

THE EVOLUTION OF EROTIC ART WITHIN THE WORLD OF TOM OF FINLAND

I was 26 and living in New York City when I first met the artist Etienne (real name Dom Orejudos). We immediately became pals and I asked him about the artist whose image was on a flyer (promoting a motor cycle run) I had in the pocket of my black leather jacket. I'd swiped it off the bulletin board at the Spike Bar the night before.

One glance and he replied, "That's by Tom of Finland."

"It's amazing," I responded; "So powerful and sexy."

"I can give you his address in Finland if you want to write him," Etienne said. He did, and I wrote the first fan letter of my life. One year later, in 1977, I was living in Los Angeles with Tom of Finland as my houseguest.

Tom's initial exhibitions in America were about to take place, the first at San Francisco's Feyway Gallery, run by Robert Opel. Tom, Etienne — who by now had become my close buddy — and I all went up for the opening. Etienne was negotiating with the gallery for his first show, as was an unknown photographer named Robert Mapplethorpe. That day was significant for many reasons, not the least being that it marked the beginning of a lifetime friendship between Robert, Tom, Etienne, and me.

Before long I found myself coordinating exhibitions for Etienne and Tom in other American cities, acting as an unpaid agent for my new idols of erotica. One of the first shows I arranged was with Louis Weingarten, one of my mentors from my New York City days. Louie, who owned the gallery Stompers, pushed me to enter my first leather contest and to start modeling. Stompers was an ultra-cool, underground operation: the front of the store was a used boot shop, and if you went into the backroom through a black cloth curtain there was a gallery where he showed works by Tom and Etienne.

Word got out, and soon Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, and an elite cross-section of the underground art scene made it down for a look. I gradually realized that to continue along this path and secure all of our best interests, my artist friends and I would have to approach it as a business. So Tom and I became incorporated, partners in a new company bearing his name. We hired an employee to run the day-to-day operation from my house, and began to produce magazine-type books and prints of Tom's work for com-

mercial sale.

Over time, the business that Tom and I started became a small but successful operation. We sold original art through mail-order and set up exhibitions for Tom across America, gradually transitioning from underground venues to upscale galleries, like Feature in New York City, where Tom's work was exposed to a new wave of contemporary collectors. Society had begun to recognize the artistic value of Tom's work despite the fact that his subject matter was still taboo in mainstream culture. They couldn't seem to dismiss him, and so we took the next step and established the non-profit Tom of Finland Foundation for the preservation and furtherance of erotic art. Tom and I used money from our company to promote the non-profit foundation. It was our child and we wanted it to grow to be strong and healthy. We never dreamed its reputation would eventually surpass that of the commercial company that printed his books and posters, and basically made it all possible.

Tom passed in 1991 at his home in Finland, but before he died, a few more landmarks were established. Tom, slowing dying from emphysema, told me he regretted that he was barely known in his homeland, so I made it my business to see what I could do to change that. There were signs that the timing was right to further expand Tom's reputation.

Otava Press, the Finnish publishing house, saw one of the Foundation's Tom of Finland retrospectives in a London art bookstore and contacted us about doing a biography on Tom, who until then had been completely unknown to average Finns. During this same time a Finnish filmmaker, Ilppo Pohjola, came to us with a desire to do a documentary about Tom. Then we sought out a reputable gallery in Helsinki to have a one-man exhibition for their native son. Confined to his home, too ill to travel to America anymore, Tom became the Finn's favorite son almost overnight. He lived to see his documentary aired on Finnish television and the explosion of articles on him that accompanied the release of his biography, written by the Foundation Director, Valentine Hooven.

When his one-man show opened, several pieces were acquired by the Kiasma, the national museum of contemporary art. A representative from Tom's birthplace purchased one image as well, to be displayed in its Town Hall.

With Tom gone, it fell on me to oversee everything he and I worked on together. It has been 14 years since he left us, and I still miss the bastard. That was a word Tom called himself, sort of an endearment...

I wish that Tom was around to enjoy his legacy. He would love the diversity that flourishes in his name, from huge circuit parties at venues like Roseland in New York City to more intimate, underground gatherings where men bare their butts for a silly but liberating contest.

Tom would relish it all—he always liked raw, unpretentious events where guys could be themselves and just have a great time.

