

*The Pleasure of Play* is the most comprehensive Tom of Finland survey exhibition to date, spanning six decades to include more than 180 drawings, 1930s childhood paper dolls, the full set of 1940s gouaches along with triptychs, individual drawings, storyboards and over 300 reference pages.

Touko Laaksonen, aka Tom of Finland (1920, Kaarina – 1991, Helsinki), was a child of grammar school teachers and grew up in rural Finland. At the age of 19 he enrolled in a distance learning advertising course. Soon drafted, he joined the Finnish Army in its fight against the Soviet invasion. After the war he stayed in Helsinki, studying classical piano at the renowned Sibelius Academy. While at the Academy, Tom of Finland worked as freelance graphic designer, later becoming senior art director at the Helsinki office of the global advertising agency McCann Erickson.

While living life as an adman in Helsinki, his global career as an iconic gay figure was jumpstarted in 1950s Los Angeles, through his ongoing contributions to Bob Mizer’s publication *Physique Pictorial*. From the 1960s onwards, he frequently published his now well-known comic series with the Danish publishing house DFT, COQ International and the Swedish Revolt Press, and later through his own Tom of Finland Company.

In 1978, Tom of Finland had his first New York exhibition at Stompers, a boots store in the West Village. His first gallery exhibition was at Feyway Studios, San Francisco, where Tom of Finland was befriended by Robert Mapplethorpe, who in 1980 helped him get his first major New York exhibition at Robert Samuel Gallery.

During his 17 years at McCann, a job he quit in 1973, Tom of Finland started traveling extensively throughout Europe. On his many trips, particularly to London, Hamburg and Berlin, he would take his drawings to sell or to gift to men that he met in the local gay scene, thus proliferating his work while establishing an underground distribution network, and with it a network of friends and admirers. From the 1970s onwards Tom of Finland began to visit the US more frequently. While he never permanently resided in the states, during the last decade of his life he spent equal time between Helsinki and Los Angeles.

Tom of Finland’s biography parallels pivotal moments of 20th century (gay) history, bearing witness to the disasters, the turmoil and the radical changes that took place during his lifetime. Indeed, his work stands in dialectical relationship to these events and the often oppressive culture that surrounded him.

Starting from an early age, Tom of Finland played with the iconographic conventions upon which both the representation and the very conception

of masculinity are based. His emblematic, larger-than-life drawn phalluses threaten not only the existing symbolic order of heterosexuality, but also reorganize the principles by which (homo)sexual desires are structured. This fearless portrait of sexuality can also be read as a portrait of the sadomasochistic relationship that is at play between culture and subculture itself, an aspect that runs through gay culture of the 20th and 21st centuries as much as it is present in Tom of Finland’s biography and work.

Working from 1956 to 1973 as senior art director at one of the first global advertising agencies, it is likely that Tom of Finland had access to a range of global mainstream publications as well as illegally published early gay magazines – both from which he would meticulously cut out details and compose on single pages to later use as studies, or as he called them, *reference pages*.

It is telling that many of these cutouts are taken from global print campaigns; Tom of Finland seemingly studying and taking apart the representations of maleness and gender-assigned attributes in mainstream media, and fusing them with cutouts from gay periodicals. Originally separated into binders, the majority of these collages were sorted by distinct taxonomies: leather jackets, motorcycles, uniforms, beards, hairdos and so forth. On rare occasions he also drew directly onto these cutouts, to either amplify or reduce the existing attributes.

In some respects the collages are key to an understanding of Tom of Finland’s work. During the day (at least until 1973), as an acclaimed advertising executive Tom of Finland was involved hands-on in creating the hetero-normative vision of the happy suburban family of the late 1950s; while at night, he would cut up the very basis of his own work (print advertising) to study, to analyze and to categorize – turning these reference pages towards the exact opposite of their origin. One aspect of Tom of Finland’s drawings is that the faces of his protagonists feature a familiar, recognizable likeness – these bold, grinning faces, while in the act of sadomasochistic play, present a fearless vision of sexuality pointing towards the culture that constructed the relationship between sexuality and fear in the first place.

Because of Tom of Finland’s compound status as artist and subculture icon, his work has for years been admired by many artists including the late Mike Kelley, who in 1988 invited him to speak at CalArts (documentation of which is on view at Artists Space Books & Talks); Raymond Pettibon, who became a lifetime supporter of the Tom of Finland Foundation; as well as Richard Hawkins, who continues to work with the Foundation today.

