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FORUM



Tom of Finland comes home, keeps on coming

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Tom of Finland, the alias of Touko Laaksonen (8 May 1920–7 November 1991), remains the internationally most known and recognized Finnish visual artist. His homoerotic – and unabashedly pornographic – work has been acknowledged as a key influence for the aesthetics of gay male leather cultures and gay pornography (see Lahti 1998; Mercer 2003; Snaith 2003; Kalha 2012, Vänskä in this issue). This *Porn Studies* forum expands considerations of Tom of Finland's legacy from gay male cultures to the diverse ways in which it has been made to enter broader cultural circulation and commodity production. Approaching Tom of Finland's work as cultural objects, this forum is interested in its diverse locations and travels across contexts of production, distribution and consumption, as well as in its entanglement in the circuits of politics, monetization and cultural value.

This introductory article maps out the fairly recent rise of commodity production, drawing on Tom of Finland's work in his country of origin, and inquires after the paradoxes involved in reframing his iconography as an object of national pride and joy. In her piece, Leena-Maija Rossi maps out Tom of Finland's gradual entrance into the art world, while Annamari Vänskä investigates the circuits of influence between Tom's visual iconography and the fashioning of the male body. Taken together, these three contributions address both the enduring appeal of Tom of Finland's work as well as the busy traffic that it engenders across the categories of pornography, art and consumer culture.

Our boy!

In 2011, Turku, one of the European Capitals of Culture, celebrated the occasion with the largest Tom of Finland retrospective ever seen in the country, titled 'Tom Comes Home!' (*Tom palaa kotiin!*). A high-profile occasion, the show was visited by VIP guests ranging from politicians to Sweden's Crown Princess, Victoria. Six years later, Touko Laaksonen was one of the official themes of the centennial celebration of Finnish independence. It is not extraordinary for a small country to recognize its most internationally known artist, especially when this artist incorporated the name of the said country in question in his alias. Following a decades-long tradition, Finnish media eagerly report on the international recognition of its citizens, occasionally framing them as builders of or ambassadors for the country's national image. The enthusiasm with which Tom of Finland has recently been embraced and celebrated as a public figure is nevertheless exceptional, as well as paradoxical. As I discuss in the following, the commodification and public

circulation of Tom of Finland's work for the purposes of both corporate profit and national brand-building is noteworthy, not least given its homoerotic pornographic overtones.

In 2014, the Finnish Post Office released a sheet of three stamps to celebrate Tom of Finland (Figure 1). The designer, Timo Berry, described the stamps as 'depicting sensuous force of living and pride in oneself' (Posti 2014). The stamps were a quick success, with presales alone to 178 countries (Matson-Mäkelä 2014). In the aftermath of the stamps' broad international attention, a range of commodities emerged making use of the Tom of Finland brand. In 2014, the textile manufacturer Finlayson (est. 1820), which had



Figure 1. Tom of Finland stamps (2014). Press photograph by Posti.

been recently purchased by entrepreneurs with previous careers in advertising – the very field where Laaksonen himself worked – released a series of tote bags and kitchen, bathroom and bedroom textiles in collaboration with the Tom of Finland Foundation overseeing the copyrighted uses of his work. The company has since launched a new line of Tom of Finland products every autumn.

By 2016, Tom of Finland wall calendars featuring some of the less sexually explicit imagery were on sale in post offices across the country. Robert's Coffee launched a Tom of Finland line with two different roasts – 'Build Bold' for light and 'Heavy Duty' for dark – coming in eight different designs (Figure 2). For Christmas, the company introduced a 'Spicy Santa' roast decorated with one of Laaksonen's hunky, semi-naked Santa images and added to its overall visibility with a street advertising campaign. These coffees were soon made available in supermarkets and, the following year, consumers could also buy organic Tom of Finland vodka. The biopic *Tom of Finland* directed by Dome Karukoski premiered in 2017, becoming the Finnish Academy Award entry for best foreign-language film. The same year also witnessed the premiere of the *Tom of Finland Musical* at the Turku City Theatre, where his most iconic character, the cartoon protagonist Kake, came to life and a young Tom serenaded a worker's leather boots. Meanwhile, there were discussions on naming both a square and a street after Laaksonen in Turku and in his native town of Kaarina.