The enterprise that Tom and I started years ago in simpler times has evolved into two diverse entities. Although they overlap in purpose, there are two components: the commercial branch, which includes Tom's Men and Tom's Parties, and the non-profit Tom of Finland Foundation, whose stated mission is to protect, preserve, and promote erotic art. The foundation of both is built on Tom's legacy as an artist, and as a cultural force, a legacy whose value will continue to increase with time. Once, Tom of Finland was accessible only in a plain brown envelope or in the back rack of newsstands. Today, Tom's work is in the finest collections, including the Permanent Collections of major museums such as LACMA and the Museum of Modern Art. Erotic art, because of its outsider status, is vulnerable to illegal duplication and unlicensed usage; the Foundation has made major strides in securing all rights and licensing for Tom's art, a major problem during his lifetime. The lessons we learned in reclaiming Tom's work and establishing legal copyrights to protect his intellectual rights have served us well with other artists who have come to the Foundation for guidance.

The foundation is now celebrating two decades as a non-profit. Much has been accomplished in the last 20 years, and much remains to be done. The Foundation hosts two art fairs per year, one in Los Angeles and one in New York City, equal opportunity venues which provide new artists with a forum to show their work, and offer veteran, regional artists an opportunity to keep in touch with their fan bases. And every other year,

the Emerging Erotic Artist Competition offers aspiring talent a chance to have their work evaluated by a panel of critics, with the possibility of winning a cash prize and gaining valuable exposure. The Foundation actually does what its mission statement promises: it preserves, protects, educates, and promotes erotic art worldwide.

We have come a long way, from exclusion to inclusion, and from obscurity to acceptance. Tom's art, once taboo, is now prized and coveted by major institutions and collectors. Once seen only in the back-pages of niche publications like *Physique Pictorial*, Tom's work is now published in deluxe large-scale format by mainstream publishers such as Taschen, who will release a new volume later this year.

All of this happened because a shy Finnish man had a desire to capture the beauty and pride of the male in drawings and send it out into the world to others of like mind. Then, in collaboration with a young guy from a cowpoke town in Alberta, Canada, and a devoted army of believers, a movement was born whose momentum endures to this day. I wish Tom could be here to see it. It was our hope and dream that the world would recognize the treasure trove of art existing with thousands of erotic artists around the globe documenting human sexuality and sensuality, each from his or her own unique perspective. Keeping this dream alive and growing is now the focus of my life, my covenant with Tom and all the other artists who made it not only possible, but essential. Your donations and physical support of the Foundation is crucial towards securing its long-term future.

Can anyone think of another artist whose work has evolved from sexual arousal fodder kept under men's beds to highly collectible art kept in museums? That is the groundbreaking legacy of Tom of Finland, but I don't want Tom to be the only one to reach this plateau, just the first. If you ever travel to Finland, you may meet the men of Tom of Finland, or you may not; but if you give yourself a chance and share some beers with the Finns you will recognize much of what is within Tom's work.

It's in their nature.

— Durk Dehner

On our cover: This **Image of the Year** was selected by our Board to represent the Foundation for our promotional materials during 2005. Created by Tom, this original graphite *working drawing is being auctioned* – with a final closing date of November 30, 2005 and can be previewed at both of our Erotic Art Fair Weekends. This exceptionally collectible piece of art will include a copy of each poster in which it is used this year. For details, check our website or call the Foundation.

Every artist has his muse.

Édouard Manet had his Olympia. Salvador Dali had his Gala.

Pet Silvia has Pet Silvia, a cross between Marcel Duchamp's Rose Selavy and Barry Humphries' Dame Edna Everage.

We caught up with the multi-tasking artist, curator, crossdresser and social gadfly as he prepared for a trip to Seattle in his role as Head Curator of the Third Annual Seattle Erotic Art Festival. Whether the trip will inspire a new series of images featuring Pet in flannel amongst the tall timber of the American Northwest only time will tell.

His name is Pet, but no one has him on a leash.

Briefly, what is the mission statement and basic genesis of your exhibition space, Art @ Large? [630 Ninth Avenue, No. 707, New York, NY 10036, Phone: 212.957.8371]

My wife, Tammey Stubbs, & I started Art @ Large as an extension of the freelance design business that she started originally. We both have major backgrounds in art, design and production, and in fine art. When we quit our day gigs about 5 years ago, we renovated our studio space and put up some extra walls — mostly to hide Pet's studio from commercial clients. I had curated gallery shows for several years before that, mostly at the Sacred Body Art Gallery, which was in the basement of a tattoo parlor on Canal Street in NYC. So we just started the gallery exhibiting works that we felt needed to be shown, and it just kept growing. It still is. We've been a gallery for 4 years.

This is your Barbara Walters question. Who is PET SILVIA? Is there any separation between the private citizen, public artist and gallery curator, and the curious woman who appears in your artwork? Please map out the intellectual domain known as PET SILVIA.

