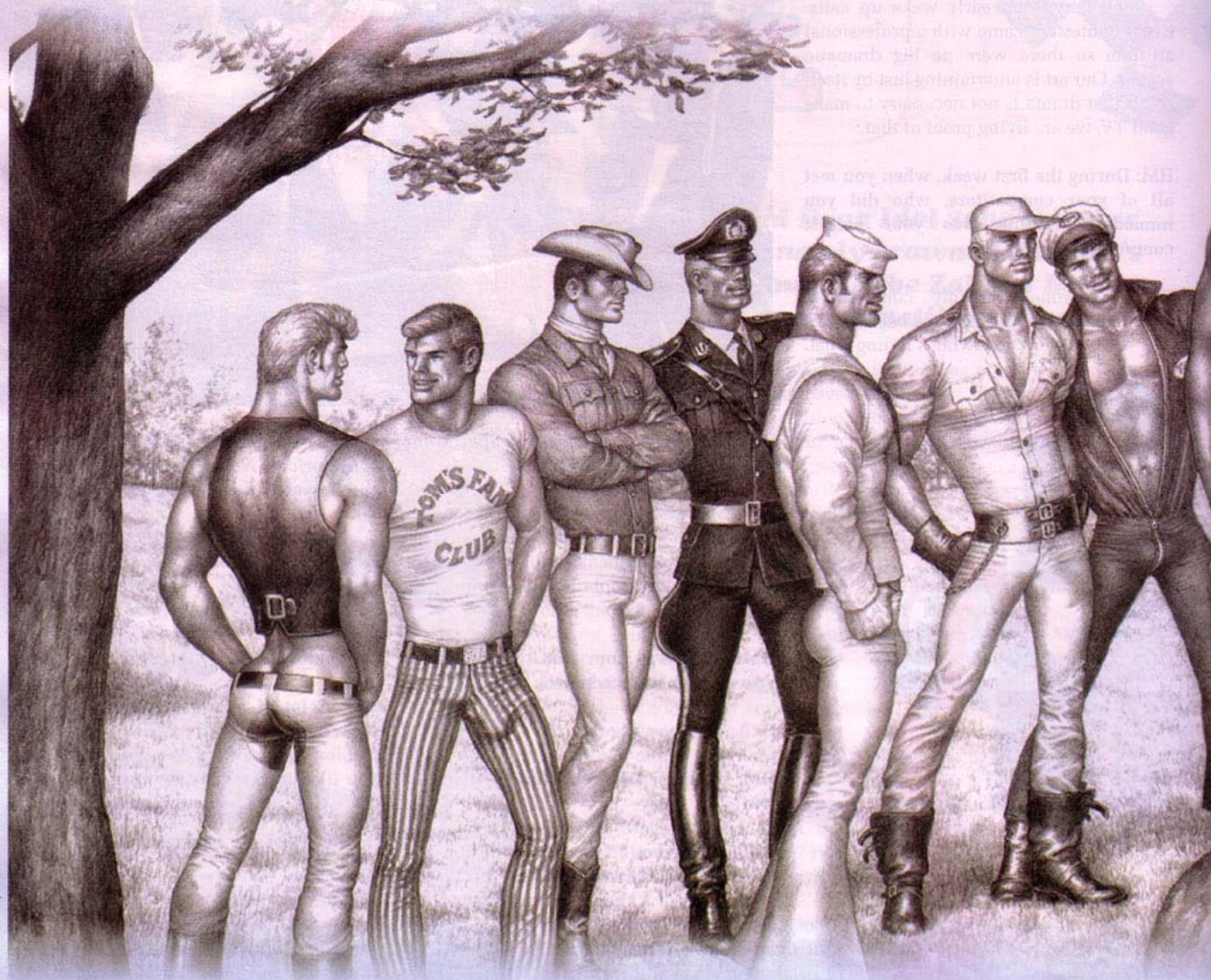
