collages suggested at least a beefcake kinship to Warhol's Factory servings of series in silver, like the forty-two Liz Taylors in his *National Velvet*, 1963, while Mizer's invention of an all-gay, tumbleweed-strewn Old West of denim and fantasy is not so distant from the *mise-en-scène* of *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967–68). Mizer's productivity (his estate is said to own as many as a million negatives) has its own magical force. It is almost as if he thought he could answer, through sheer numbers, the age-old questions of realism, especially the one that asks, How are male bodies to be presented to the viewer?

In Paris in 1853, Courbet unveiled *The Wrestlers*, his depiction of working-class, stripped-for-action muscle hunks competing for the favor of the pastel Salon bourgeoisie. A century later, Mizer unveiled ten thousand of their grandsons and encased them in trunks of sheer mesh or posing straps that seem ever ready to slide away from the sweaty male bodies they tag. While Tom of Finland's labor-intensive drawings may seem more legitimate as "fine art," the exhibition convinced me that

Mizer's rugged, cheerful stud farm might prove the more substantial achievement in years to come. The mind boggles, even as the body trembles and spasms.

—Kevin Killian

“A Quick Note: Bennett Simpson on Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland,” *MOCA.org*, January 22, 2014



A Quick Note: Bennett Simpson on Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland

MOCA | 01.22.2014



The following essay is by MOCA Curator Bennett Simpson

It is easy to understand why Bob Mizer and Tom of Finland are considered heroes for many people. They made unashamed, unrepressed art in a moment when their kind of desire was barely recognized (illegal, taboo, aberrant). They depicted gay men as worthy of desire and confident of their worth. They departed from stereotypes of weakness and passivity for fantasies of strength, virility, physicality, and action. They made their art for people. It was functional in a sense: offered to an audience that would like to imagine itself, to imagine a community, and of course to get-off (which, surely, came first). In its era of fear and implicit hate, their work must have seemed, for those who wanted it, a profound kind of gift.

So I wonder, can Mizer and Tom of Finland be considered heroes for art? That is, not just heralds of an identity-empowered coming subjectivity (generalized as “gay rights”), but artistic originals as well? What kinds of originality can we say they manifested? Where would that originality lie? These don’t seem like easy questions to answer. Not easy, for starters, because of where Mizer and Tom of Finland were “doing their work.” Early on at least, their primary reception was in bedrooms, bathrooms, and basement bars: counter-public spaces of intimacy and self-selection well removed from the typical locations of mainstream art. Not easy, furthermore, because of where I am when I ask these questions—that is, in one of those typical places, the museum, where Mizer-like and Tom-like methods have their own extensive, similar-but-different history. From where I sit, it would be tidy to relate Mizer to Cindy Sherman or

“A Quick Note: Bennett Simpson on Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland,” *MOCA.org*, January 22, 2014

Ryan Trecartin, among any number of other artists, based on their shared predilection for masquerade and gender archetype; or, to establish his importance by contextualizing him with a more-well-known figure like Warhol, who aped the Athletic Model Guild with his own Factory and even made Mizer’s model Joe Dallesandro the hunk-star of several of his most Mizer-esque films (*Trash, Heat, etc.*).

As tantalizing as it may be to wager influence in this way, from within art history, it cannot satisfy the question of these artists’ importance. It feels superficial, diminishing on all sides. Writing this, I keep returning to Mike Kelley, who owned at least two drawings by Tom of Finland and often cited the latter as significant for his own work. What did Kelley see in Tom? I can guess that it must have been something about the exploitation of “all-American” masculine stereotypes, the upturning romp with cultural and sexual norms that is so central to Tom’s imagery of strapping sailors, fisting cops, and leather bikers. I can guess that Tom’s humor, both in its insider appeal and in its more destabilizing public ironies, made perfect sense to Kelley, who so often privileged jokes as expressions of psychic and social desire. And I would guess that the younger artist appreciated that Tom’s “return of the repressed” (like his own) was seldom merely negative, a form of putting down—as the revelation of homosexuality in straight society so typically is—but was always firstly present as a means to empower and expand. That expansiveness, as I see it, is a crucial part of Mizer and Tom of Finland’s originality. It was critically sharp and it was pleurably full. And, I guess we could say, it brought people to their senses.





Arts

The well-hung show

With its bulging bikers and its penises waving flags, the ICA's Keep Your Timber Limber show takes an unblushing look at sexuality in art. **Adrian Searle** enters beefcake world

There are a lot of cocks and balls here. You can't miss them. They bulge out of tight jeans, they fill walls, they poke you in the eye, they keep on coming. You can't avoid the flying fluids. Yes, this is a family newspaper, but what is one to do? "Please be aware that this exhibition contains challenging imagery," says a sign, downplaying all the penile dramas filling the ICA. Keep Your Timber Limber is a seminal and well-hung exhibition in every sense - except for the making-sense part.

The first thing you see is gigantic and erect, with bulging, hairy balls. It's so big it has to turn a corner on to a second wall. This penis, drawn in black chalk, has the words "MORAL INJURY" written along its shaft. This is US artist Judith Bernstein's Fucked By Number, which reworks a smaller anti-Vietnam-war drawing she made in 1967, updated and upscaled to account for US troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Engorged with outrage, it's a strangely impotent explosion of energy.

Bernstein's work has long been obsessed with the male organ and male power. Her most famous work, shown at The Historical Box show in London last year, equated the penis with the screw, the dick with the drill. This was always very obvious and a bit lame, but it got up the nose of Philadelphia mayor Frank Rizzo, who in 1974 succeeded in having it removed from an exhibition in the city. The flagging power of the penis may be her subject (and her two Fucked By Number drawings both have the US flag dangling from poles stuck down the urethra) but their

shouty, expressionist intensity wears me. I long for Nancy Spero, whose work, which often shared the same anti-war sentiments and feminist certitude, was much more subtle in its sexual politics - and better drawn, too.

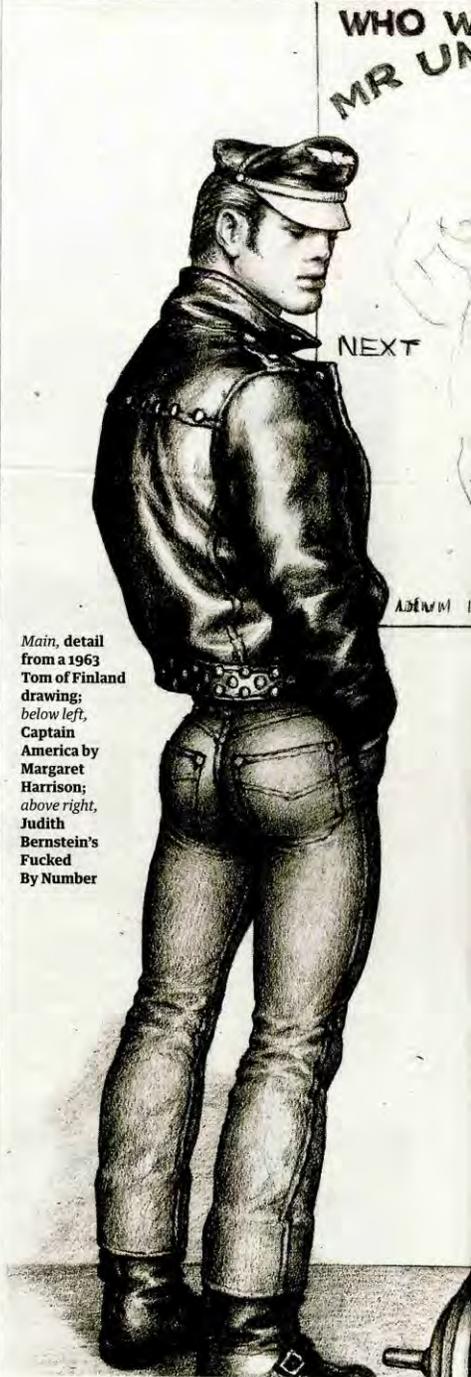
A corseted, high-heeled and big-breasted Captain America fiddles with his garter strap in one of Margaret Harrison's delicate watercolours. Her takes on the clichés of rugged masculinity are amusing, but a bit meek. Why shouldn't men, even superheroes and footballers, slip on the heels and stockings? Superhero costumes are a daft sort of drag to begin with: all that Lycra and tight-fitting spandex looks like it wants to be rubberwear; and superhero garb is often one of the more childish features of fetish clubs. And as for footballers in drag: well, why not?

