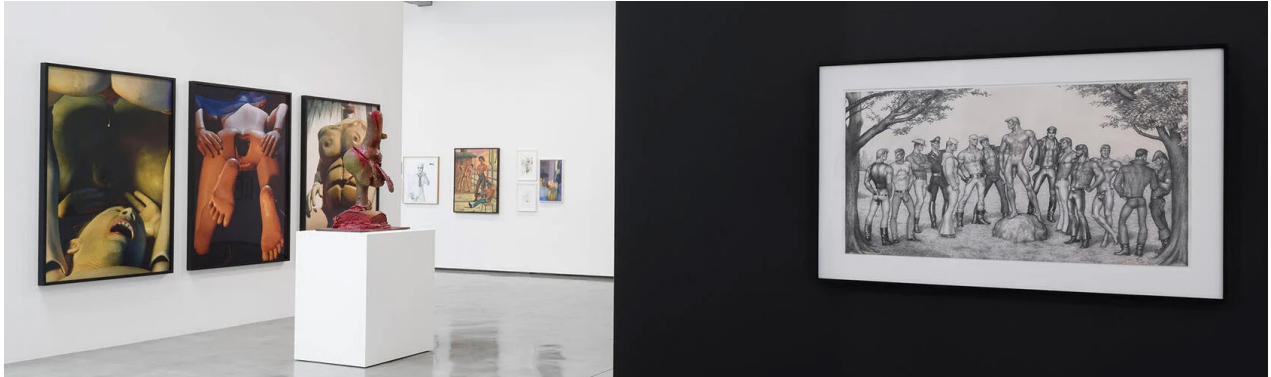


FRIEZE

Tom of Finland Is Still Turning Heads

At David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, what initially appears to be a perfunctory summer show reveals itself to be genuinely ambitious

