



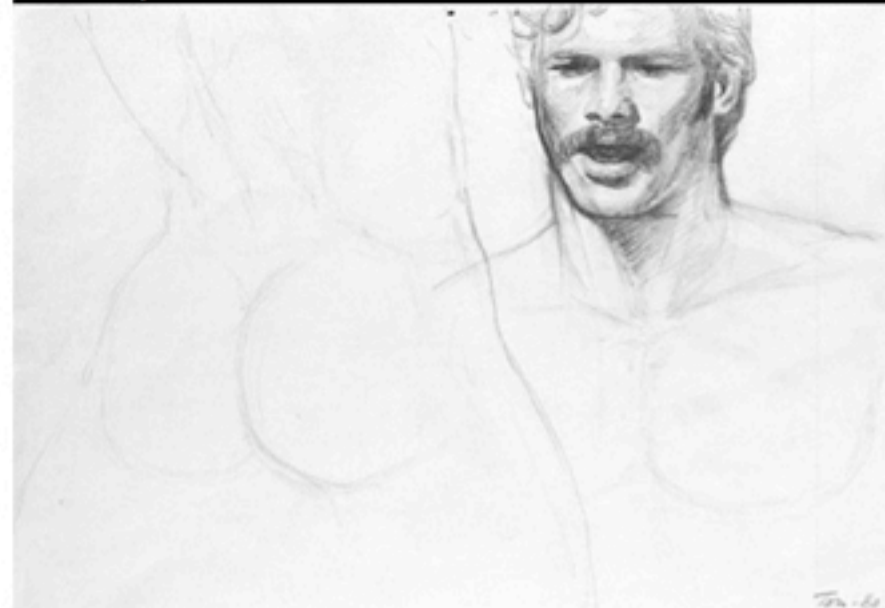
Tom of Finland, And Then Some

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As I was discussing the work of the late Tom of Finland with his former New York gallerist, who goes by the name Hudson and who owns Feature Inc., we were interrupted by a phone call. He left to answer as I perused some of Finland's matted drawings, selected for Feature's upcoming show, *Tom of Finland and Then Some*. Hudson returned with a smile that he couldn't contain. "People always call to remove themselves from our mailing list whenever we have a Tom of Finland show."

Getting offended by Tom of Finland in 2010 is almost like getting offended by an accidentally



suggestive balloon animal. Tom of Finland's stylized renderings of sexually transgressive beefcakes in compromising positions are surely erotic in nature, but to ignore the formal elements of his compositions is an unfortunate misstep in viewing. This impatient optic often holds all too fast for audiences both appreciative and dismissive of his work and it's refreshing to suss out Tom of Finland's more outstanding qualities and compare them to the work of various contemporary artists in Feature's show, which opened last week.

To Hudson, Tom of Finland was just a "grandpa," a very easygoing guy whose works were first shown at Feature's original SoHo location in December 1989. What surprised Hudson was the reverence that other artists had for Tom of Finland's work. "It was sort of amazing to hear how all these other artists knew and appreciated his work for years. I had no idea."

For this current show, Feature is showing a selection of Tom of Finland's rarely seen preliminary sketches from the Tom of Finland Foundation alongside several finished works as well as pieces from contemporary artists like Catherine Ople, Richard Kern, Richard Prince, and Raymond Pettibon, among many others, whose work reflects a similar unbridled investigation into sexuality. But one soon can see that sex isn't the only common denominator.

"People place his work outside of the art world because they have an illustrative quality to them," said Hudson. "But, if you look at these rough drawings, there's a mark-making as keen as anything and goes back centuries."

Surely he was a master draftsman with a hand well attuned to details in musculature. But just as Leonardo da Vinci had a propensity to serially render overwrought curls and spirals in the hair and shirtsleeve billows of his sitters, or Michelangelo was wont to make up for his own lack of masculinity in his brawny sculptures, the bodies in Tom of Finland's work are humorously anatomically incorrect, and their poses virtually impossible. It's his gestural grace that qualifies these bodies in space, and at the very least, makes these forms holistic in their reciprocity and coital activation. In one of his preliminary sketches, the curled quaff of a chained-up bottom-boy is echoed in the rounded oval chain links themselves, as well as the circular arrangement of his open mouth, no doubt surprised by the stylized, circular head of another man's penis in the extreme foreground. Circles abound, making the sex act into a pleasant confusion of similar shapes.

"Graphic representation in certain parts of his backgrounds are clearly one-dimensional and someone could mistake that for lack of skill," said Hudson, pointing to the flat locker bank in one of his finished gym drawings. "I find them to be more perceptual than that. However, artists within the past 15 years have been very interested in graphic art and it's gained credence now. The computer is surely a part of that, but you can trace that impetus back to cubism possibly -- the play between synthetic and real."

In Robert Fontanelli's piece *Daddy Table*, which is part of the show, his figurative composition takes a surreal turn when its brawny subject and his doe-eyed son find themselves submerged in the armature of midcentury furniture pieces. Similarly, bodies are confused in shape and intention in Jerry Phillips's graphite drawing, a mixture of fleshy forms, possibly multiple genitalia, seemingly rendered from an out-of-focus photograph. Richard Prince, of course, highlights the pulpy, cinematic air present in Tom of Finland's work with a collage featuring a shirtless cowboy. And Richard Kern's command of chiaroscuro in the warmly lit buttocks of *Lisa Looking Through Her Legs* finds good company with Tom of Finland's range of shadowing and his use of formless, ominous backgrounds that set his subjects on stage.

In terms of ethos, one of the most potent works in the show is a graphite and ink drawing by Jared Buckhiester. In a nighttime scene, with the stars shining over them, two androgynous teenagers are sitting in either an open attic or a roofless tree fort made from two-by-fours. One is fisting the other's mouth. The act is at once absurd, aggressive, and tender, and you're not entirely sure it's sexual. Their respective expressions are also dichotomous: excitement and fear. But, more than anything, potential permeates; just as Tom of Finland created palpable narratives where glances led to erections.

"I find the camaraderie between participants in his works to be utopian -- his works possess the perfect segue between hippie free love and gender inclusiveness that occurs in later years. If you look at the breadth of his work, you can really see this evolution," said Hudson. "But, the art world is very conservative and sex still makes people nuts." -- Jordan Hruska

Images courtesy of Feature, Inc. Gallery.

For more information on Tom Finland, And Then Some and Feature, Inc., visit the gallery's official website.