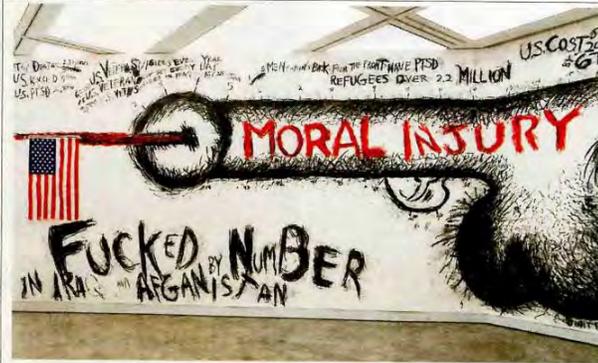
Harrison's watercolours don't work for me. Whatever subversiveness they had once has faded. Even Good Enough to Eat, the 1971 painting of a naked woman as a sandwich-filler, has lost its bite. Sexism and sexual stereotyping may be as rampant as ever, but our awareness of them has largely made Harrison's work feel redundant, telling us things we already know.

For real illustrative oomph and pizzazz, Mike Kuchar's he-man naked hunks - cavorting with dinosaurs and each other - are much more fun. He and his twin brother, George, also made ultra-camp underground movies in the 1950s and 60s, which were a major influence on director John Waters. It's a surprise any of Kuchar's gladiators and Thor-type beefcakes can even walk, let alone slay brontosauruses, given the bulging impedimenta they drag about between their legs.



Main, detail from a 1963 Tom of Finland drawing; below left, Captain America by Margaret Harrison; above right, Judith Bernstein's Fucked By Number





Cary Kwok's images are all of solitary men ejaculating. Carefully drawn in blue ballpoint, London and Beijing-based Kwok homes in on ecstatic faces, concentrated expressions, and looks of surprise, as orgasm hits and unbelievably copious emissions spatter across the paper: there's a Jew with his peyot ringlets, a dog-collared priest, a Buddhist monk having a temporary nirvana. The one I like most shows a young man cuffed and chained to a wall, having a hands-free orgasm. Never mind the drawing: it is the fact that he can do it at all that's impressive.

Tom of Finland's musclebound blond bikers, men in uniform and a whole closet full of leatherwear not only illustrated a sexual style, but partly invented and glamorised the look: caps, moustaches, chaps in chaps - the overt, often parodic masculinity. The fantasies of Touko Laaksonen, as the Finn was originally known, migrated into a kind of near-universal default clone-wear, and celebrated cruising and casual sexual encounters in a way that appears almost wholesome. Everyone is ludicrously hunky. His drawings, like Kuchar's, are as funny as they are erotic. Like most pornography, most sexual fantasies, and even sex itself, their work is deeply repetitive, playing again and again on the same tropes.

In the end, I don't understand this exhibition. The lone example of American Marlene McCarty's work depicts a gorilla snuggled up with two young, bare-breasted women. It is not quite zoophilia, but is meant to make us think of primatologists who have transgressed, we are told, "the ethical distance appropriate to their field of scientific research". I am more interested in following the argument about this than I am in McCarty's drawing. Also - and to no great purpose a single 1946 drawing by Germany's George Grosz has been included, showing a well-fed fat man, full of beer and meat

and dumplings, being assailed by some very thin stick-men. What does it have to do with anything else here? Nothing. Its inclusion feels like name-dropping.

Nor can I see what Antonio Lopez, the fashion illustrator and denizen of the New York club scene who died of Aids in 1987, adds to the show. His exercises in 1980s style have period flavour - with their portrayals of Grace Jones and Divine, as well as fashion campaigns for Gianni Versace - but they feel misplaced. There is an exhibition to be made about drawing and sexual politics, pornography and protest, and the boundaries between private acts and public display. But this flaccid exhibition isn't it.

i Keep Your Timber Limber (Works on Paper) is at the ICA, London SW1, until 8 September. Details: ica.org.uk

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Hooven III, F. Valentine, "Afterword," *Tom of Finland: Life and Work of a Gay Hero*, Berlin: Bruno Gmünder Verlag, 2012, pp 232-235



Hooven III, F. Valentine, "Afterword," *Tom of Finland: Life and Work of a Gay Hero*, Berlin: Bruno Gmünder Verlag, 2012, pp 232-235

AFTERWORD

Tom's passion continues ...

Twenty-one years later, Tom of Finland's influence is still felt by new generations of all orientations. In 2006, the Museum of Modern Art in New York accepted five Tom of Finland drawings into their permanent collection as part of a much larger gift from The Judith Rothschild Foundation. The trustee of The Judith Rothschild Foundation, Harvey S. Shipley Miller, said so eloquently, "Tom of Finland is one of the five most influential artists of the twentieth century. As an artist he was superb, as an influence he was transcendent."

Harvey's statement reflected what I instinctively knew as a young man, that somehow Tom's life had to be documented and his work preserved. Now, Tom's message is permanently fused into the fabric of modern-day culture.

Tom's goal was to perfect his technical ability as an artist, to rise above language barriers and to successfully convey that men—his men—all men are proud, sexual, defined and fully realized by nature. Gay men are complete, happy without shame or guilt.

When an influence such as Tom's is absorbed into society it ceases to be a separate element, and therefore, difficult to distinguish after the fact. We don't even notice when in time these major cultural shifts take place.

The physiques of Tom's men inspired developing gay men to become what they became. Knowing it was now possible, they went to gyms in masses to develop their bodies and in turn, ignited the entire culture and with it came the explosion of the fitness movement which spread health clubs across all nations.

The clothing/gear worn by the men in Tom's drawings sparked designers such as Tom Ford and Jean Paul Gaultier, and their Tom-influenced designs revolutionized the men's fashion industry. Bands and their lead singers, like Judas Priest, Freddy Mercury and the Village People, adopted styles that were the result of being reared on Tom of Finland. They exposed the broader culture to the male sexual icons of Tom's men, bringing them to life.

The gay liberation, gay pride and coming-out movements, the proliferation of gay bars and especially the leather/biker subculture, have their roots embedded with Tom's influence. Tom was an instrument that created the archetypes needed at the time for redefining homosexuals—first by gays themselves; then, eventually, by all of society.

Untitled, 1978, graphite on paper, ToFF #79.18

"Tom's Masterwork." This drawing had previously been in the possession of Robert Mapplethorpe and eventually was sold in his estate auction at Christie's. Harvey S. Shipley Miller, trustee of The Judith Rothschild Foundation, called this drawing a masterwork. He also said that Tom did several masterworks in his lifetime and few artists ever do any.



Hooven III, F. Valentine, "Afterword," *Tom of Finland: Life and Work of a Gay Hero*, Berlin: Bruno Gmünder Verlag, 2012, pp 232-235

Tom's work favored the "manly man." His motivation? This type definitely turned Tom on, yet he consistently chose "butch" because manliness had always been denied the homosexual—as if it was solely owned by the heterosexual world! Tom felt this unjust and wanted to equalize the playing field. He sought to broaden the vocabulary of what gay men could be.

Members of the Queer Nation organization protested Tom of Finland not long after his death, calling him a "sell out"—only drawing what they saw as "straights." They were too young to know the history of why the artist chose the super-masculine male for a role model. Tom wished everyone to have the freedom to be what they wanted to be by their own definition. Gay men of different generations have found Tom's work as the centerpiece of gay events and in gay establishments worldwide. Tom of Finland is the declaration of who we are: proud to be gay.

