Visual Arts and Film
TOM OF FINLAND

AN APPRECIATION

by Nayland Blake

Nayland Blake is an artist and the program coordinator of New Langton Arts in San Francisco.
TOM OF FINLAND is one of the gay world's few authentic icons. For over 30 years his drawings have appeared in gay magazines and circulated in pirate editions. His men have entered the fantasy life of thousands, and his vision has influenced such artists as Robert Mapplethorpe, Bruce Weber, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Though his popularity has waxed and waned, he has remained modest about his work and committed to the making of it. He was born in Finland where he worked as an illustrator and art director for an advertising firm. He first came to America in 1978, and now spends his time between Europe and California, where he has established a foundation to promote his work and an archive to preserve and protect it.

Tom's work is diverse. His drawings are at once a system of gay erotics, utopian documents, historical texts, formal puzzles, memories, and love letters. All of this takes place in the context of an effective pornography. This essay is an attempt to present the various ways in which Tom's work might be used to illuminate other areas of sexuality and cultural history. To do this, it is useful to use a model of several "Toms." Each might be understood to exist in separate but overlapping locations and to articulate different vantage points. Each is one-dimensional and as such, far from any final truth about who Tom is. Taken together, however, they can indicate the diverse nature of Tom's production and the many options available to the person who looks at it.

Tom the Pornographer
Tom's work has been left on the sidelines of any debate about gay sensibility because it is pornography. Pornography remains a taboo; we consume it but will not commit to it. Yet when the history of gay images and representations is written, it will contain a large section on our pornographers. In a milieu that has produced a new connoisseurship of sexual acts, what we arouse ourselves with speaks eloquently about who we are.

Because of the marginalization of pornographic practice, Tom's work has been pirated, his earnings stolen by booksellers and art dealers, and his impact as a producer of powerful signs ignored by the same gay community he helped to create. It is time to invert the value placed on the production and consumption of pornography, and to instead look to it to provide understanding of who we are and how we are.

Tom draws. Most current discussion tends to focus on photographic pornography, treating all other forms as sidelines, or subsets of it. But there are important differences between a drawn and photographic image. Photographic pornography operates as evidence, the documentation that certain acts took place before the camera. Drawings, however, function in a way akin to writing: they provide the props for the viewer to hang a fantasy on rather than a specific person for the viewer to be aroused by. Tom comprehends that his drawings are not renditions of reality. His "men" are machines for fucking, like exotic sofas, and they are constructed accordingly. Unlike the subject of a photograph, their brawn is not the product of endless grooming. Their bodies are not a reproach to our own, but an opportunity for luxury.

Tom constructed his ideal gay body on paper. Because of his position as a pornographer, he was able to disseminate his ideas about that body to a sympathetic underground of gay men in Europe and America, to modify and embellish it, and finally, to see it celebrated as a central figure of gay culture.

Tom the Artist
Every work of cultural criticism has its own project. For years gay cultural critics have been locked into a project of assimilation into the dominant culture. They expect the gay
Cadmus' paintings are either social commentaries peppered with a series of grotesque homosexual "types," or sentimentalized hymns to a gay middlebrow heaven. Munity to produce figures that will stand alongside the masters by satisfying criteria of impact, technique, or seriousness of purpose. We are constantly presented with a parade of gay artists raised to mastery or snatched from the mainstream canon by their critics or publicists. In recent years we have seen this project attempted with such artists as David Hockney, George Platt Lynes, and Caravaggio. But the urge to "take someone seriously" and to confer respectability through placement in art history can easily be a disservice to the artist. Paul Cadmus, for instance, is an artist whose rehabilitation is complete, whose work has been successfully termed both gay and high art.

Cadmus began his career in the 1930s. He was a student of Reginald Marsh and worked on several projects for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). His most famous moment came when he was commissioned to produce a painting for the US Navy and presented them with a portrait of boozey sailors whoring on leave. The resulting scandal thrust him into the mainstream until the schools of
postwar abstraction eclipsed his own, representational, style. In the late 1970s, his reputation was revived by increased interest in the WPA period, and by his lionization in the gay press. But Cadmus’ work can only be described as tangential to the entire thrust of modern art. Its overwhelming characteristic is the desire to be taken seriously, to be high art. It attempts to convince us by displacing all the signifiers of mastery: coy allusion to other paintings, meticulous rendering, a tendency to caricature divorced from any real perception, and a slavish devotion to antique craftsmanship (in his case egg tempera—which was supposed to show that the painting took a long time and wasn’t easy to make). But the result of such labors is kitsch. Kitsch reassures the bourgeois audience that they are receiving their proper dosage of culture. A progressive politics cannot arise from a conservative aesthetics, and to promote Cadmus to a place within the world of museum art is to win a hollow victory for gay politics.