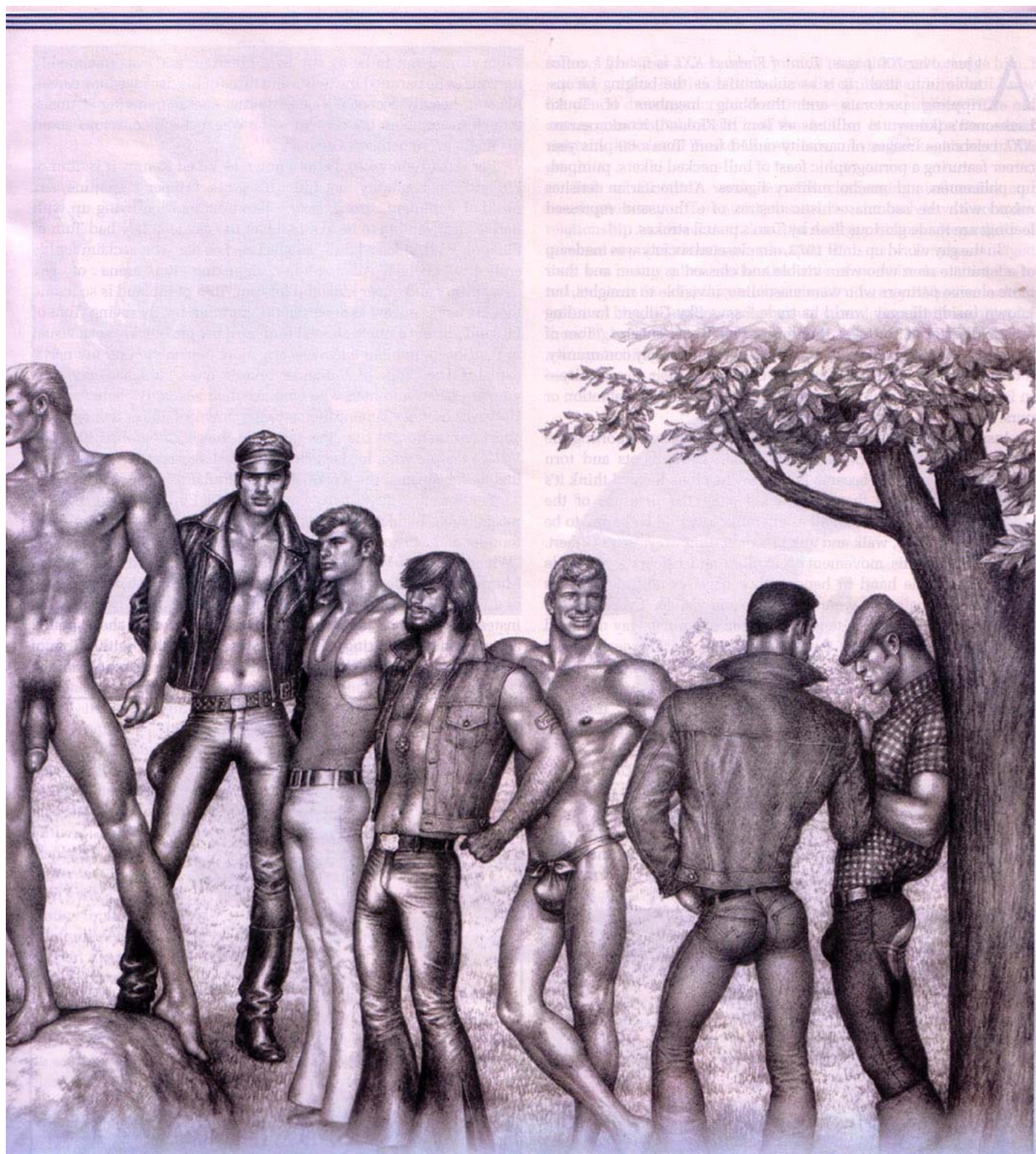