—Durk Dehner

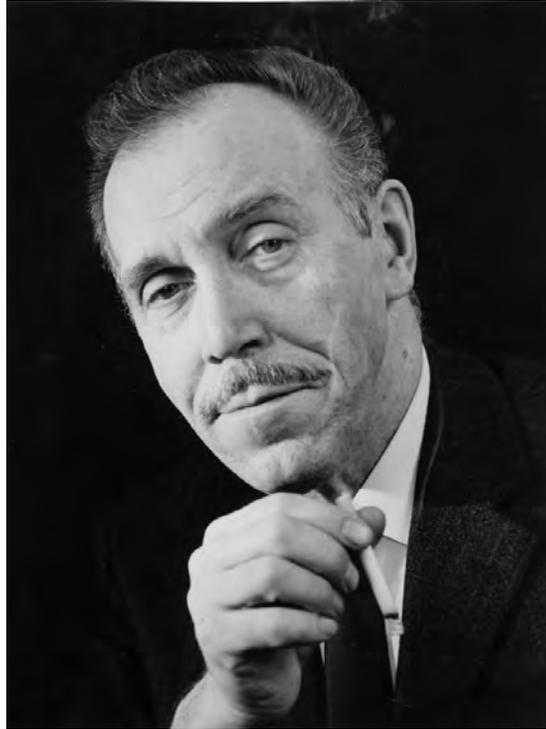
Tom of Finland was a groundbreaking queer artist, a subversive, an activist. His drawings have provided developing Homosexuals with empowering role models: icons. His creations, "Tom's Men," broadened global society's definition of what a queer could be. He gave us permission to be. And influenced artists that stood on his shoulders, with what they would see.

—S. R. Sharp, *Starrfucker* magazine, Issue 04, 2011, created by Jeremy Lucido

Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008



Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008



tom of finland

Words by Aaron Rose

Captions by Durk Dehner

Images courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation, Los Angeles

I've recently found myself increasingly interested in what I like to call "alternative" art worlds. I use the word *alternative* because I'm referring to networks that exist apart and away from the mainstream art market, a system comprised of auction houses, major museums, etc., but at the same time still hold major social and financial weight in the culture at large. These markets, which are comprised of sizeable networks of galleries, fans, and collectors can be quite substantial (supporters numbering in the millions of people) and quite profitable (grossing millions of dollars) have always been an inspiration to me. It is in this context that I would like to begin talking about the artist Tom of Finland. Not necessarily because I want to focus on his "market value," but more because he is an artist who, via a worldwide underground network, has managed to become perhaps one of the most iconic visual artists of the 20th Century, while still remaining to this day, for the most part, ignored by the mainstream art world.

Tom of Finland fits squarely within the confines of this definition not only because of the highly erotic and controversial nature of his images, but because his prolific career of over 40 years, while not entirely unnoticed (his work is collected widely and held in many museum collections), has still yet to break through into any part of the academic mainstream. Is it the sex? Maybe. Perhaps though it has more to do with the fact that he lived his life and ran his career through a vast subcultural network comprised not only of art galleries and collectors, but also through the venues of comic books, magazines, calendars, posters, and low-cost editions. Plus, in addition to traditional art patrons, especially in his early years, his work was collected just as much by people who were considered by society as lowlifes and sexual deviants. That doesn't always fly with the cocktail set.

The first time I saw one of Tom of Finland's artworks was on a t-shirt worn by Sid Vicious in a Sex Pistols photo I had as a teenager. I can't remember exactly what the image was, but I believe it depicted two policemen having sex with each other. Like most teenagers I was pretty impressionable and I remember the artwork feeling incredibly dangerous and subversive. Of course I had no idea who drew it, it was just a Sex Pistols shirt to me, but that first viewing experience solidified in me a feeling that this artist was someone that I needed to follow...and each and every time I saw one of those works since then (even as I write this article!), that same "I'm being bad" sensation came back to me.

Years later I was researching the fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and learned that the t-shirt Sid Vicious was wearing in that photo was in fact produced in the late-1970s by Sex, a shop on the Kings Road in London that Westwood ran with her then-husband, Malcolm McLaren. I also learned for the first time that the artist who drew it was named Tom of Finland. Tom of Finland? What kind of name was that? That had to be a joke. Well it turns out that it wasn't, and in fact that funny name belonged to an artist whose personal history is as layered and subversive as his artwork. Upon further research I discovered that over the course of four decades he produced some 3,500 illustrations, mostly featuring men with exaggerated primary and secondary sex traits: heavily muscled torsos, limbs, buttocks and improbably large penises. But that's only part of the story...



(clockwise from top left) *Untitled*, 1947, Gouache on paper. Tom was enjoying the idea of stylizing clothes on men. It reflects the usage of motorcycle and military gear for civilian pleasures...an effete period in Tom's life exploring sexual adventures. *Untitled*, 1954, Graphite on paper. This drawing shows the combination of traditional men's apparel with military influences and Tom's persuasion that clothes look a lot better when they form fit his men. This is the look that soon would be the gear that everyone who was into being a "leatherguy" would have done in black leather across Europe, North America and down under in Australia, South Africa. Touko Laaksonen with his platoon in WWII (on right).

(previous spread, from left) *Sex in the Shed*, 1975, Gouache on paper (The character in the t-shirt is Pekka). *Tom of Finland*, 1977. Photo taken at McCann Erickson's Helsinki Bureau where Tom was the advertising director.



Tom of Finland's real name is Touko Laaksonen. He was born on May 8, 1920, on the south coast of Finland. Finland had been an independent country for just three years when Touko was born, and apart from its few major cities the landscape was still quite rustic. Both his parents were schoolteachers, and they raised Touko indoors in an atmosphere of art, literature and music. Obviously talented, by the time he was five he was playing the piano and drawing comic strips. He loved art, literature and music. Oral history reports that Touko began making sketches at a very young age (some say he was drawing portraits by age five), but unfortunately none of these drawings were saved. He liked the comic-book format, and his earliest works as a child were drawn in this style. As an interesting side note, Laaksonen did say in interviews that his early drawings were inspired by and often depicted the lumberjacks and outdoorsmen that lived around him. It was during these early years that he began to question his sexuality. Both the logger and the cowboy (both of which were in high concentration where Laaksonen lived) are very powerful male stereotypes. When these ultra-masculine archetypes are set as the ideal it can become very difficult for a young boy (especially if he is a creative type) to live up to. This situation became especially complicated because he was attracted to them at the same time. It is quite possible that those early sexual drawings he produced are based in this dichotomy and in the artist's attempt to make peace with those feelings. Still, as a teenager Laaksonen tried to fit in with heterosexual norms, he had girlfriends in high school and even experimented with sex, but his problem was that none of the sex or relationships he had in high school were nearly as exciting as the fantasies he could draw.

In 1939, he made his choice. He was going to be an artist. He applied to the best art school in Helsinki and was accepted. Helsinki at the time was an amazing place for him. The city was a full-fledged modern metropolis and could not have been more different from the place he grew up. Majoring in advertising, he immediately threw himself into his studies. In his mind advertising made sense because he could learn all about art and develop as an artist, while still maintaining a solid foundation for a sensible career. However after a short time he realized that school wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. In his words,

I was so naive! Studying advertising was not what I expected it to be at all. I was burning with desire to be a real artist and all they were teaching me was business, business, business!

He began to withdraw from his schoolmates and sequester himself in his studio making drawings. These were not works for his advertising studies however, they were for his eyes only...what he privately referred to as his "secret drawings" or "dirty drawings." These drawings became his refuge from school, the loneliness of the city, and the harsh reality that life was not always as it appeared in his fantasies. Instead of just drawing farmers and lumberjacks, he began adding city types into his drawings. Construction workers, street punks and policemen became common subjects in his work during this time.

However, soon after he began school, Stalin invaded Finland, and the country became embroiled in the Winter War with the USSR, and then soon after, formally involved in World War II. In early 1940, Laaksonen was conscripted into the Finnish Army where he served as an anti-aircraft officer, holding the rank of a second lieutenant. It was here that his first came in contact with the men in uniform that would play such a large role in his subject matter for the rest of his life. He attributed his drawings and fetishistic interest in uniformed men to encounters with men in army uniform at this time.