It really isn't that complicated. My artist statement all these years has been: "I'm a nice boy who enjoys being a naughty girl in front of a camera". It started in 1993 because I couldn't find a nude model to replace the woman I was using for 10 years previously. So I started using myself. And in doing so, I started to explore my sexuality. The whole process evolved to try to answer the questions of what's art, what's porn, what's masculine, what's feminine. I still search for those answers in my work. I've said it many times too — it's all about me! You just don't give yourself to the work in this way, and expect not to open your life up to scrutiny. If I should become more famous, I'm prepared to take those consequences, because this whole process is about me. What the viewer gets from it is for themselves: Could I do that? Could I look like that? When I did street performances "in costume", the people who got the biggest thrill and wanted autographs were middle-aged, overweight women. They just wanted to know where they could find lingerie like that because it would fit them, and make them feel pretty, and turn on their husbands.



18

I don't consider myself a private citizen or public artist, (least of all public!) And I grew into using the name Pet in my 'gallerist' business because far more people know me by that name after 10 + years. I also believe that for my work, the model is much more important in what 'her' role is, than in what my role as the artist is. The model is who the viewer sees first, and formulates opinions, misgivings, hate, or joy about. As a curator and gallerist, (I don't care for the word art dealer), I promote the careers of our 'crew', as I would my own work. This too has grown into a full time job 24/7. I wouldn't do this if I didn't believe in their work, and who they are as people... try to get them some money for the sales of their work, so they can keep body and soul together. It ain't easy, but it's very rewarding to do this.



Most of the artists exhibited by Art @ Large are classified as "erotic artists." Would you describe yourself thusly, and do such classifications limit the audience and affect the response to the work?

Contrary to what you think, we all really hate the 'E' word. It's just so non-descript with people who are familiar with the context, and it conjures up the wrong impression with people who would be more objective to it as art. Our mission is to get people interested in this work because it's good art. We still use the 'E' word to attract those that are attracted to it. We also use the words Figurative art, or Neo-Erotic, but mostly we use "Art That Excites". What's happening more and more is people responding to that. I hear it all the time, "Oh, you don't really show work that is tasteless, it's quite accomplished." Some of the artists are more edgy than others. Some of my own work is more edgy than other aspects of it, but I try to explore all the possibilities, all the levels of sexuality, and the body as subject. And by the same token, just because it's naked, doesn't mean it's good. I get so tired of fetish photography, because there are very few artists who can do it with a total original flair.

If you could curate your dream exhibition, at any venue, with any artist, living or dead, who would be included, and where would it be held?

I'm already doing that. I'm living my dream with these exhibitions. I'm taking the words of Joseph Campbell, "follow your bliss" and doing what I was put here to do. It wasn't so long ago that I looked toward the works of the major art underground, and admired artists like Annie Sprinkle, Spider Webb, Charles Gatewood, Tom of Finland, Etienne, and Luger, and I've exhibited all of them already. But to answer your question, a goal of mine is to curate all of these people I represent and have an entire floor devoted to their work at a Whitney Biennial. That would be a major accomplishment.

Your wedding was held at the Museum of Sex. Where was the honeymoon? In the window of Bloomingdale's?

No, never did Bloomie's. We did do lots of window displays for Sony and Ann Taylor on Madison Ave. But our honeymoon was a driving tour of the southwest. Rented a car in Las Vegas, and did Grand Canyon, Zion National Park. Went to see lots of Native American art from southern Utah to Santa Fe. Drove about 3,000 miles in 3 weeks. It was nice to be un-Manhattan for a while. Met a lot of fun people along the way.

If everyone is beautiful, what happens to ugly?

Contemporary art is ugly. Extremely ugly!

Has Pet ever been leashed?

Hey, it's all in the work.

All right, maybe he's been on a leash, but one thing is assured: this Pet will never be neutered.

[See Pet and his work at our NYC Fair in May.]

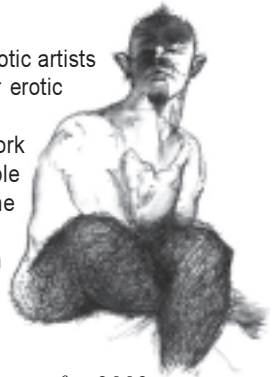
[Images 17 & 18 are available through the Erotic Art Gallery on the next page.]

EMERGING EROTIC ARTIST CONTEST 2005

Every two years the Foundation starts a quest to bring unknown erotic artists to the public's attention. This competition invites artists to submit their erotic work for the world to view — and a chance to win some great prizes.

The contest is open to artists that have not *sold* any erotic artwork — our definition of a "professional erotic artist". So — whether people are amateur or professional artists — if they haven't made-the-scene as a "professional" they are warmly welcomed to participate.

Check out website or call the Foundation for details and an application form. See our masthead on page 11 for contact information.



Satyr by Steam (Israel), 2002, Pen and brush, 18 x 25 cm.,

1st place winner in the Fantasy category for 2003