# TOM *of* TORONTO





**ALISTAIR NEWTON CHATS WITH LOCAL ARTISTS  
ABOUT RADICAL PORNOGRAPHER AND  
BEEFCAKE ARTIST, TOM OF FINLAND.**

At just over 700 pages, *Tom of Finland XXL* is nearly a coffee table unto itself. It is as substantial as the bulging biceps, rippling pectorals and throbbing members of Touko Laaksonen's (known to millions as Tom of Finland) iconic oeuvre. *XXL* celebrates images of carnality culled from Tom's 60-plus year career featuring a pornographic feast of bull-necked bikers, pumped-up policemen and macho military figures. Authoritarian fetishes mixed with the sadomasochistic desires of a thousand repressed feelings are made glorious flesh by Tom's pencil strokes.

"In the gay world up until 1973, our closeted society was made up of effeminate men who were visible and classed as queer, and their more elusive partners who were masculine, invisible to straights, but known inside the gay world as trade," says Sky Gilbert, founding artistic director of Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. "Tom of Finland's celebration of these types hit a chord in the gay community. It came at a time when gay men were celebrating their masculinity—in fact I'm not sure which came first, Tom of Finland's celebration or ours."

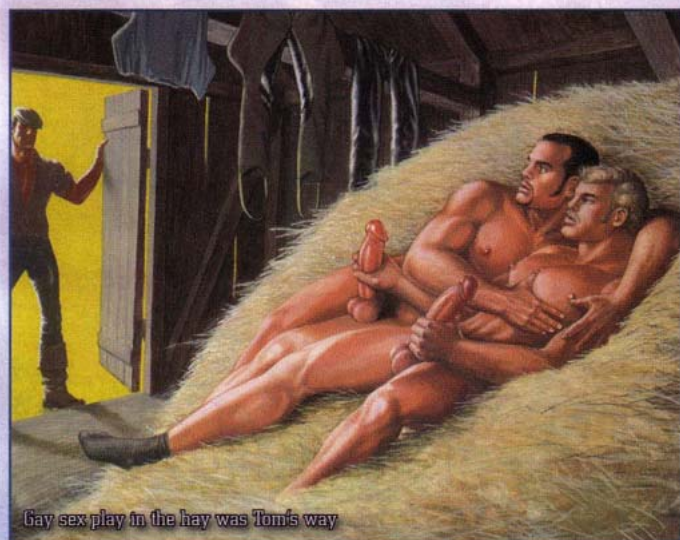
Inspired by Tom's drawings, many gay men began sporting the shorts, tight jeans, suspenders, facial hair, heavy boots and torn t-shirts that eventually became known as the clone look. "I think it's quite understandable that gay men, feeling the pressure of the stereotype that classifies them all as effeminate, would be happy to be free — free to dress, walk and talk in a masculine way," says Gilbert. "Unfortunately this movement to explore and celebrate gay male masculinity came hand in hand with a negative attitude towards those homosexuals who were effeminate and visible. Ever since the late '70s, there has been a tension between effeminate gay men and butch ones — that is when they aren't having sex with each other." Does this mean that Tom is held responsible for encouraging a tension between sissy boys and their more masculine counterparts? "Tom of Finland's works are not political speeches, they are pornographic fantasies that are so expert that they may very well be art," summarizes Gilbert.

John Greyson, director of seminal queer flicks like *Urinal*, *Zero Patience* and *Lilies*, met Tom of Finland while teaching at CalArts in the '80s when a graduate student invited Tom to participate in an artist talk. Greyson recalls "it caused much hubbub in the hallways — a gay porno lecture," and when Tom arrived he did not match up with any of the authoritarian stereotypes depicted in his drawings.

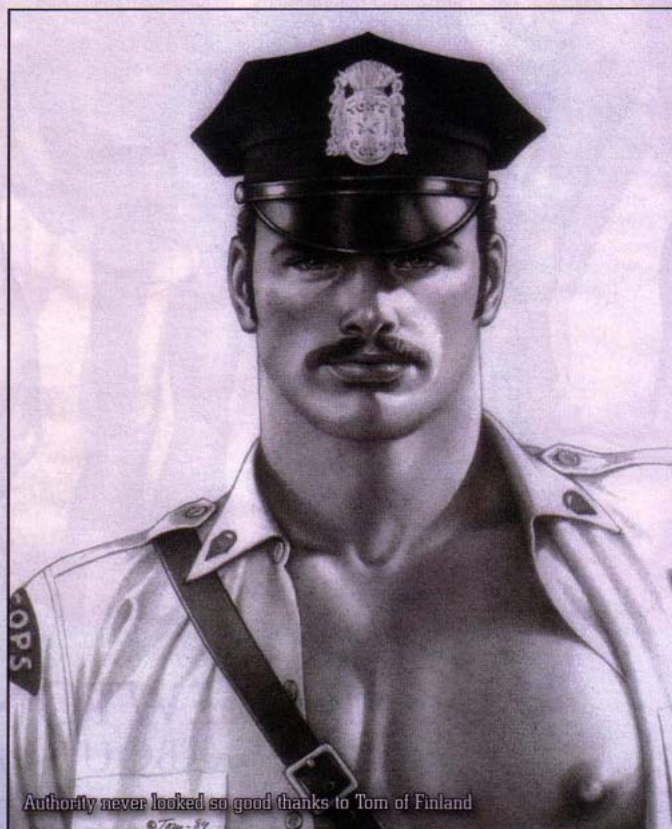
"Tom turned out to be as shy as a librarian, and was memorably nervous as he narrated the twists and turns of his decades-long career, his soft, heavily accented voice faltering and stammering at times, though never about the content — he was just self-conscious about his English," remembers Greyson.