Rose, Aaron, "Tom of Finland," *ANP Quarterly*, no. 10, 2008

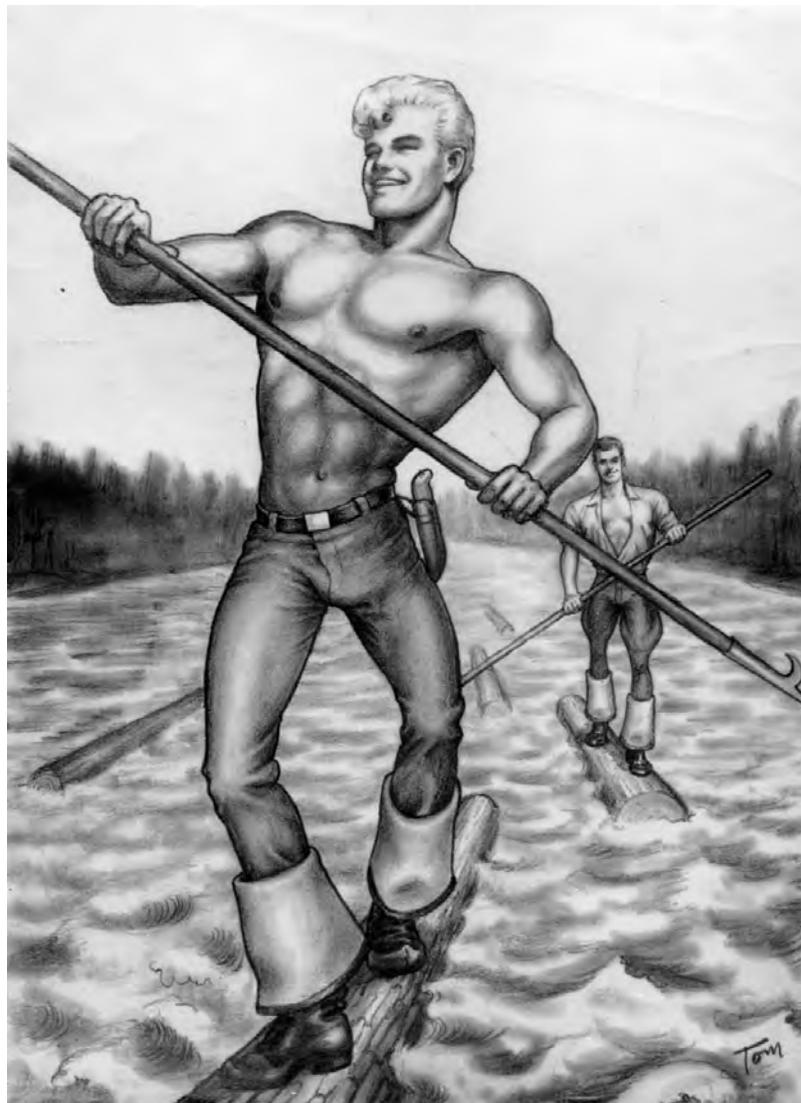
Sometimes the attraction to the uniform is so powerful in me that I feel as though I am making love to the clothes, and the man inside them is just a convenience to hold them up and fill them out—sort of an animated display rack.

Hitler's army at the time was involved in other battles, so Finland was relatively quiet fighting-wise while Laaksonen was in the army. There was ample leisure time to lounge around with other soldiers and he found much inspiration for his drawings at this time. However, because he was almost constantly in the company of his fellow soldiers (sleeping, eating together), he was rarely able to make any of these drawings a reality. They were still "secret" to him, and he dared not get caught. As a partial release, and so as to not let his drawing skills get too rusty, he would from time to time draw pencil and ink drawings of his buddies. Ironically, most of these wartime drawings were sent home to girlfriends, wives and mothers.

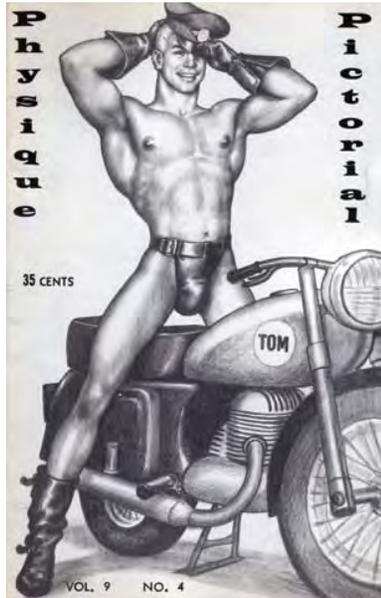
Strict curfews were imposed over most of Europe at that time, so the darkness became a sort of playground for Tom. For some

reason, war and the threat of death are aphrodisiacs for many people, so many indulge in behavior that in peacetime would be considered promiscuous. In the streets of the pitch-black city, he began to have anonymous sex with other soldiers, many of whom were officers in Hitler's army. As a result of these experiences he began to feature Nazi officers in his drawings. This led to some controversy later on in his life, some calling him a Nazi sympathizer. This however could not have been further from the truth. The basic fact is that he drew them because he liked the uniforms.

In 1941 America entered the war, and by 1945 the war was all but over in Finland. After the war, Laaksonen returned to civilian life and after a brief period of indecision, enrolled himself back in school. He had always had a love for music, so he would study advertising by day and music at night. He even took a job playing piano at a local cocktail bar. The best of all the things that peacetime brought for Laaksonen was privacy. Finally he could get back to his drawings! He had over five years worth of ideas stored up inside him and he was eager to let them out.



Cover drawing for *Physique Pictorial*, Spring 1957. This next piece is the first published work of Tom's. Bob Mizer, the man behind *Physique Pictorial*, was a man of honor and integrity with Tom. (See *Beefcake* the documentary). Bob Mizer and Tom of Finland had many aspects in common. Both were master craftsmen in their respective fields. Mizer was an excellent and talented photographer, and Tom in his ability to bring men alive through the pencil. Both men had great humor which they used in their work.



Assorted *Physique Pictorial* Covers (1957-1959) by Tom of Finland

(opposite, clockwise from top left)
Back cover of *Physique Pictorial* Volume 13, number 4

Haberdashery, 1959, Graphite on paper.

Bar Scene, 1964, Graphite on paper.

It was almost as though there were a separate spirit inside of me, urging me back to work, back to my art. I would feel this spirit again in the future, always coming to me when I was depressed, pushing me back to life.

Homosexual behavior and other "acts against nature" were still highly illegal in almost every country in the world at that time. To avoid arrest many gay men affected effeminate roles for themselves. A cop could not bust you for "acting" female, so many gay men hid behind this facade. Laaksonen began to frequent the bars in Helsinki that catered to these types, but he never felt completely comfortable there. He was interested in "real" men, both sexually and for artistic inspiration and he was not finding it in the bar scene. Again, feeling lost and out of place he retreated back into his room, preferring to live with his pencil and paper fantasies.

Out of school and now entering his thirties; He was working in two professions, music and art. By day he freelanced in advertisement illustration, magazine and newspaper layout, and window display. At night, on the piano, he became one of Helsinki's most popular entertainers. The 1950s had begun, and although still quite repressed by today's standards, some things were beginning to open up.

Due to his frequent travels for his advertising work, he became very familiar with the gay cruising areas found in every major city. Covert liaisons with men became a part of his life and through these encounters he began to feel more comfortable to share his "dirty drawings" with men he met. It was through these men that Laaksonen received his first positive feedback for his artwork. Erotic art drawn with skill was practically non-existent at the time, and one could not help but be amazed by the incredible talent this man possessed. When he traveled, he carried two suitcases. One for his clothes and one filled with drawings. Wherever he went, they went...often times sneaking them through customs. Many times he carried them simply as a seduction tool, but slowly but surely, while still very underground, his work began to build up a devoted private audience of international fans.

While pornography (especially gay porn) was still outlawed, a few small publications had begun to surface. These magazines, which were really no more than mimeographed and stapled pamphlets, were quite hard to come by, but still, change was in the air. Also, the 1950s brought a new type of publication to the mainstream...muscle magazines. Bodybuilders like Charles Atlas had been offering photographs of muscle-bound men since the 1920s, but in the 1950s the culture went mass-market, creating a voracious appetite and a plethora of magazines dedicated to the subject. While these magazines were (at least on the surface) geared towards straight men, it was the gay community who were perhaps their biggest subscribers. Laaksonen would vigorously search for these magazines, sometimes traveling all over Europe just to find them.