This mundane, commercial and highly visible celebratory presence of Tom of Finland iconography marked a clear departure from the long-term obscurity that his oeuvre had



Figure 2. Tom of Finland coffee in a supermarket in Joutseno, close to the Russian border, 2016. Photograph by author.

enjoyed within Finland. Laaksonen launched his career in the 1950s, some two decades before homosexuality was decriminalized in 1971, and aimed his work at the US print market from the very beginning. Added to his artist name 'Tom' as an additional exotic accent by a publisher, the denominator of 'Finland' situated Laaksonen's work geographically and occasionally, as with some of his lumberjack imagery, also culturally. The Tom of Finland brand was nevertheless a markedly transnational and international one, drawing influences from the uniforms of Third Reich soldiers, US street patrol officers and motorcyclists into a fantasy fabric occupied by almost photorealistically rendered, yet physically impossible male bodies exaggerated in their extraordinary physique.

In Finland, a country that had close to no openly out gay male celebrities until the 2000s and where the public visibility of queer cultures remained equally low, Laaksonen's reputation was for a long time limited to gay male subcultures, as in the case of the fetish club Motor Sport Club Finland – Tom's Club, established in the mid-1970s. It was not until Kaj Kalin's (1990) magazine interview with Tom of Finland – the year in which he was given a national award for his achievements as a cartoonist – as well as Ilppo Pohjola's (1991) documentary film *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, released shortly after Laaksonen's death, that his persona, work and legacy began to grow familiar to some of the broader public (see Kalha 2012, 53–54). As Rossi discusses in her forum piece in this issue, Laaksonen's drawings gradually entered the art museum scene during the years to follow. Tom of Finland nevertheless remained an underground figure until the enthusiastic commercial embrace of his work in the 2010s.

From the margins to the Moomins

Much of this commodification can be explained through attempted appeals to the pink euro and dollar, yet Tom of Finland has also emerged as a highly desirable and broadly applicable instrument in liberal brand-building both within the corporeal sector and in the context of national public relations efforts (Figure 3). While having an artist known for his pornographic oeuvre becoming one of the official themes of centennial independence celebrations may strike some as odd, Laaksonen presents a particular success story made edgy in the contemporary perspective precisely by his pioneering role in gay pornographic cultures. The broad recognizability, upbeat style and erotic appeal of his work all quickly catch the eye while also broadly connoting cosmopolitanism and sexual freedom, qualities that many deem desirable as points of self-identification.

Much of this logic was encapsulated in a magazine article by the actor and author Antti Holma (2017) under the title 'Moomin of Finland' inquiring after the queer chains of events and the sets of investments through which Laaksonen's hyperbolically masculine leather men have become national mascots reproduced on all kinds of commodities, as has long been the case with Tove Jansson's Moomin Trolls. In addition to being another popular Finlayson product line, Moomins, first introduced in books in the 1940s, in comics in the 1950s and as Japanese television animations in the 1980s, have long been printed on coffee mugs, coffee tins and chewing gum packets, to notable commercial success. In order for Tom's men to achieve public presence comparative, albeit not similar to or equal to the Moomins, the sexually explicit had to be cleared away. Hence, no erect



Figure 3. Finlayson window display in Helsinki, 2016. Photograph by author.

penises, ass-fucking, cock-sucking or eruptions of cum appear on Finlayson's printed fabrics, vodka bottles or in the readily available wall calendars that are more focused on his overall aesthetics of male bodily display (Figures 4 and 5).

As Holma (2017, 31) aptly points out, this development, in which Tom's men are reincarnated as family friends remotely kin to Moomins, domesticates Laaksonen's work while simultaneously deflating much of its specificity and appeal based on displays of bodies driven by the quest for sexual pleasure. In the range of commodities targeted not only to gay men but perhaps even more centrally to liberal-minded people of various gender and sexual identifications, the sexually explicit becomes implicit, the pornographic turns into homoerotic and the risqué is transformed into a marker of tolerance. On the one hand, this branding operates on the level of individual consumers, such as myself, who, by shopping for Tom's coffee, packing their groceries in Tom of Finland tote bags and gifting their friends with Finlayson's oven mitts, reflectors and napkins, communicate liberal values and degrees of subcultural sensibility. On the other hand, all this is also an issue of national self-fashioning and brand-building.

In 2017, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign affairs published a Tom of Finland emoji as part of its line of national emojis encapsulating the specificities of Finnish culture (Figure 6). It was motivated by the artist's 'significant contribution to the advancement of human rights, advocating for tolerance, respect and freedom' (This is Finland 2017). As Tom of Finland has become appropriated as a symbol of 'Finnish pride', as a signifier and agent for social justice, or even as a national icon encapsulating commendable values, the framework of pornography has increasingly been effaced, if not plain ignored.