For artist Kenny Lee, better known as Inked Kenny, it is Tom of Finland's iconography that turns his gears. "Hyper masculine, sex positive, confident, strong, sexy — like a little girl growing up with Barbie and wanting to be just like her; the gay teen boy had Tom of Finland. Well, at least I did," laughs Lee. Lee has won acclaim for his erotically charged photography depicting the arena of gay masculinity and queer kink and for him, Tom of Finland is so iconic that his name is used as an aesthetic short-hand. "By saying 'Tom of Finland' during a photo shoot, I find most people quickly get a visual in their head, [which] alleviates any more explanation on my part," explains Lee. Tom of Finland's images have "touched gay men who are artists and men who embrace their sexuality" believes Lee. However he does lament the watering down of Tom's iconography and presentation of the "the gay male image" by groups like The Village People who, for Lee, "[created] a stereotype that still lingers that has cheapened the works of Tom of Finland."

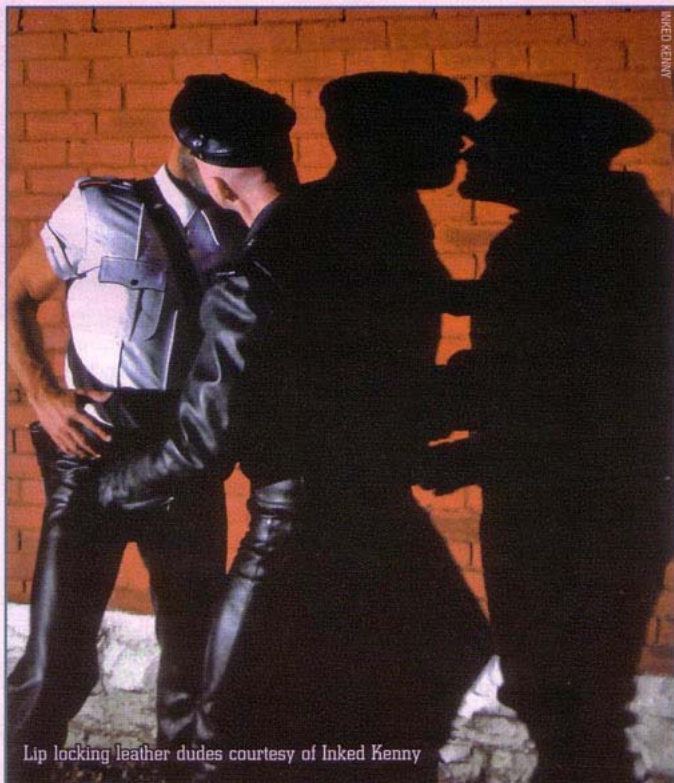
For Toronto's queer party crowd, Tom of Finland might be more recognizable thanks to t-shirts created by G.B. Jones, artist and co-founder of the historically influential homocore (gay punk) zine *J.D.'s*. "When the party Vazaleen was around, [Toronto artist and DJ] Will Munro and I made t-shirts with one of my drawings that was a kind of mirror image of Tom of Finland's two cowboys with two cowgirls instead," says Jones. Jones first encountered Tom when she spotted a punk goddess sporting a Vivienne Westwood t-shirt with a Tom of Finland graphic on it. "Imagine some banker coming home from the