At the end of 1956, at the urging of a friend, Laaksonen submitted some of his homoerotic drawings to the influential American muscle magazine *Physique Pictorial* for publication consideration. However, being cautious in those paranoid times, and thinking that "Touko Laaksonen" was too tough a name for American audiences, he signed them under the pseudonym "Tom," as it resembled his given name "Touko." Bob Mizer, the editor of the magazine loved the drawings and chose a few for publication. In fact, it was Mizer who changed his name to Tom of Finland. The rest is history. The cover of the spring, 1957 issue of *Physique Pictorial* featured a Tom of Finland drawing of a laughing lumberjack. Needless to say, it was a sensation. The response was immediate, electrifying and international. Drawings such as these had not been seen before on a mainstream level and legions of gay men immediately stood up and took notice. His work spoke to developing young men who were queer and spotted Tom's work like a beacon, from New York City on newstands to the smallest little drugstores in remote towns in Texas. Tom gave them the clear message that they were healthy and natural and would develop into men like their heterosexual friends and brothers. Some described their first viewing of Tom's drawings as a "watershed moment" in their lives. Why? Although certain types of gay erotica did exist before that point, the subjects were not pictured in the same loving way as straight porn. There was always shame attached. It was very important to Tom that his subjects be proud of themselves and he always portrayed them as having a good time. His ability to make a drawing simultaneously sexy and funny was a real talent, and when it hit, it hit hard. In his words:

In those days, a gay man was made to feel nothing but shame about his feelings and sexuality. I wanted my drawings to counteract that, to show gay men being happy and positive about who they were.

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Why is this big guy getting an old fashioned spanking? He has just wrecked his buddy's motorcycle! See page 2 of this book for details about the Tom series "The Corleau Cycle!"



Also, because Tom's drawings were not overtly "sexual" in the pornographic sense, he could get them past censors...but they were certainly identifiably homosexual to anyone who had inklings towards that way of life. Previous "physique art" had always tried to pretend that the world and everyone in it was heterosexual, but not Tom's. It was almost as though they spoke in a secret code, a code that most certainly resonated with viewers all over the world. Suddenly collectors and fans worldwide wanted Tom of Finland drawings and the editors of *Physique Pictorial* began to field numerous requests for private commissions of his work.

However, neither erotic art nor homosexual art paid very well in the Fifties. He eventually stopped playing the piano in order to devote more time to his drawing, but he continued to work in advertising, living a double life as commercial artist by day and Tom of Finland by night. Still, his private commissions grew. In addition to sales to wealthy collectors, Tom created drawings for numerous publications around the world. His largest commission of the time filled the entire long wall beside a swimming pool in a luxurious bathhouse in Hamburg. Works for private collectors could be as wild as Tom's (or the client's) imaginations could muster, but still, drawings intended for publication had to be "desexualized." Tom loved to push the envelope of just how much he could get away with...constantly challenging the censorship board...but he found this very frustrating.

Following other people's rules was always hard for me. I already had my own set of rules, my own limits. No blood, no cutting of the body or breaking bones, etc. I had enough of that in the war.

This was the era of Marlon Brando, James Dean and films like *A Rebel Without a Cause*. These new biker/rebel stereotypes were very exciting for Tom and he began to draw characters that looked like these movie stars. Tom always added a little twist though, changing small details in a humorous fashion. For instance, instead of drawing a specific type of policeman, he would change his badge to say things like "Tom's Cops" or he would change the brand insignia on the gas tank or license plate of a motorcycle to a logo of his name. His work was constantly filled with little inside jokes like these. Elements that added again to the lighthearted humor and fun that permeates his works.

Because the censorship rules in England were more lax than the rest of Europe, some of Tom's biggest collectors during this time were in Great Britain. One of Tom's most frequent patrons was the physique photographer Tom Nicoli. When Nicoli offered Tom a chance to visit London, he quickly jumped on the offer. Upon arriving in London, the two embarked on a series of collaborations with a "biker" theme and it was in fact, in London that Tom bought his first leather motorcycle jacket. His exposure to Nicoli, and his use of photography inspired him to begin drawing from photographs of live models. The two of them would go to Hyde Park together and ask subjects to pose for them. Once Tom began drawing from photographs his improvement as an artist was so dramatic that he rarely went back to drawing solely from his imagination.





Test Your Strength, 1961,
Graphite on paper.

Untitled (from Kake), 1962,
graphite on paper.

(opposite)
Untitled (from Kake), 1962,
graphite on paper.

The Cop writing the ticket
has such defined exactness.

Its rendering and the
characterization of the biker
are so easy to interpret.

In Tom's stories almost
anything could happen.

Since he was a child he
could tell a story without
words in only a few panels.

While Tom's career as an artist was taking off, he still wasn't making as much money as he probably could have been. He fit the standard artist stereotype of the "unworldly fellow with no head for business." Because of this his financial dealings suffered. Tom never knew what to charge for a drawing, so many times he would put the decision of how much to pay for a work in the hands of the buyer. As a result of this he was constantly underpaid. That said, he still remained on the defensive about the prices he charged, claiming that he felt like he didn't expect more than he was getting. Because homosexuality was still forbidden in the Western world, and dealing these drawings was illegal, secured only on the black market, he didn't think he could ask for more. Although he wished he could be making enough from his artwork to do it full time, it just wasn't possible in his mind. In 1958 he made a decision. He put on a suit and tie and took a full time job as an artist for McCann-Erickson, a major advertising agency. While there he worked on graphic arts for major accounts such as Coca Cola and Phillips. His specialty, of course, was drawing people and many times, because of advertising trends at the time, he was asked to execute illustrations of "happy families." It was not uncommon however for the clients to send back his drawings for re-rendering because the daddies were "too sexy." Nevertheless, as would be expected with a talent like his, he excelled in that world and was eventually promoted to head art director for the company.

Enter the 1960s. While the fabled "hippy counterculture" did not really come into existence until much later in the decade, the seeds of the sexual revolution were already beginning to sprout as early as the late 1950s. Perhaps the most recognizable side effect of this was the loosening of censorship laws. This was felt first in Europe and then in the United States. In 1965, a small magazine called *Drum* published the first full-frontal male nudity and by the end of the decade the only major publishing restrictions that were enforced were laws against child pornography. Ironically, none of this change of tide had much effect on Tom's subject matter. He had already been drawing sexually graphic illustrations for years and the fact that the world was catching up didn't really faze him. However, one benefit of these loosening of restrictions was that Tom could freely publish his drawings. In 1957, he was approached by the Danish printing firm D.F.T., who was one of many small publishing houses who took advantage of the loosening of laws to publish small comic books of a sexual nature. Tom was asked by the company's