For Cadmus depicts gay people in an ambivalent fashion. In his early work, gay sexuality is slipped in on the sidelines, often with the artist as a knowing spectator winking at the audience. Later, history allowed him the luxury of painting beefcake. Cadmus’ paintings are either social commentaries peppered with a series of grotesque homosexual “types,” or in a painting like his What I Believe, sentimentally hymns to a gay middlebrow heaven.

Tom cites Cadmus as an influence, but his work is different in tone and intent. He is skeptical of attempts to classify his work as high art, preferring the terms “fantasy drawings” or “dirty pictures.” His images relate to the man in the street far more than to the pantheon of great artists. His work is not an apologia for homosexuality, but a direct document of it. With Tom there are no great themes, no highbrow rhetoric, but great communication. The fact that his work is utilitarian, that its aim is sexual arousal, means that it cannot make claims to distance or a transhistorical resonance. Tom sacrifices the grand for the immediate. It is his success at this that makes him a much more interesting figure in discussions of gay identity.

Tom the Craftsman

“I wanted to develop a photorealist style.”

One of the most striking and transgressive features of Tom’s drawings are their polish, the obsessive way in which they are rendered. The viewer’s attention is shifted away from considering the quality of the line (in the way that we would speak of Matisse’s line) to the object or activity that is being depicted. Rendering strives to be seamless, obscuring the process of its own making. In the twentieth century, work that has attempted to hide the process of its making has almost always been allied with extreme aesthetic and political conservatism.

Two examples of this would be Soviet socialist realism and the paintings of Norman Rockwell. They share the same concern as Tom’s work does with the fetishized representation of things “as they really are.” This last phrase is the most important because it is the project of this work to construct the reality it purports to depict. Such work revives the time-worn metaphor of painting as a mirror to create a fantasy reality and make us believe it as well.

Like Tom, Norman Rockwell worked for years as an illustrator and commercial artist before anyone ever claimed his work was fine art. If you tour the Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, you will be treated to endless reminders of how long the paintings took to execute, how exacting Rockwell was, how his models were drawn from the people around him. Not a word will be said about the real agenda of Rockwell’s work, which is the construction of a phantom America, where people have disagreements but not differences, where social issues are the occasion for damp sympathy or sly chuckles but not action, and where every thing “feels like home.” Rockwell supports a type of anti-historicism in the name of American ideals: a bumbling clerk or American soldier looks exactly like his colonial forebears; children commune with the spirit of George Washington; a young man giving a speech bears uncanny resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. His work achieves its effect by its obsessive rendering (which panders to
our wish to see ourselves in the mirror it proffers) without saying it is not our image we see, but only its own distorted editorializing.

Socialist realism (the art movement promoted by Stalin in the early 1930s) has a similar goal. Its aim is the creation, through their depiction, of attitudes proper to the ideal communist state. Its style is a hybrid of nineteenth century salon painting with the neoclassicism of late art deco. As the official government style, it succeeded in silencing some of the most important art of the twentieth century. Soviet artists moved from the vanguard of ideas in painting, filmmaking and architecture to become obscure state functionaries. Works that treated the viewer as anything other than a passive receptor for the “correct attitudes” of the propagandists were driven underground. Like Rockwell, the Soviet artists were using arguments of naturalism and realism as a cover for their own political program, and like Rockwell, they relied on the technique of scrupulous depiction to seduce and convince the viewer. It is telling that the works produced under socialist realism began to look like those produced in Nazi Germany.

The burly workers and farmers that stride through socialist realism’s paintings and sculptures are not too distant relatives of the sailors and cops whose orgies Tom lovingly depicts. Tom too, is constructing a fantasy world, but with different aims. He is calling into being a world suffused with gay sexual ity, using the power of his craft to validate his fantasies.

