

KANSALLISGALLERIA •  
FINLANDS NATIONALGALLERI •  
FINNISH NATIONAL GALLERY •

## Boys Will Be Boys? Some Notes on Tom of Finland

Alvin Li, writer, curator, Shanghai and London

Also published in Leevi Haapala, João Laia and Jari-Pekka Vanhala (eds.), *Tom of Finland – Bold Journey*. A Museum of Contemporary Art Publication 178/2023. Helsinki: Parvs and Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 2023, p. 63–67



*Tom of Finland, Boy on Observatory Hill, 1954–55, watercolour on paper, 29.5cm x 16.5cm*

Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

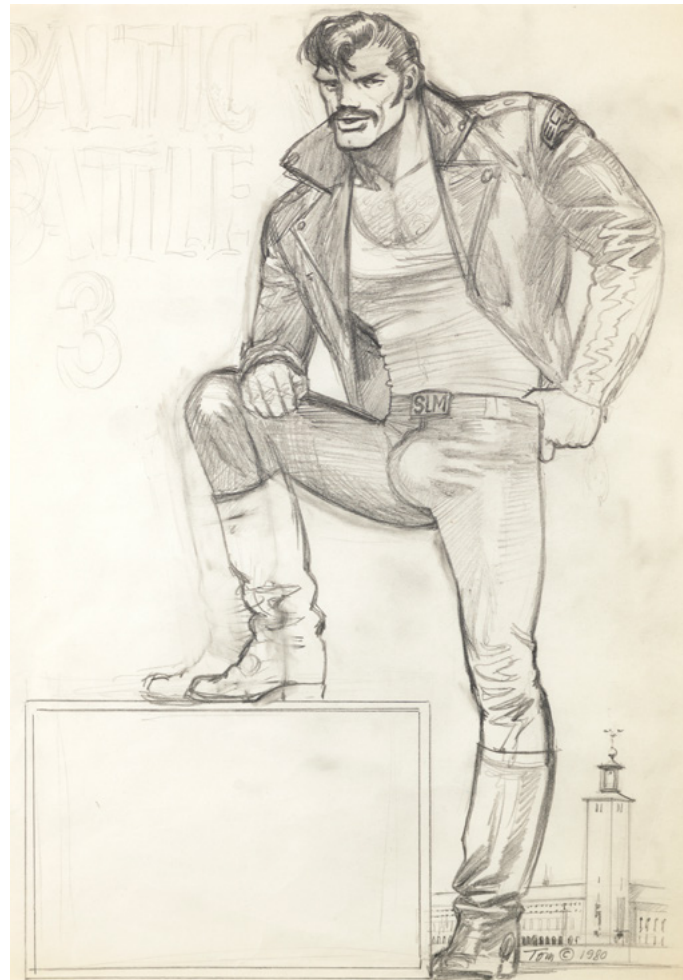
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

*If I don't have a hard-on, it's no good.*  
Tom of Finland

I must open my essay with a confession: before taking on this commission, I had never considered myself a fan of Tom of Finland. Not a real fan, that is, in the sense of someone who would have studied his biography, taken notes on some of the collections, public and private, that house his work – travelled to see them, even – purchased prints (well, ideally originals) to hang at home; and learned all the gossip about his lovers and fetishes, as I now have. Worse, I cannot even remember my first encounter with his drawings. If I had to take a wild guess, I suppose it might have been in the form of digital reproductions on Tumblr sites in the mid-noughties, when I was in junior high school, posted in between gifs of ejaculating male bodies and vintage porn stills. Did I ever jerk off to Tom's men? I'm honestly not sure.

This amnesia I have just described, the inability to retrieve the memory of a first encounter, is not mine alone. When I started doing research for this piece I sent out a questionnaire to a dozen of my favourite queer writers and artists across a few different generations. Among the Generation X interviewees, a common reference was a cowboy T-shirt produced by Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren in 1975 – though, as later critics have pointed out, the image printed on that T-shirt was not in fact one of Tom's, but a piece by artist and photographer Jim French.<sup>1</sup> But among peers of my age group (I was born

<sup>1</sup> Jim French. 'The Myth of the Cowboy T-Shirt', in Dian Hanson (ed.), *Tom of Finland: XXL*. Cologne: Taschen, 2009.



**Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1980, pencil on paper, 42cm x 30cm**  
**Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

in 1993), the memory gets increasingly blurry. Some similarly cited Tumblr posts they saw back in high school, while a queer zine editor referred to magazines, though was unable to recall the exact title. One possible reason for this inability to recall our earliest acquaintance with Tom's aesthetic resides in its iconic status, which by the time of my coming to terms with my homosexuality had thoroughly penetrated and reshaped the representation of men, gay and straight alike, across the mainstream and in subcultures. There are pros and cons to this. On one hand, there's a bit of Tom's man everywhere in visual culture, from the aesthetics of 1980s bands like Frankie Goes to Hollywood to the boys hanging out in your neighbourhood gay bar. The downside is, compared to the early, post-war decades when his work started circulating, whether as covers of *Physique Pictorial* or as comic books, one's first impression of Tom's work today is more likely tainted by a speck of familiarity than an experience of utter shock and engrossing infatuation.

When asked what they think of Tom's oeuvre, my contemporaries' responses are uniformly marked by a certain ambivalence. One described Tom's images as 'homonormative', despite feeling like there's also 'some nuance there', due to an '(over)performance of homomascularity'. Another, a more feisty queer, completely dismisses the type of masculinity that Tom has so masterfully invented, describing it as something to be 'resisted', or better yet, ignored – even though its appeal, in their mind limited to objects of popular consumption (like the ToF x JW Anderson underwear, priced at 155 USD, whose jock cup bears Tom's drawing of two muscle gods flexing next to a boat), is by now more than well established.



Cover of the magazine *Prätikäposti* 3/1990, published by MSC Finland-Tom's Club Tom of Finland Collection 1960–2000. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Ainur Nasretdin

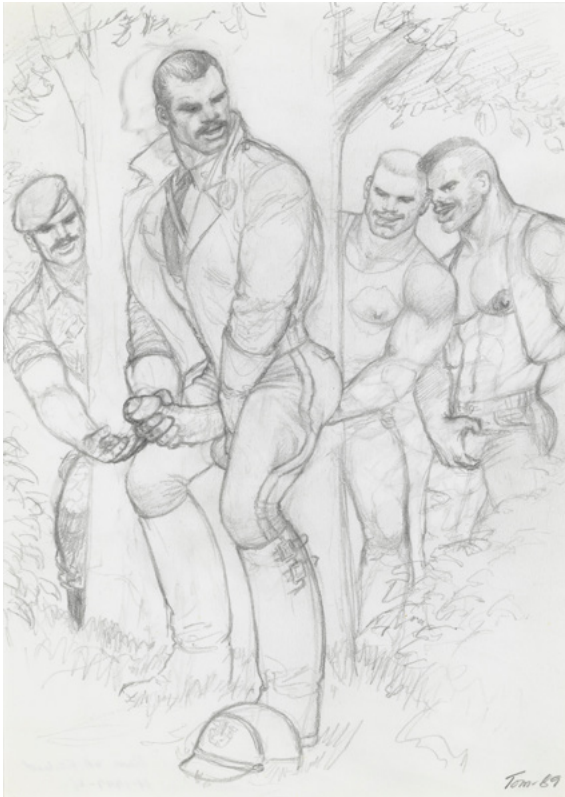
The above-quoted stances are symptomatic of the generational rifts in Tom's reception, and telling with regard to the way choreographies of resilience and counter-position shift over time, sometimes to become (mis)construed as cliché or complacent. A review of the historical context in which Tom invented his signature masculinity would help us retrieve some of his undeniable radicalness. Born Touko Laaksonen in 1920 in post-civil war Finland, Tom served in the Finnish Army during the Second World War before going into advertising. During this period, in Finland as well as in most parts of the world, homosexuality remained taboo and was practised only in secret meeting spots like forests and parks.<sup>2</sup> Representations of homosexual males in print and media – when they existed at all – invariably portrayed effeminate and flamboyant characters, including various parodic versions of the androgynous aesthete promoted and invented by the fabulous Oscar Wilde.<sup>3</sup> Against this historical backdrop, Tom's men were as much projections of his private fantasies as sources of empowerment within the gay community, countering a homophobic history – the effeminisation of gay men – and contributing to a changing perception of gay sexuality. These images of hyper-masculinity took on life-affirming importance in the worst moments of the 1990s, after AIDS had swept away

the lives of so many. In those dark days Tom's men, glowing with health, meant something more than a celebration of masculinity, representing the very hope of survival.

At this point some are likely to object that Tom's men, even if progressive for the time, nonetheless perpetuated a standard of hyper-masculinity that inadvertently contributed to a sort of masculinity worship, germinating a legacy of effemiphobia within the gay community. In Tom's defence, as some have already suggested, this objection becomes unsustainable as soon as one dips beneath the surface level of those muscles to observe the continuously interchangeable sex roles of his figures: tops are never solely tops, and the same is true of the bottoms; Tom's men give human form to a versatile, exuberant play of insatiable homosexual desire.