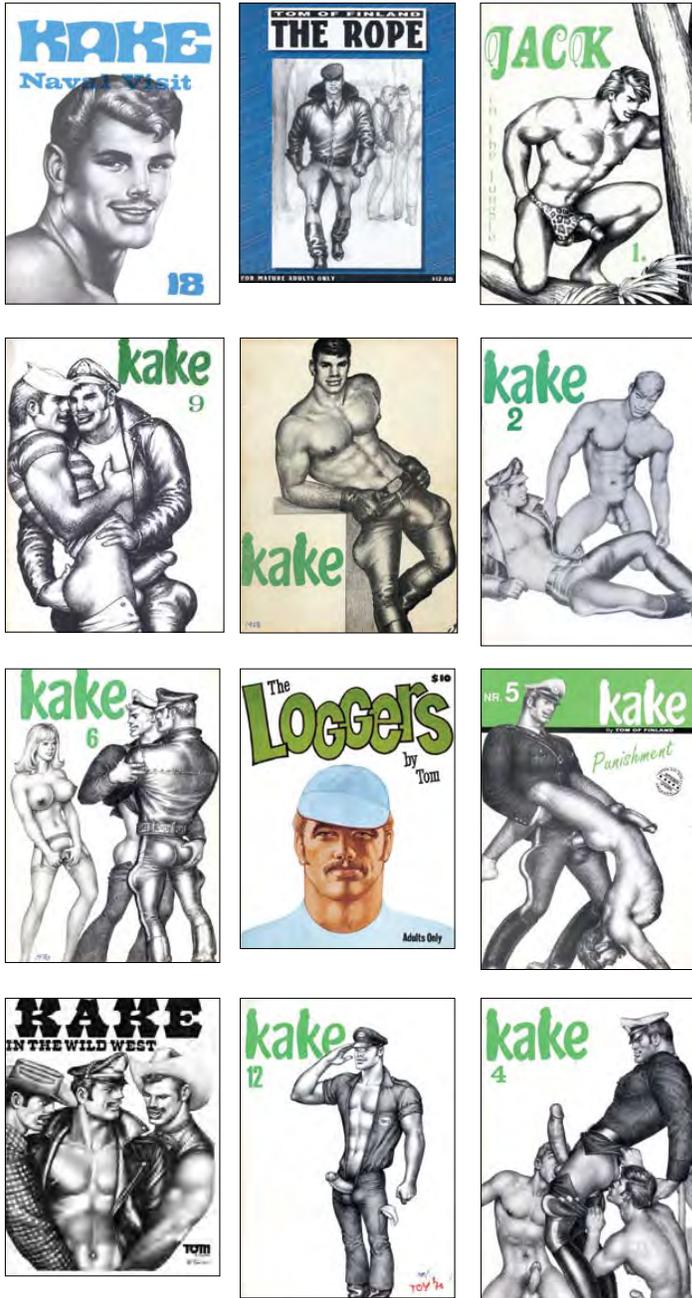
president to create a collection of comic books. The series, which Tom titled *Kake* (pronounced KAH-keh), featured the adventures of an oversexed, over-endowed motorcycle rider dressed head to foot in black leather. The books were an immediate international success and, Kake, the story's main character became a pin-up icon for the gay culture worldwide. By the end of the 1960s, Tom had produced over fifteen thirty-two-page stories. Surprisingly, all this loosening of restrictions and new publishing ventures did not necessarily translate to an increased income for Tom. The *Kake* comics paid quite poorly, and although the laws had loosened in terms of subject matter this did not necessarily mean that more drawings were commissioned. In spite of the sexual revolution Tom was still stuck at his day job in advertising in order to make ends meet. This, however, would soon change.

In 1970, Michael Holm, who had been Tom's editor at D.F.T. started a new company called Revolt Press. He immediately asked Tom to create a series of comics for this new company and Tom was ecstatic. Under the new banner of Revolt Press, he was promised considerably better pay and his originals were to be well cared for. He made three more *Kake* comics, this time going for a larger, full-color format and also began a new series featuring a sex-crazed lumberjack named "Pekka." Because these new publications were in color, they required much more time to execute and Tom was beginning to feel the pressure of balancing his new art career with his day job. In 1973, he took a careful survey of his finances, and because he was now making more money, decided to quit his job in advertising and devote his life full time to his artwork.

Once he could devote his efforts full-time to his drawing, his work grew exponentially. Tom combined photorealistic attention to detail with his wildest sexual fantasies to produce a body of work that, for sheer technique and eroticism, surpassed anything he had done prior. He developed a three-step process for creating his works. The first stage consisted of very generalized sketches to play with ideas for the picture's story and to work out the composition. These were done extremely free-hand, sometimes consisting of just a few pencil strokes. Second, the individual details of a piece were worked out. Sometimes this was done in a series of small, separate drawings, which were later applied to the composition. Many of the inspirations for these drawings came from what Tom called his "archive." The archive was essentially a series of scrapbooks

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Assorted Covers from 1960s-1980s

Assorted Collage Works

These collage pages are as Tom made them, as reference binders, mixed with some photos of models and some clipped directly from magazines. Some very sexy guys are in these binders dedicated to the learning of the form and expression of the body and soul of the male.

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bursting with photographs he had cut from newspaper clippings, magazines, or any other source that had a face, a butt, or any other body part that Tom thought he could use later. Many times Tom worked directly over these archive images with a pencil, comically adding such elements as a moustache, boots, clothing and bulging erections.

When I have been commissioned to do a portrait, I take or get several photographs from various angles because even though the drawing will be done only from one angle, one photograph doesn't give you all the information you need.

Once Tom was satisfied with all the various components of a composition, he would combine all the individual elements onto the final work. He would then render the finished drawing in graphite (his favored medium), pencil, ink, watercolor or tempera depending on what the subject called for. The finished drawing was then signed and dated.

Around this time, Revolt Press opened a small bookstore in Hamburg's red-light district. In a small back room of the shop, Tom was asked to exhibit the original drawings from his *Loggers* series. This would be his first public exhibition and although the show was badly installed and poorly lit, he was excited to display his works for a public audience. Unfortunately his excitement was short lived. The guy who ran the shop thought it too dangerous to keep the originals there, so he took them somewhere in Düsseldorf for "safe-keeping." This would be the last Tom ever saw of these originals (it was discovered much later that the works were all sold behind Tom's back). As a result of this it would be five years before he consented to another exhibition.

This setback aside, Tom's career did not appear to be slowing down. Soon after his exhibition in Hamburg, two wealthy German collectors asked him to do several large-scale wall murals for a bar they were opening. Christened "Tom's Saloon" in honor of him, the walls of the establishment were essentially covered in huge blow-ups of Tom's drawings. The bar quickly became an international sensation and led to the murals being copied worldwide. In fact in the late-1970s, a Tom of Finland drawing was quickly becoming almost essential decoration for any gay bar around the world. One could even credit Tom with inadvertently influencing a worldwide dress style for gay men. Starting in the 1970s, just after the historic Stonewall Riots of 1969, many gay men began wearing leather and denim as a de rigueur outfit. There is no doubt that Tom of Finland's drawings played a huge part in this cultural phenomenon. This was a "new" gay man, not feminine like the gay stereotypes of the past...these guys were real men, just like the characters Tom had been drawing for years and this masculine style for homosexual men continues today.

Through a work contact in Europe, Tom was introduced to two men in Los Angeles that ran a small art gallery called Eons. They approached him with the idea of creating a Tom of Finland calendar for the year 1978. Of course Tom accepted the offer...it was too good to pass up. One of the conditions of the offer was that Tom travel over for an exhibition of the original drawings in Los Angeles. He created thirteen original drawings (twelve months plus the cover) for the calendar and got ready to go. At the age of fifty-seven, Tom was able to finally make his first trip to America. He had fantasized about the United States since he was very young and he was thrilled to arrive. When he landed in Los Angeles, he was completely blown away by the size of the city! He had traveled extensively throughout Europe, but this city was a whole different ballgame. While in the city, he was to stay with Durk Dehner, a complete stranger who Tom had only met through correspondence. Dehner was a young model that worked under the pseudonym "Jonathan From Hawaii." He was muscular, blonde, and looked very much like someone Tom would have been drawing. Needless to say, Tom was thrilled. Dehner's home in the Silverlake area of L.A. was in Tom's mind "very Hollywood" and the two spent most nights hitting the leather bars in the area. Durk also arranged to have custom leather gear made for Tom, which was ready for him just in time, the day before his gallery opening.

On the night of Tom's exhibit at Eons Gallery, crowds converged on the little space. He was a bonified celebrity amongst the gay community in Los Angeles and supporters came out in droves to catch a glimpse of a Tom of Finland original. It was all very exciting. Soon after, Feyway Studios, a gallery in San Francisco asked Tom to exhibit the thirteen drawings. Durk offered his hospitality again and for the second time in six months, Tom was back in America. For the exhibition's opening, the director threw a small preview party. One of the attendees was the artist who was scheduled to have the show following Tom's, a young photographer from New York named Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe asked Tom to sit for a portrait and urged him to come to New York for an exhibition. Tom was growing quite fond of America and an offer to come to New York City was just too good to refuse.