BY **LOGAN LOCKNER** IN **EXHIBITION REVIEWS** | 11 AUG 26

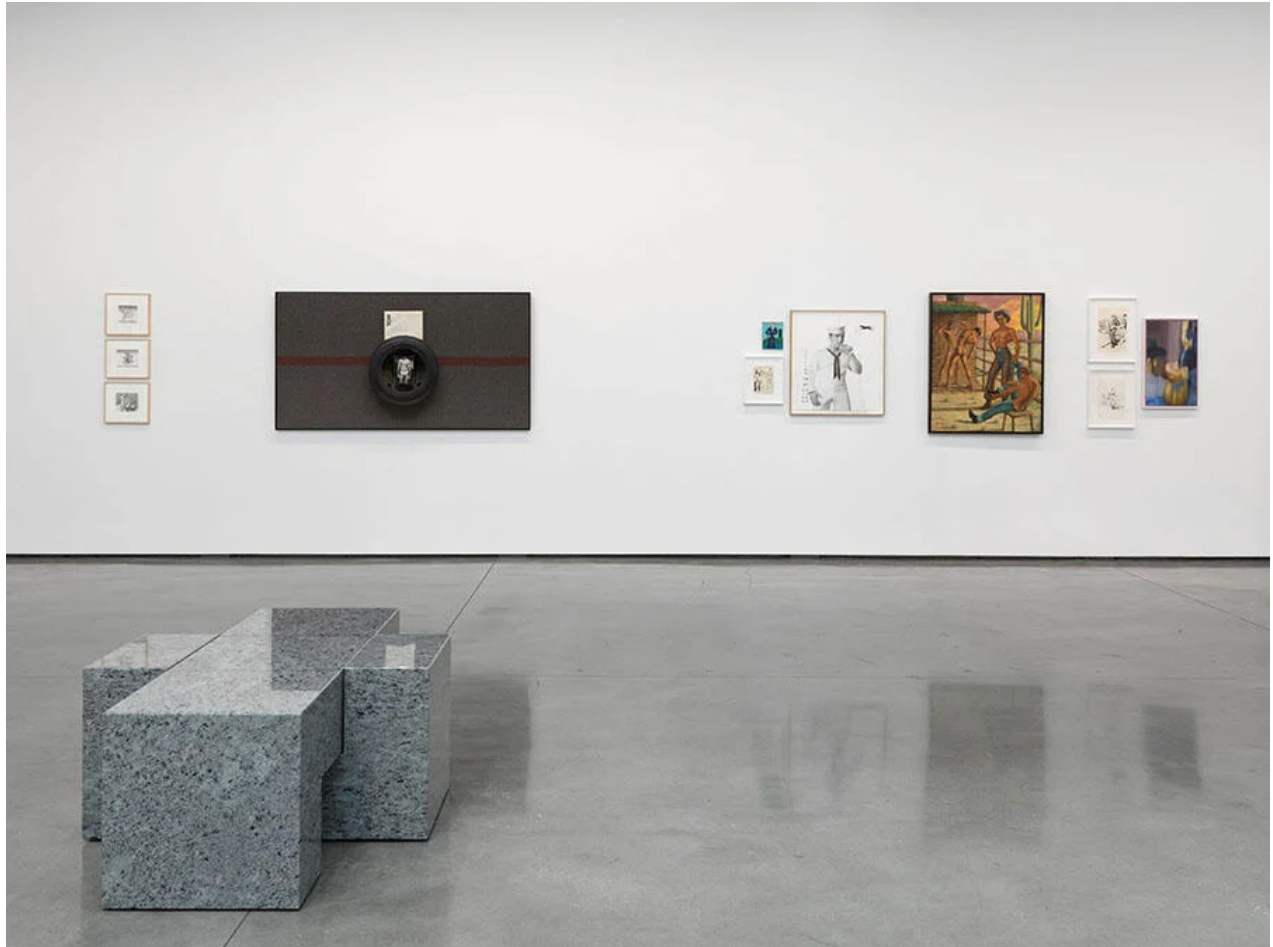


While it is common today to see varied merchandise bearing distinctive images of works by 20th-century artists such as Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, perhaps only Touko Laaksonen – better known by his pseudonym Tom of Finland – has inspired branded products including dildos, bondage collars and lubricant. Beyond the aisles of sex shops, the artist's eroticized drawings of hypermasculine beefcakes have appeared on apparel by fashion designer Jonathan Anderson, who has collaborated with the Tom of Finland Foundation on three capsule collections. Regardless of whether such phenomena represent cheeky homage, lurid profiteering or some combination of the two, the task of evaluating Tom of Finland's legacy 35 years after his death requires a sustained mental effort to read his artworks on their own bare terms and not on those of their widespread commercialization.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Positioning (DSF7986)*, 2023, archival pigment print, 1.5 × 1.2 m. Courtesy: © Paul Mpagi Sepuya, courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles; photograph: Brica Wilcox

The exhibition 'Tom's Stretch' at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles frames an expansive, intergenerational group of more than 70 artists as heirs to Tom of Finland's legacy, featuring dozens of his drawings and collages alongside over 100 works. While on its own, this premise could appear somewhat perfunctory – a large group show around a well-known artist mounted in the doldrums of summer – the genuine ambitions of 'Tom's Stretch' become apparent in the breadth and dexterity of its presentation, which balances a pervasive, playful lasciviousness with keen juxtapositions between artists, visual styles and historical periods.



'Tom's Stretch', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery; photograph: Jeff McLane

One familiar genealogy places Tom's homoerotic imagery in the lineage of postwar artists such as Bob Mizer, whose mail-order beefcake magazine *Physique Pictorial* (1951–90) introduced the Finnish artist's drawings to US readers in the 1950s. In a 1951 Mizer photograph included in the exhibition, *Jim Carroll (with antlers)*, a muscled, mop-haired stud bent over on his hands and knees faces the viewer; antlers sprouting from his head cast him as a fantasy figure. George Quaintance's 1953 painting *Sunset*, meanwhile, depicts sun-tanned cowboys eyeing each other suggestively as they undress and shower. It is a recurring scene amongst many of the works on view: a group of uniformed men whose mutual attraction is communicated by the direction of their gazes as much as the prominence of their bulges.

Subsequent generations of artists refract and refine the visual language developed by Tom and his contemporaries. Paul Mpagi Sepuya makes his own presence explicit in the photograph *Positioning* (*_DSF7986*) (2023), where the artist is seen to stand behind a model whose chin he assertively positions towards the camera. Painter Julien Ceccaldi renders two figures cruising a locker room in the highly stylized nature of anime (*Locker Room Etiquette*, 2026). A drawing by G.B. Jones (*Vaccine*, 2025) reclaims Tom's eroticism for the sapphic imagination, while Namio Harukawa (*Untitled 09*, 1990) and R. Crumb (*Untitled [Crumb Hanging on Woman's Leg]*, 2007) each portray a statuesque woman dominating a subservient male figure. Some of the most formally innovative works in the show, including Nick Hoecker's *Club Chair IV* (2026) assemblage and Tiona Nekkia McClodden's series of rope-bound paintings, 'NEVER LET ME GO' (2023–ongoing), appear as abstracted bodily forms, lending sculptural dimensions to the taut contours of Tom's expert draughtsmanship.



R. Crumb, *Untitled (Crumb Hanging on Woman's Leg)*, 2007, ink and correction fluid on paper, 40 × 32 cm. Courtesy: © R. Crumb, courtesy the artist, Paul Morris and David Kordansky Gallery; photograph: Kerry McFate

Although 'Tom's Stretch' is filled with scenes of explicit sex and BDSM, one of its most surprising qualities is the sense of economical restraint that emerges from Tom's drawings. Possessing what verges on old-fashioned charm, these works – in stark contrast with the looksmaxxers, gooners and AI-generated porn of today – suggest that the most vivid, inventive fantasies may require little more than an artist's imagination and his technical sleight of hand.

'Tom's Stretch' is on view at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles until 22 August

Main image: 'Tom's Stretch', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery; photograph: Jeff McLane