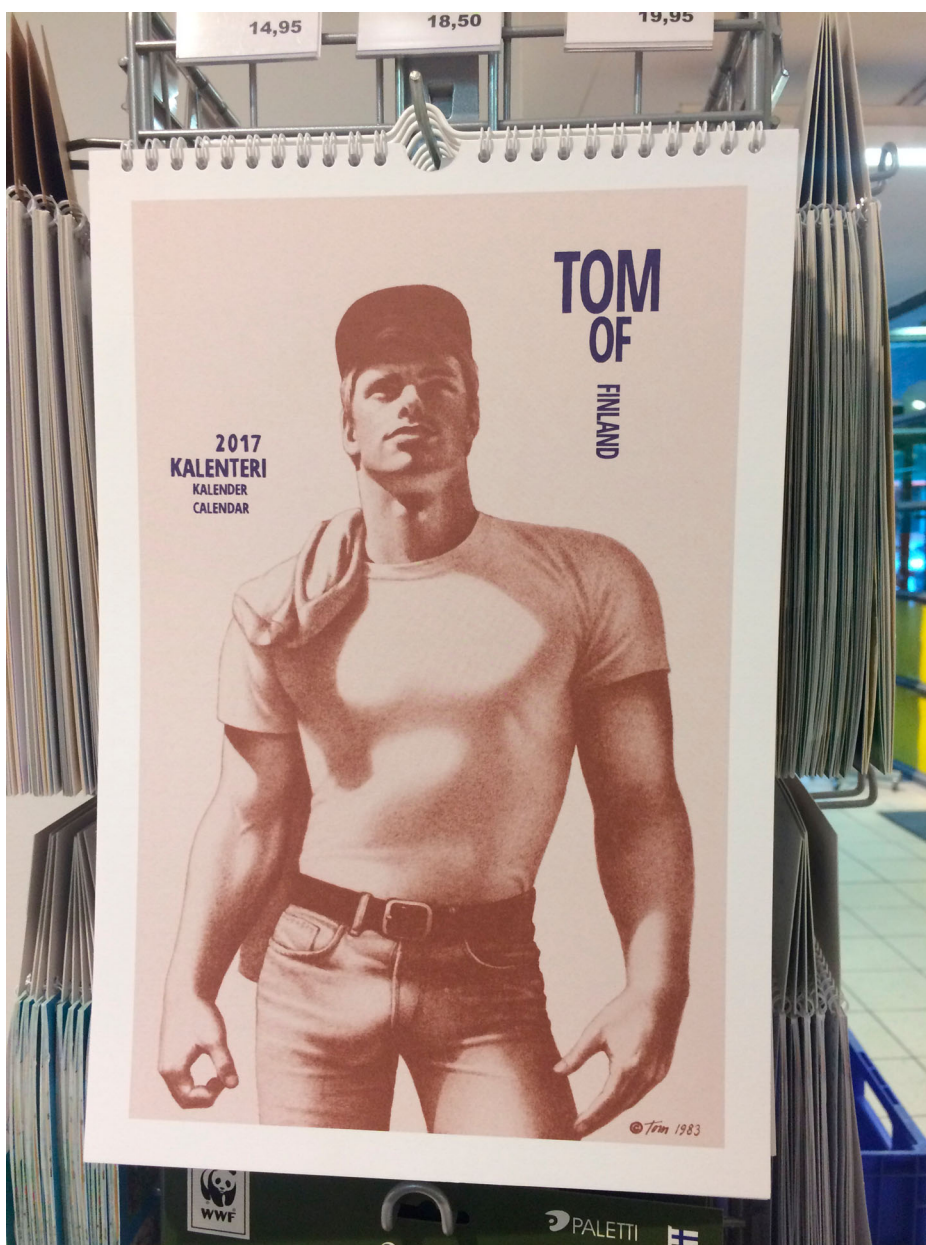


Figure 4. Tom of Finland wall calendar on sale at a post office in Helsinki, 2016. Photograph by author.

This is not to say that Laaksonen's work, albeit drawn, circulated and consumed as pornography, would ever have simply been contained within this realm alone, given its display in spaces of art, or their mass reproduction as Taschen postcards and books over the years. The scale at which Tom of Finland has been embraced as a posthumous national brand ambassador nevertheless speaks of recuperation where the pornographic, subcultural and indeed transgressive tones of his work become co-opted as edgy fun, and as sources of national pride. This recuperation draws attention to the pleasure-seeking



Figure 5. Tom of Finland and Moomin postcards on sale at Helsinki airport, 2017. Photograph by author.

men in his drawings, as well as to the figure of the artist himself as a means of celebrating Finnish culture while simultaneously turning attention away from the culture's homophobic patterns, both historical or contemporary. The celebration of hedonistic gay sexual promiscuity gives way to the valorization of individual creativity, success and style as a means of communicating progressive politics on personal and national scales.

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