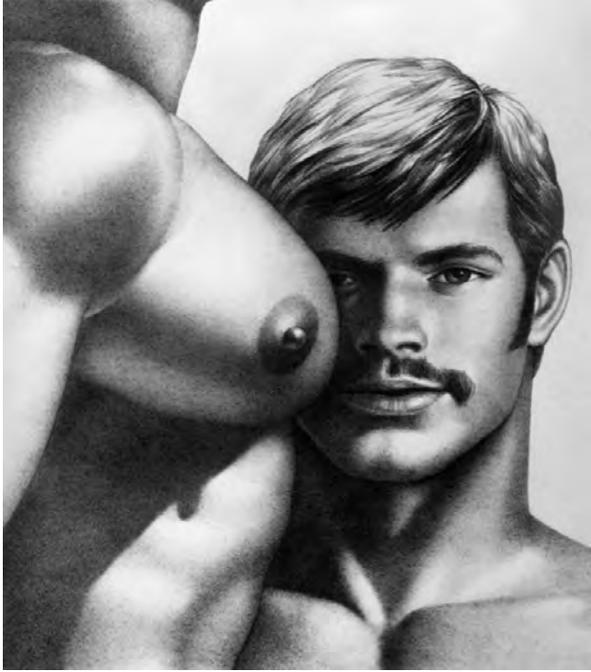
In 1978, upon arriving in New York, Tom was greeted at the airport by Durk Dehner and an entourage of bikers in full leather gear. They had all come on bikes, so driving into the city he felt like he had a full motorcycle escort. Dehner had arranged Tom's New York exhibition and Tom was to share the gallery with one of his heroes, the artist Etienne (another erotic artist who had much fame at the time). When Tom arrived at the gallery he saw that the exhibition space was, again, not much more than the back room of a store called Stompers which sold new and used boots. However, this time he was in the heart of Greenwich Village, the center of New York City's gay scene. When he saw the guest list he couldn't believe it! Celebrities like Andy Warhol,



Untitled (Peter Berlin), 1978. Rough sketch
This rough sketch was done with Peter Berlin having commissioned Tom to do a four-panel set of him being the sexy narcissist that he was, strutting the streets of Europe and America in pursuit of himself.

Jailhouse, 1987. Rough sketch.

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The drawing (left top) was done in 1979 and was displayed at the Robert Samuel Gallery exhibition in New York. The boy with the officer's cap was done in 1981. He was a Finnish model of Tom's. The other two are very special for they are of Viki, who I found tending bar in Helsinki and he became the one person who attended to Tom's needs for companionship and errand running, and was the guardian of Tom's well being when times were such that I couldn't stay in Finland and care for Tom during his slow demise to death's door. I honor Viki for being dependable to Tom and myself. Tom truly adored the boy for all he gave to Tom freely. They enjoyed each other's company a lot.

(opposite) *Untitled*, 1973. Graphite on paper. The "three bikers" was contemporary then and still is today. Tom was known for putting his name or a sign of himself somewhere in his drawings...so there was a whole universe created with Tom's name or one of his character's names branded in the uniform, the vehicles, the town. *Untitled*, 1970. Graphite on paper. The leather jailor was the first Tom image I ever saw. It was being used as a flyer to promote a bike run of a NYC Motorcycle Clubs function. I compulsively took the last flyer off the bulletin board and coveted it for it was the sexiest image I had ever laid my eyes on and it eventually lead me to meeting Tom.

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Gore Vidal, and Halston were scheduled to attend. Apparently Warhol already owned quite a few Tom of Finland originals. He met up with Robert Mapplethorpe and he showed Tom around the city as well as the wild bar scene of Greenwich Village. The exhibition opened to great success. So much so, that he was asked back to do a solo show the following year at Robert Samuel Gallery, a large space on Broadway.

Tom returned to Finland and began busily working on new works for his show. While in New York, he had turned the tables on Mapplethorpe and taken a photograph of him, which he then transformed into a drawing for the upcoming exhibition. Tom was very excited about the work he was doing. It was not long before Tom was back in New York preparing the exhibition. His last trip had been a wild time, hanging out with Mapplethorpe and going to bars. However, this trip was different. The gallery was the most professional Tom had ever exhibited in. He was treated "first class" all the way, put up in a fancy apartment and invited to expensive dinners. The opening night of Tom's exhibit at Robert Samuel Gallery was a black tie event and most of the works had pre-sold before the exhibition had even opened. Tom was on top of the world. He returned to Helsinki in very good spirits feeling like he was finally being treated with the respect he deserved.

I was very productive and I think that the forty-eight works that were exhibited in that gallery were among the best that I have ever done.

Soon after returning, Tom was approached by Dehner with an idea. Apparently there were hundreds of unsold Eons calendars left over in Durk's basement. What if they cut off the calendar parts and broke them up into sets? They could sell the prints as editions via mail order. Tom didn't know much about mail order, but Durk promised to take care of everything. Tom agreed and the sets were produced. Small

advertisements were placed in gay publications announcing the project. Called "Duos", the print sets were an immediate success and sold out almost immediately. Tom and Durk decided to try to print some editions on their own. Since Durk and Tom had been spending so much time together, Durk had learned quite a bit about Tom's career. He was saddened to hear from Tom that throughout his life he had not been treated very respectfully as an artist. Tom had rarely been paid what he deserved and many of Tom's greatest originals had been either stolen, pirated or lost. In addition, after over a year of waiting, Tom had never been paid for any of the work that he sold from his huge Robert Samuel Gallery show in New York. His many attempts at contacting them only produced dead air. To add insult to injury, it turned out that the "Robert" in Robert Samuel Gallery was in fact his supposed "friend" Robert Mapplethorpe, who was equally unresponsive to Tom's inquiries.

Durk wanted to change all this. He truly felt that Tom of Finland's art was important not only because of Tom's incredible talent, but that it was historically important to gay history. The first step was trying to secure the rights to Tom's past work. However, this was not as easy as it sounds. Many of Tom's originals had been sold direct from Tom without documentation. Additionally, the erotic publishing business attracted its fair share of scoundrels and mafiosos and a good majority of the works Tom had sent for publication over the years had never been returned. In response to this, in 1984, Tom and Durk decided to start the Tom of Finland Company, a publishing venture dedicated to producing only *official* Tom of Finland publications. Tom began spending more and more time in Los Angeles, working with Durk on new projects. Their first venture was a new comic, *Kabe in the Wild West*. It sold out quickly and more books were printed including reprints of older books *Highway Patrol* and *Service Station*, which were produced under the title, *Tom's Archives*.



It was an exciting time for Tom, he felt like he was being taken seriously and, in Durk, had found a real partner in arms.

Though at the time Tom was still spending half the year in Finland, his trips to Los Angeles became more and more frequent. The top floor of Durk's house in Silverlake was set up as Tom's room, with a corner set up with a desk for drawing. By 1985, the Tom of Finland Company was doing so well that Durk decided to try to expand and focus on another goal...a foundation. He wanted to start a non-profit organization that would concentrate solely on preserving Tom's works for history. The Tom of Finland Organization was established with three main goals: Preservation, Restoration and Exhibition of Tom's works. Over the years, Tom estimated he had created over three-thousand pieces, most of which were scattered around the globe. They certainly had their work cut out for them. Not only were the works lost or stolen, but even if they could track them down they had other obstacles. Because to many people who had them, the works weren't considered important art, many had not been cared for. Many drawings had been stapled, folded, taped or plain destroyed. Plus, Tom did not always use the most archival of materials, so the many times the paper had deteriorated significantly. That said they were able to rescue a considerable amount of works and as a result published a book called *Tom Of Finland: Retrospective*. For the book, Tom chose almost two hundred of his favorite works that spanned the years 1946-1987. It was a huge undertaking, but in the end it paid off. The book went on to sell over 25,000 copies... large numbers for any art-related book let alone one with subject matter as controversial as Tom of Finland!

The publication of the retrospective book boosted Tom even more into the spotlight. In a short time, his fans grew from what were for years primarily patrons in the gay community, to adulation from the establishment art world at large. He was offered more gallery exhibitions,



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each time in a more and more professional situation. One dealer in particular named Hudson, from the acclaimed Feature Inc. gallery in New York took a strong interest in Tom's works and became Tom's primary dealer. Additionally, during this time, Tom of Finland works appeared in the catalogs of Christie's auction house and were displayed at the Whitney Museum. Still, even with this growing success, in the 1980s' conservative art world, Tom's subject matter was many times too controversial to garner any real mainstream acclaim.

I know my little "dirty drawings" are never going to hang in the main salons of the Louvre, but it would be nice if—I would like to say 'when,' but I better say 'if'—our world learns to accept all the different ways of loving. Then maybe I could have a place in one of the smaller side rooms.