No longer interested in desire and its implied lack, Tom substitutes a pleasure of looking and being looked at, equating the cruising look with the sexual act.

Tom the Narrator

Tom says, “I wanted to show a world where gays could be freer, not so afraid.” He draws an idealized world of sexual courtship and activity that is at once a projection of his own private fantasies about gay behavior and a public articulation of possibilities within the gay community.

The rules of this utopia are spelled out through narrative. Tom uses narrative in two ways. The first is within the individual drawing. We see figures gesture to one another while in the background, a third is enticed
towards the scene. A knot of flesh reveals itself to be a series of sexual acts, the individual articulations of which rest like beads on a strand: here a crotch is being grabbed, here a neck bitten.

Often when we feel we have solved this sexual puzzle there is an unexpected conjunction: a body is given a half twist, a foot is wedged to stroke an asshole. Such moments in the drawings are like turns in the plot. A new erotic site is revealed and the drawings move from sexual excitement to repletion.

The second use of narrative is the linking up of various drawings into a series. In this, they begin to resemble novels or films more than photographs, displaying the possibilities for sexual conjunction between characters. We anticipate combinations—what if Kake (one of Tom’s heroes) fucks this cop who is arriving? Or, if the situation reverses, is that cock sucked later on? The erotic is displaced from an object to a terrain of figures and their possible interactions. Narrative opens up the image; it denies it an authority of hierarchy.

A narrative exists throughout Tom’s work as a whole. This is because certain characters have continued to appear in his work for 30 years—not only the heroes Kake and Pekka, but the bit players as well. Tom’s figures are as generalized in their appearance as they are particularized in their acts. Their similarity makes us feel at home. This is a world we recognize, but without the boundaries on our desires.

**Tom the Sensualist**

Tom is the poet of texture. Notice the characteristics of flesh in his work. Flesh as it is compacted into springy mass, as it pushes from between fingers, as it is ridged during fucking. Tom’s men are massive and it is this sense of the impact of flesh upon flesh that provides erotic charge. His bodies are pneumatic and well upholstered, and at the same time, pouty.

In western art, the pout is a potent sexual signifier. It is a fullness (the skin is near to bursting with the flesh that lies beneath it) and at the same time a slackening, a slight droop that connotes a leisure, a gentle lassitude. In

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OUTLOOK
Tom, not only the lips, but the eyes, the bellies, even the cocks seem to pout, to be packed with a sexual energy that expresses itself in a slight but significant bulging. It is this flesh that pouts, through clothes and across streets, that produces the heavy air of sex in Tom's world.

Tom is adept at portraying the texture of leather boots and jackets, the starch of uniforms, the tension and give of denim. He admits that it was the British who first drew his attention to the world of leather, and he is perhaps its most faithful depicter. His leather is shiny and beautifully heavy, draping the men of his drawings with a sort of solemnity. This drapery frames the erotic object; clothing is often retained far into the sex act. The textures and bits of uniform are the variables that allow us to sort out who is who among Tom's generalized figures.

**Tom the Voyeur**

Most pornography of the image is constructed around the framework of the gaze. The gaze can be understood as the eye as phalus, a powerful and penetrative organ. In most pornography, the object presents itself to the gaze, welcomes its penetration and is rendered passive by it. In Tom's work there is surprisingly little of the singular, phallic gaze. Instead, he presents a network of looks. Often he inserts figures observing the activities into the margins of his drawings. There is a heightened sense of people putting themselves on display.

Two fully clothed men lean against a tree. They look out onto a street where other men cruise and make gestures of sexual enticement. After a while we realize that the men are fucking. This drawing is not an invitation to us, the viewer, but it is powerfully erotic because of the combination of the men's casual looks and their position as part of an entire world of fucking. Like those of the men, our eyes are invited to roam. This allows for a double current of attraction/participation rather than the single current of gazer/object of the gaze. No longer interested in desire and its implied lack, Tom substitutes a pleasure of looking and being looked at, equating the cruising look with the sexual act.
Tom the Fascist

"Whoever designed the Nazi uniforms had to be gay. Those were the sexiest men I have ever seen in my life...."