Still, this insistence on versatility that upends the equation between penetration and masculinity – and between anal reception and effeminacy – does not prevent its glorification of the masculine male form from shaping in consequence, 'for better or worse, much faggot flesh'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it would be hard to deny the complicity between Tom's oeuvre and a certain body fascism that hovers over the gay male community. But instead of resisting Tom's men as exclusive, potentially dangerous fantasy, a closer look at his works suggests to me that it was never Tom's intention to essentialise the role of the flesh in gay representation or subjecthood. Rather, Tom's drawings emphatically polish and embellish the male body to the

- 2 Berndt Arell. 'Outdoors: Public Sex and Tom's Playground for Big Boys', in Dian Hanson (ed.), *Tom of Finland: XXL*. Cologne: Taschen, 2009.
- 3 Camille Paglia. 'Sex Quest in Tom of Finland', in Dian Hanson (ed.), *Tom of Finland: XXL*. Cologne: Taschen, 2009.
- 4 Bruce Hainley. 'Review: Tom of Finland, Mark Moore Gallery', *Artforum*, November 1997, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/199709/tom-of-finland-52036> (accessed 12 January 2023).



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1989, pencil on paper,  
 30cm x 21cm  
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary  
 Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

same intensity of sheen as leather, equally objectified, likewise up for fetishisation. Indeed, Tom's men rarely appear fully naked. In moments of the most savage coitus (fisting, spanking, double penetration) they still wear the skin-tight jeans dropped to their knees, or their police hats just about to fall off their heads. In thinking about Tom's influence on the gay aesthetic I am reminded of one of my favourite quotes of all time, from none other than the talented Canadian novelist Derek McCormack: 'Fashion makes fags so that fags make fashion.'<sup>5</sup> Tom's drawings constitute a functionally accessible catalogue of gay semiotics, always ready for gay men to mimic and perform, as they have enthusiastically done so for half a century.

In recent years, the art world has been inundated by a resurgence of queer figuration in paintings and drawings that typically range from tender, caring sex to moments of self-pleasure. The bodies depicted in these works tend to come in all sizes, rather than represent an idealised standard. While one might applaud this strand of queer figurative realism for its embrace of inclusivity and diversity, I also cannot help but detect a speck of conservatism in its revamped, lukewarm eroticism, a mannerism masquerading as intimacy, and a blandness that omits what actually goes on in much of male homosexual life – role play, fisting, double-penetrating, to name a few – what I consider lived choreographies with growing popular acceptance, especially in our pharmacopornographic era, where the increasing ubiquity of HIV prevention such as PrEP is revitalising gay sexual culture nearly to the point of the pre-AIDS days.<sup>6</sup> However extreme they are perceived to be, these are also forms of intimacy. My intention here is in no way to question the incredible, decades-long progress made by feminists, queers and allies, especially since the #MeToo movement, in laying a much-belated emphasis on the role of care and consent in intimate relationships. Regrettably, however, in tandem with an

emboldened critique of masculinity (even if in many ways well-deserved) has come a crisis – or collective withdrawal, or self-censorship – in its representation. Against this backdrop, the work of Tom of Finland is not just a matter of history, but incredibly contemporaneous. It is more representative of gay sex life today than liberalist discourse would like to admit, and absolutely indispensable for our to-be-continued understanding of homosocial codes.

'If I don't have a hard-on, it's no good.' Tom famously defended self-pleasure as a necessary condition for the value of his art. To me, the iconic quality of his oeuvre perhaps resides precisely in this commitment to the bodily truth of gay desire – which is irrational and animalistic, with a penchant for eclipsing ethical codes. There must be some truth to the much-maligned saying: 'Boys will be boys.' Unless – or even if – the ultimate goal of our sexual revolution is the complete annihilation of the male sex (*à la* Valerie Solanas, whose work I'm just as fond of), we must thank Tom for leaving humankind with a titillating archive to study, collect, mimic, peruse and – for those of us with penises, biological or prosthetic – to assist our wanton, private pleasure.

**'Tom of Finland – Bold Journey', Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, until 29 October 2023**

5 <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201906/thierry-mugler-79928> (accessed 12 January 2023).

6 While the unequal accessibility of PrEP certainly raises complex ethical questions, this is not the subject of the essay; instead, I'm interested in the embodied effects it has had on the gay community.