In 1987, Tom was diagnosed with emphysema. He was a chain smoker for over fifty years and it had finally caught up with him. His prognosis did not look good. Upon receiving this news he became more and more aware that his habits would have to change. He decided stop traveling the way he had and spend his last years back in Helsinki. He continued to draw, but due to his illness and the side effects of the drugs he required to treat it, his output became less and less. This pained him very much as drawing was his primary source

of enjoyment. In 1990, his emphysema coupled with the Finnish winter found Tom hospitalized. He was eventually released, but in a very frail state. He switched mediums from pencil and ink to pastels because they were easier to work with. He continued to produce for another year before being hospitalized again in 1991. After spending some time there he finally succumbed to his disease. On November 7, 1991, Tom of Finland died of an emphysema-induced stroke. He was 71 years old.

Though not widely spoken about, except in the company of close friends, Tom had always been interested in the spiritual side of things. Just before his death, he became even more interested in the supernatural. For an artist whose subject matter had always dealt so much with things in the physical plane this is very interesting. While for most people art is judged primarily on the basis its beauty or physical/aesthetic merit, it is important to remember that there are always other forces at play. He would often speak of a spirit that followed him around, watching him, guiding his life and his art.

Whenever I was depressed or disgusted, I would feel him, that spirit inside, urging me back to living, back to drawing. I believe there is a lot to the world that can't be seen or touched, and if you turn away from all that—especially if you are an artist—you are avoiding and important part of life, maybe the very heart of it.

Tom of Finland lived a life outside of the system...a system that, even though it has been over fifteen years since his death, is still reluctant to accept. Though there has definitely been a resurgence of interest in his work (recent book monographs as well as this article are case in point), Tom of Finland's works still seem to exist within the realms of this "parallel market" that I spoke of at the beginning of this article. For me this is a shame, because I truly believe he is one of the most interesting and inspiring artists of the 20th Century. His works do belong on the walls the Louvre, as well as on postcards, t-shirts, calendars, coffee mugs, perfume bottles, in books, magazines and anywhere else that art can invoke and inspire.

All images (c) The Tom of Finland Foundation. The *Tom of Finland Foundation* is still based in Los Angeles and managed by Durk Dehner. They are not only dedicated to preserving and promoting the work of Tom of Finland, but work hard to nourish the works and careers of younger artists who, even today, face many of the same issues that Tom faced in his life. You can learn more about them by visiting their website at: www.tomoffinland.org.

Untitled, 1981, Pastel on paper.

(opposite)
Untitled (Punker), 1987,
Graphite on paper.





TOM

Kindly
Join us
Friday,
8 p.m. for a special
preview showing of
recent original drawings
and for the
first time in America

TOM OF FINLAND
*(personal appearance by
the artist courtesy of
EONS Gallery, Los Angeles)*

FEYWAY STUDIOS
1287 Howard St.
San Francisco

Invitation admits bearer and one guest

AMERICA WELCOMES TOM OF FINLAND

TOM DRAWING COURTESY
OF EONS GALLERY, L.A.

PHOTOS BY EFREN RAMIREZ



Interview Tom Of Finland

WITH
ROBERT OPEL



Opel: *You are a man whose images have been widely circulated; perhaps you are the best known artist in the Gay sub-culture. Have you always been an artist?*

Tom: I dreamt about being an artist, for a long time it was only a dream, I wasn't sure I could make it work, but for the past five years now I'm able to make it as a professional.

Opel: *When did you first create the images that we know as the Tom of Finland Men?*

Tom: I got my inspiration from pictures I saw in American body building magazines. I was very excited by them. I found the American type so attractive I started to draw them.

Opel: *Do you feel sexual about your work?*

Tom: Yes, otherwise, it wouldn't work. If I do a commission about a situation that really doesn't excite me, I notice that the work is bad. From the beginning I drew from my fantasy world because the real world didn't provide me with what I needed in the way of sexual stimulation. Even today when all things seem possible, when I draw I record my fantasies. When I first started to draw I felt embarrassed because I thought, well everyone can see through my drawings and know exactly what's going on in my head. But I've gotten over that and I draw exactly what I want to and I draw those situations that excite me.

Opel: *You seem to have touched some universal space because a lot of people seem to get off on the same ideas.*

Tom: I was surprised because they were very personal and to find out that a lot of other people had the same ideas, it made my work worth something and made me continue.

Opel: *Do you live in Finland now?*

Tom: Yes, this is my first trip to America.

Opel: *But your work isn't seen in Finland?*

Tom: No, pornography is illegal and the images I create are considered to be pornographic.

Opel: *Could you be prosecuted in your own country if you became visible as an artist there?*

Tom: Yes, so I am known by very few people as an artist.

Opel: *Where did your drawings first appear?*

Tom: A friend of mine in Finland got a copy of Physique Pictorial and he saw some drawings in that magazine and he told me that I should send some of my work to them and they might publish it. This was in 1957. So I sent some pieces

to Bob Mizer who was the publisher and he ran them. He also gave me the name Tom of Finland because he couldn't pronounce my name and he thought his readers would be confused by a Finnish name. So I use this name professionally.

Opel: *A lot of your work consists of stories, a series of drawings that form a scenario. You are a great storyteller.*

Tom: Well that seems to interest people. I started doing this because there were some people who approached me who wanted a story depicted in 20 or 30 pictures; and I liked this very much so I began to draw stories from my own fantasies.

Opel: *A series that I like is the one that involves circus performers. Beautiful men trapeze artists who fuck with each other in the air.*

Tom: I always found men who worked with the circus to be very exciting. They had beautiful physiques. I wondered how it would be if they were fucking with one another. So I made them fuck one another.

Opel: *Mostly you draw men, but I have seen some women that you've done. Do you like to draw women too?*

Tom: I would like to draw women more, but I am homosexual and I am turned on by men. I just don't have the same stimulation when I draw a woman.

Opel: *Do you get a hard-on when you draw these images?*

Tom: Yes, oh yes.

Opel: *Do you come when you do the final drawing in one of these very sexually exciting stories?*

Tom: No, I hold off because I have to keep going; drawing more pictures.

Opel: *I've jacked off many times to your images, and I know a lot of other people who have come all over them; you've given a lot of people some intense orgasms, which may be the very best thing you can do for someone.*

Tom: I try.

Opel: *There is a certain sense of exaggeration in your work. Do you really know many men who look like those you draw?*

Tom: No, many people have told me not to exaggerate so much and I have tried to go back to drawing more normal figures but I noticed when I tried to do this there was no reason to draw. Today the photography is so good and the bodies of the models are so fine, I don't find a reason to duplicate that or compete with that. I deal with fantasies, directing attention to certain areas of the body; but sometimes I feel that I exaggerate too much.

Opel: *You draw great asses.*

Tom: I love asses, and so I do them very well.

Opel: *Does it excite you to come here and have a show of your work and meet people who are turned on by your images?*

Tom: Very much, it is very important to me to know that people are excited by my work.

Opel: *Your men, even in the more intense Sado-Masochistic situations always seem to be having a good time when they are fucking.*

Tom: I like to see people enjoying what they do. The men in my fantasies always enjoy each other. In one series the police force one of the men to have sex with them but he eventually gets the policemen to do it without force because they all like it so well.

Opel: *Most of your work that appeared in America was not authorized by you; is that right?*

Tom: That's right. Most of the work was reproduced from magazines that appeared in Europe and Scandinavia and I received no compensation for that. I have some commissions now from people in America for which I will be paid. And I have some representatives here and we have done a calendar together for which I receive a percentage from the sales.

Opel: *Are you going to continue to draw the same images or are you considering some new directions?*

Tom: I hope to leave all this one day and begin something new.

Opel: *How many pictures have you drawn since you first started?*

Tom: Well, I didn't keep a count when I first started but there are about two thousand. I have been doing the same thing for 20 years now and I need to grow. I need to make something new. I'll make a flower for you.

Opel: *Wonderful, I'll have it made into a tattoo.*

Tom: You won't be able to have it made into a tattoo, it will have too much color. Our relationship has a lot of color and I would express it in this.

Opel: *I'll have Cliff Raven do it. The idea that you exist, Tom is quite exciting. I'm happy to know you and I'm very glad to have this time with you, and to share it with the readers of DRUMMER.*

Tom: Thank you. The people here have been wonderful. I finally get to meet all the American men who turned me on so much in the photographs I have seen. They are very special to me.