Tom's earliest sexual experiences were with German soldiers during the occupation of Helsinki. He talked about this romantic involvement in an interview with David Reed in *Christopher Street*. His first drawings were attempts to recreate those experiences and fantasies.

The first time I read the above quote two things came to mind: first, the debate then raging over the meaning of the fashion of leather and uniforms for gay men, and second, the visual similarity between Tom's drawings and the heroic neo-classicism that had been the court style under the fascist regimes of the 1920s through 1940s.

Can Tom's work be said to provide a direct link between the *übermensch* ideals of Nazi Germany and the so-called fascist undercurrents in the gay uniform craze? And by extension, can Tom's work be called fascist?

In Tom's utopian world, roles exist, but power is fluid. He is the keenest depicter of the erotics of ludicrous power. Cops may have authority, a uniformed man may begin to flog his prisoner, but these situations will soon reverse themselves as the cop bends over to be fucked, and the man in the uniform allows himself to be bound. Tom understands that the pleasure of S/M is the successful fulfillment of a role while maintaining the understanding that it is a role. "It is more playful, like acting," he says. There is also a high degree of humor in the drawings, and even when there are scenes of beating or bondage, they are suffused with an avuncular attitude that is difficult to resolve with the notion of fascism.

Some maintain that the symbol itself holds power, that to use it is to invoke all that it has stood for. At the opposite extreme are those who claim that a symbol, like the swastika, is utterly neutral and that it is the viewer's responsibility to get past any negative connotations that it may have had. Both positions contain a certain amount of self-willed naïveté. By itself, a symbol is a neutral arrangement of lines, but symbols are never by themselves. Like all signifiers, they are the product of specific historical circumstances.

After the experience of Nazi Germany, it is impossible to claim that its symbols are neutral. However, it is equally wrong to say that once symbols acquire a meaning, that meaning is fixed forever. The meaning of phrases and images does shift depending on who uses them. While Tom's drawings utilize a style of representation popular under fascism, it would be a mistake to say that even those that contain Nazi imagery are fascist in intent or effect.

Tom himself expresses misgivings about drawings he made early in his career. "People saw them in a political way because they had Nazis in them. They thought I was a Nazi. I would not do them today because I do not want people to see them that way—they are my fantasies." Through an understanding of the traumatic effect that they have on people, Tom has removed the drawings that contain Nazi figures from circulation. This is a case in which his private fantasies were not shared by a larger public. Tom also talks about subjects that are too violent for him. "They (people with commissions) asked me to do pictures like of balls being cut off or stomachs opened with all the organs... I could not do them."

A fascist art is one that seeks to silence opposition by means of its own authority, one that uses scale and impersonality to produce power. It renders the viewer mute, denying any voice other than the state. From the first, Tom has been inclusive in his work, incorporating suggestions from others, and through dialogue, coming to an understanding of its various political implications. His art does not glorify power, being all too eager to upset the balance in favor of erotic connection. It is impossible to imagine Kake as some sort of *übermensch*. He is too often on the receiving end of Tom's jokes, losing his clothes, or having his cock handcuffed to another man. Tom is too obviously delighted with the possibilities for erotic display to not invite us to join in.
Tom the Sadist

In speaking of sadism, it is important to differentiate between a garden variety of brute and someone whose work is inspired by the Marquis de Sade. Tom is a sadist, not because of any perceived violence in his work, but because he shares similar obsessions with Sade. He is a careful constructor of sexual tableaux. He is concerned with full use of the erotic zones of the body, with saturation. It is important that all orifices be filled, that figures be connected, disrupted and connected again. In one narrative a man is pissing in a public toilet. A sailor wanders in and starts fucking him, a blond comes in and starts fucking him, and so on until there are eight people in a row. This is a typical Sadean trope; an asshole is fucked because it is there and it is important to complete the tableau. The formal demands of sexual positioning overwhelm the ideas of power relationships.

Like Sade’s, Tom’s work operates by an overlapping and subsequent disruption of codes. In Tom’s case this is the tension between the drawn image and the photograph. His best drawings bounce between the deadpan style of the camera and the sky exaggerations of his pencil. Without the meticulous rendering, his exaggerations would fail to arouse. There is a sense of outrage with the notion of the painstaking approach to such a low aim; that one should labor so hard to produce images of men fucking.

