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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