

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 Gallery

by Bradford Nordeen | May 2015



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.

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 epebe than musclemán. 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.