Sade uses beautifully crafted French prose to describe the most perfidious activities. In our society, the expected result of superlative craft is the sublime. Tom, with his devotion to his fantasy, stands this expectation about highmindedness and craft on its head. His intense devotion to a pornographic labor is anti-establishment; it is a “waste” of time and talent. It disrupts society’s ideas about what pornography is: cheap, thrown together, and without redeeming value.

The physique magazines should be seen not as cute precursors to today’s hard core porn, but as underground press equal in importance to the first gay political magazines.
Tom the Physique Artist

Looking at a copy of Futeur Art Quarterly, it is remarkable how Tom’s work stands out from the rest of the drawings that surround it—as much for what it doesn’t do as for what it does. The majority of early gay pornography is dominated by a desire to return to a mythical past. Images of fauns playing lyres, gladiators, medieval knights and pages, and other never-never lands of gay desire. Tom’s drawings, on the other hand, are always of contemporary subjects. Even when they portray cowboys, you know there is a pickup truck or motorcycle lurking around the corner.

This is a world of today, a world of constantly intersecting erotic gazes and gestures, where sexual activity is always a possibility. Over the years, Tom has adopted different styles of dress and hair length to maintain a contemporary look. Tom also abandons the gay figure of the ephebe, the slender hairless teen whose purity and fawn-like bearing presage the sensitive and willowy man. Tom’s men are lugs, and the closest he comes to the ephebe are drawings of robust teens who ride around on motorcycles looking to get fucked.

Tom has always drawn images from his own experiences and the world around him, but as his work began to appear in the pages of America’s physique magazines he began to receive suggestions for subject matter and commissions from his publishers and readers. These magazines functioned not only as a source for pin-up pictures, but also as a ground for the exchange of ideas for fantasies and types of identities. They began to form the image reservoirs from which gay men were able to construct new codes for dress and behavior. They began to constitute a placeless community for gay men before physical communities existed.

The physique magazines should be seen not as cute precursors to today’s hard core porn, but as an underground press equal in importance to the first gay political magazines. Tom’s drawings passed from the private fantasies of a man in Europe to the underground images that would shape a generation’s ideas of how a gay man could look and act. Tom has drawn not only on the paper in front of him but on the consciousness of the men who viewed and continue to view his work. ▼

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THE CASE OF ROSA BONHEUR: WHY SHOULD A WOMAN WANT TO BE MORE LIKE A MAN?

ALBERT BOIME

Rosa Bonheur was one of the greatest animal painters in the history of Western art and certainly the best known woman artist of the nineteenth century.¹ She received international recognition during her lifetime and in later years became a hero of the feminist movement. Before Rosa Bonheur, a woman’s indulgence in art was generally viewed as a pastime, but she broke through the confining Victorian restrictions and excessive sexual polarization to make her love and need for painting a full-time occupation. Gautier once wrote: ‘Avec elle, il n’y a pas besoin de galanterie; elle fait de l’art sérieusement, et l’on peut la traiter en homme. La peinture n’est pas pour elle une variété de broderie au petit point.’² Like George Sand and George Eliot, this entailed committing herself to a wholly independent and unconventional way of life. She early decided never to become an adjunct or appendage to a man and wished to compete with her male peers on their own terms. Eliot exclaimed while looking at one of Bonheur’s pictures: ‘What power! That is the way women should assert their rights.’³

Like Eliot, Bonheur was one of several notable Victorian women whose life-style embraced elements of a masculine guise. While she and her contemporaries often presented her case for doing so in practical terms — stressing the convenience of male attire for work or in the hunt and the need for camouflage in male-dominated activities where an unescorted woman would have been vulnerable — Bonheur obviously donned the masculine cloak for a more fundamental reason. As a young student at the Louvre, her bizarre mode of dress earned her the nickname of ‘le petit hussard,’ and later she wore a ‘grotesque’ male outfit that had a friend gasping:

It consisted of a frock-coat, loose gray trousers with under-straps, boots with spurs, and a queer hat. She held a riding whip in her hand, and the effect, as a whole, was that of a girl dressed as a man.⁴

At By, where she eventually settled permanently, she wore more conventional male clothing almost continuously. Occasionally, she made exceptions for