Gay sex play in the hay was Tom's way



Authority never looked so good thanks to Tom of Finland



Lip locking leather dudes courtesy of Inked Kenny

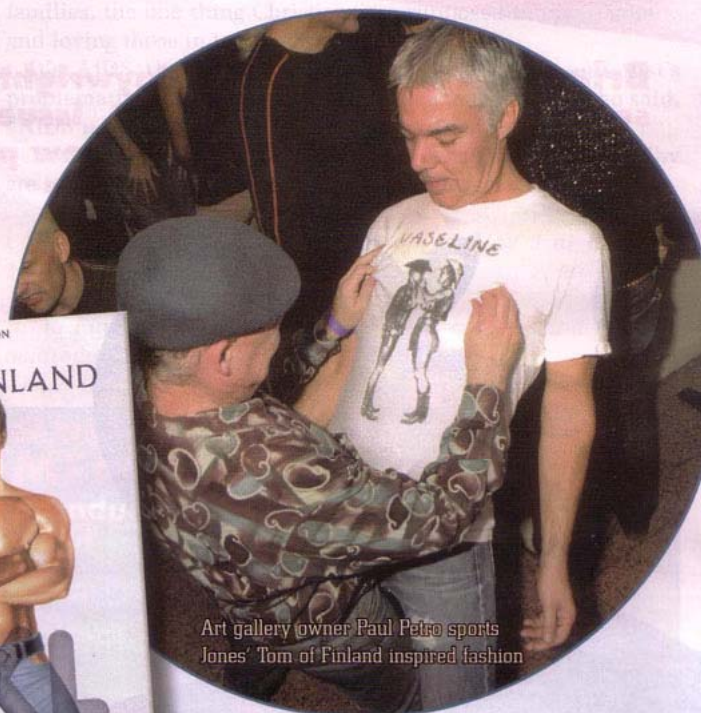
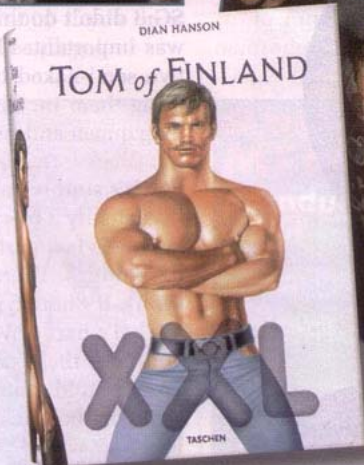
office and seeing Siouxsie Sioux walk by wearing a shirt with a drawing on it just like the ones he's got at home hidden under the bed," she muses. In her *Tom Girl* drawings Jones replaces Tom's masculine authority figures with their female foils. Although she does not self-identify as a lesbian, Jones is often called "The Lesbian Tom of Finland" and states that she is not so much influenced by Tom of Finland work but was rather "inspired to respond" to it and the potential conflict it presents. For Jones, the dangerous aspects of Tom's work lies in the fact that "pornography and erotica in mainstream culture function largely as reinforcement for hierarchies and Tom has done his part to eroticize authority."

AA Bronson, the only surviving member of the internationally famed queer arts collective *General Idea*, feels Tom of Finland impacted the history of the gay rights movement because he "demonstrated that it is possible to live without shame. In that sense he set the standards very high for the gay rights movement." But he quickly points out that "on the other hand, he was never an assimilationist and I think that at a certain point he became a bit of an embarrassment for the gay rights movement. Nevertheless, he stuck to his guns, and rightfully so."

While some say Tom's work has a dangerous fascistic element in its depiction of an unattainable, exaggerated male body type, Bronson believes differently. "Tom is never cold or inhuman, quite the opposite. Especially when you see the original drawings, the warmth and humanity of his vision becomes apparent. In fact no one is perfect, everyone is exaggerated in their masculinity and in the end pleasure and relationship are always primary," insists Bronson. "It's

funny, I find Tom a complete joy. I don't feel the need to judge him, I just enjoy him. But I don't think I really appreciated him until I saw his pencil drawings for the first time — they are sublime." The old saying goes that "the Devil is in the details," but perhaps Bronson is right: in the case of Touko Laaksonen's, maybe the angels are in the graphite.

Tom of Finland's work remains challenging, influential and exciting to many of Toronto's queer artists who each have a complex relationship to his work and its place in gay history. Regardless of personal or political taste, over the span of his career Tom has emerged from his hiding place under the beds of men in the '50s to take residence on the art gallery walls of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Whether looking for an art history lesson or some visual stimulation for those quiet for those nights at home alone, a copy of *Tom of Finland XXL* (if you can manage to lift it) can help uncover where he belongs in your personal history.



Art gallery owner Paul Petro sports Jones' Tom of Finland inspired fashion

*Tom of Finland XXL is available in hardcover now from Taschen publishing, \$200. Info: [taschen.com](http://taschen.com)  
 For info on Sky Gilbert's latest play I Have AIDS! see page 18  
 John Greyson's new film Fig Trees screens Fri May 1 as a part of the Hot Docs Film Festival at 9:15pm at the Bloor Cinema, 506 Bloor St W. Info: [hotdocs.ca](http://hotdocs.ca)  
 G.B. Jones shows as part of the group show Slipstream from May Fri 29 until Sat June 27 at Paul Petro Contemporary Art, 980 Queen St W. Info: [paulpetro.com](http://paulpetro.com)  
 For more of Inked Kenny's kinky photographs visit [kinkedkenny.com](http://kinkedkenny.com)  
 For more information on General Idea and AA Bronson visit [aabronson.com](http://aabronson.com)  
 Alistair Newton is a playwright, director, writer and a fan of salacious gay art and Toronto's bent artists.*