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Interview

We would like to extend our  
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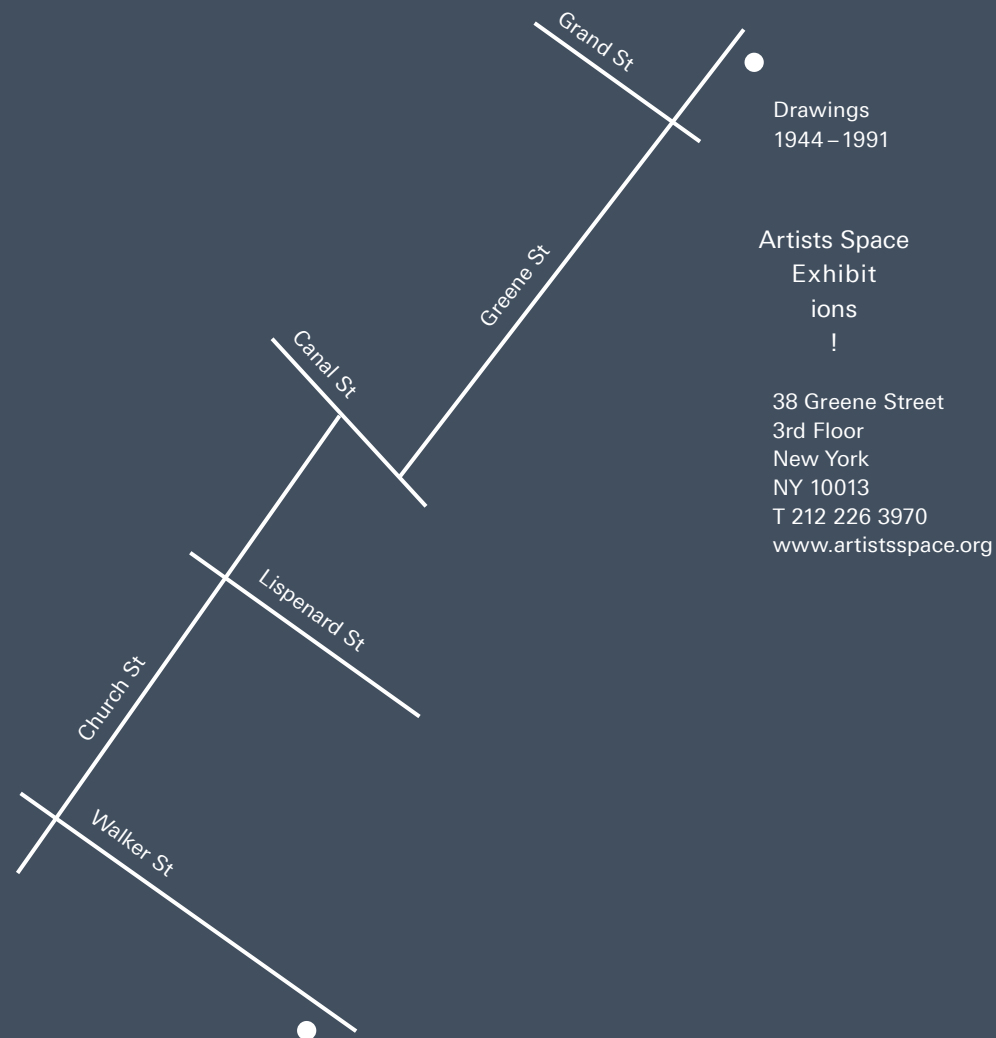
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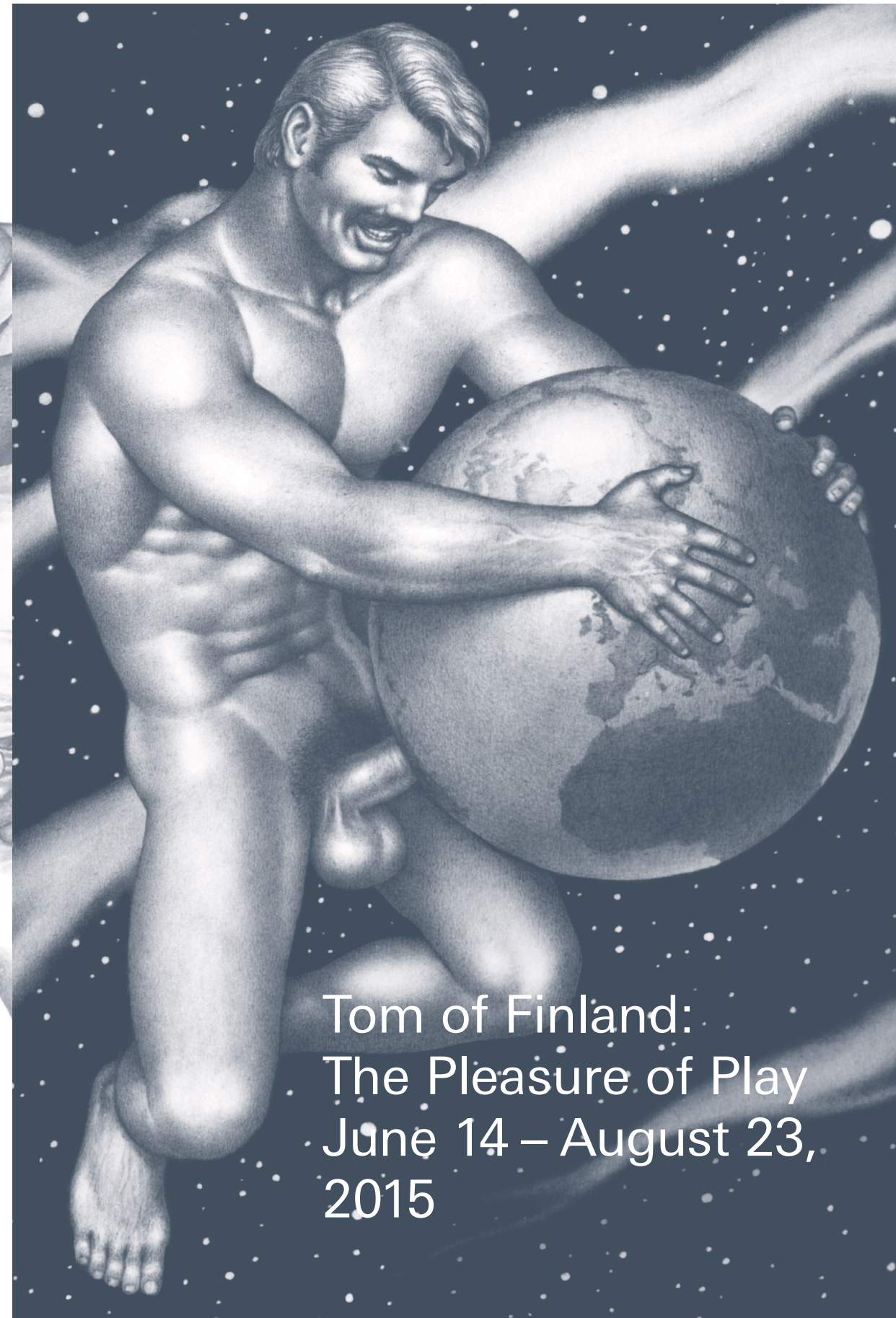
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Reference Pages  
ca. 1965 – 1990

Video  
Tom of Finland giving a  
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## Tom of Finland: The Pleasure of Play June 14 – August 23, 2015

## Program

Harri Kalha, Kati Mustola  
and Leena-Maija Rossi  
Discussion  
Sunday, June 14, 5pm

This program is the first in a series of talks, screenings, and discussions organized in conjunction with *Tom of Finland: The Pleasure of Play*. Art historian Harri Kalha and sociologist and LGBTQ historian Kati Mustola will each give a presentation discussing Tom of Finland's biography with a particular emphasis on gender and queer histories in Finland. Following the presentations, Kalha and Mustola will be joined by Leena-Maija Rossi, the Director of the Finnish Cultural Institute, New York, and herself a leading Finnish critic on the life and work of Tom of Finland, who will moderate a discussion.

Harri Kalha is Adjunct Professor of Art History and Gender Studies at the University of Helsinki, and Adjunct Professor of Visual Studies at University of Turku. Kalha recently edited a scholarly anthology on pornography, *Pornoakatemia!* (2007), which won the Finnish award for "Erotic Charge of the Year", and was the author of *Tom of Finland: Taidetta seksin vuoksi* (The Art of Having Sex) (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2012).

Kati Mustola has written and edited books, articles and museum exhibition texts on LGBT history. Her research specializes in the situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the workplace. Mustola's most recent English-language publications include *Criminally Queer: Homosexuality and Criminal Law in Scandinavia, 1842–1999* (Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2007), co-edited with Jens Rydström; and *Tom of Finland: Ennennakematonta – Unforeseen* (Helsinki: Like/Kustantaja, 2006).

Leena-Maija Rossi is the Director of the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York. She has previously worked as researcher and teacher at the University of Helsinki, and as a cultural critic and freelance curator. She has published widely both in Finland and internationally; her most recent book *Muuttuva sukupuoli* (Versatile Gender) is forthcoming in Finnish in 2015, published by GAUDEAMUS Helsinki University Press.

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