

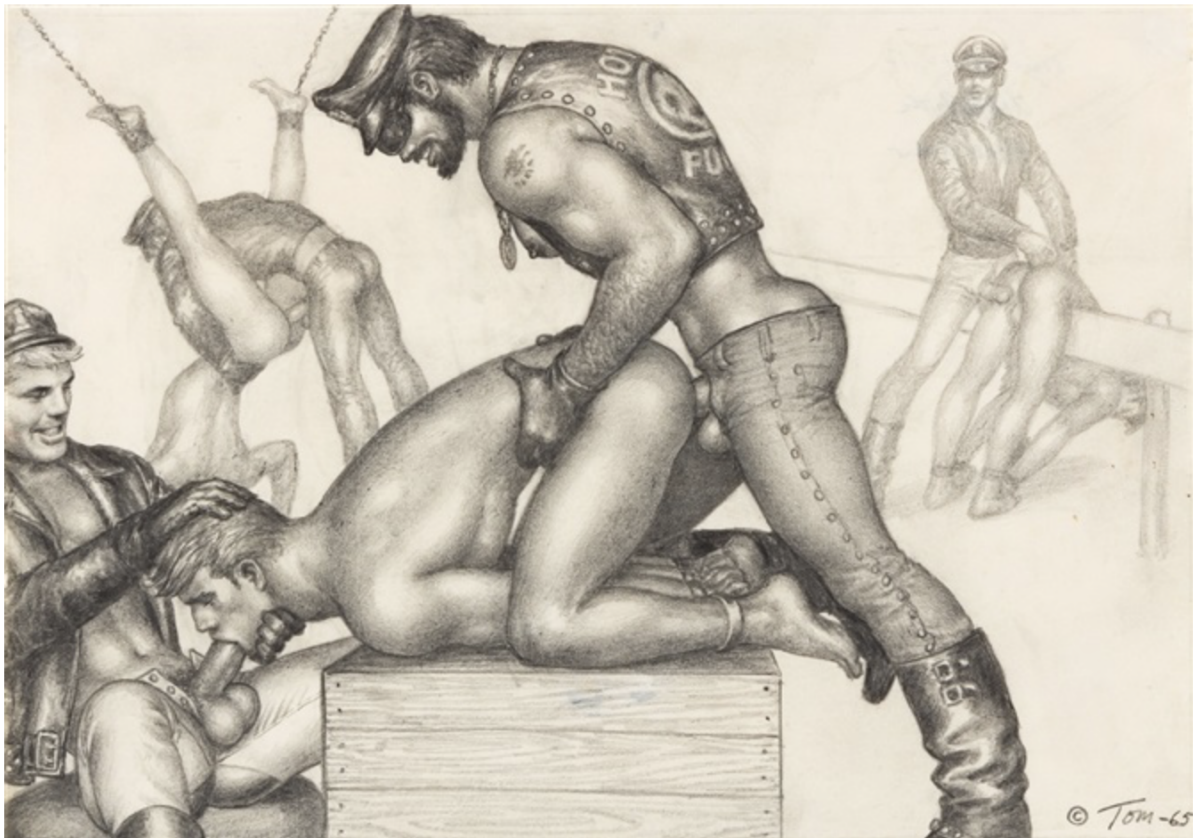
Applying a range of critical theories, identify and discuss an artwork of your own choosing

Tom Of Finland : A Symbol of Sex and Masculinity

Semiotics in terms of visual art and culture is a perplexing topic, the study, knowledge and understanding of symbols in regards to our senses. Notwithstanding, our sight upon a work of art is only one sense out of five. In other perspectives our hearing, taste, smell and touch enhances our philosophy and understanding of the world around us and the symbolic references it holds. Erotic art throughout history, particularly the twentieth century, has always held symbols when utilised by different artists and mediums. With symbols come positive and negative connotations throughout time and culture. These connotations leave the mind wondering and question their own symbolics of sex and erotica in a world where it is under represented.

“Sportive gentlemen, lascivious ladies: Since the earliest days of photography, people have been getting up to all manner of rannygazoo in front of the lens.”

[Rotenberg, M.L. (2000) Forbidden Erotica : The Rotenberg Collection. Pg. 1]



[Figure 1. Laaksonen, T. 'Tom Of Finland' (1968) 'Untitled' Graphite On Paper]

This untitled work by Tom Of Finland is a clear example of symbolism and semiotics. The whole idea of the 'Leatherman' has become a synonymous persona of the queer and fetish

communities widespread throughout the world. Looking deeper at the image the idea of eroticism through fetishism and clothing brings that masculine sense to the image. This in itself is a good example of symbolism in the way we see art. Tom Of Finland's work and particularly this piece adds a layer of subculture which is highly important when identifying semiotics because we see things through our own cultures, experiences and perspectives.

To many this would just be a shock image with extreme sexual acts taking place, but to a minority of queer people who have been shunned throughout history this image entails a lot more into our perceptions.

The composition of the image purposefully features the male body in different angles to show off the intensity of the underlying connotations of sex. In today's world masculinity and the physique of men has completely changed and Finland could be credited responsible for the queer culture's depiction of a 'leatherman'. This could be commended as a very big sex symbol within twentieth century pop-culture bringing in communities of queer individuals together to form a group identity. The idea of a 'Leatherman' was a contrast from what queer men symbolised to mainstream society in the twentieth century. The graininess of the graphite adds a definite vintage flair which holds a mediation, a first of many, about Finland's idea of the male figure and body and involves in being texture filled, especially within the erotic clothing that the men are in. The way he has drawn this holds elements of dominance and promiscuous findings.

"In a world that insisted gay men were sissies, Tom did the unthinkable, portraying them as confident, macho and aggressive."

[Finland, T and Hanson, D. (2022) Dian Hanson: The Little Book Of Tom Of Finland 'Bikers'. Pg. 78]

This tells us that Finland was living in a post-war time different to our own, that homosexuality within Europe was a complete taboo from the rest of the world and has seen many discriminatory legal actions against queer individuals. It wasn't something spoken about openly, but Finland decided to follow his heart and his heart and create work that addressed his suppressed sexuality, this can be argued that it led to mediations about homosexuals. The consequences and perceptions of war and men drafting into militaries across Europe had hindered the view of what masculinity is in order to get populations of people to subscribe to 'what being a man is'. Even today masculinity is a heavily debated topic and depending on our biases it will sway across culture to culture in variations all with their own pressures.

Upon further analysis of the artwork the mediations I personally get as a queer man looking from one century to the other is that this image conjures up feelings of the taboo and shunned sides of society in relation to sexual content and eroticism. This directly collides with another mediation I get being masculinity and the challenges that the world may put on it to follow the rules of what is expected and what is 'normal'. Finland's work portrays men as exaggerations and plays with their proportions in order to be sexually appealing. But would this apply to someone that is from a completely different background to Finland? However, upon further study of the artwork there is no relation to where these men are from, there is nothing directly political about what they are doing in terms of world affairs. He has almost carefully crafted these men in his own image pioneering instead the politics around men engaging in sexual acts with men, not the men themselves.

“Oil Paintings often depict things. Things which in reality are buyable. To have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in your house. If you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents.”

[Berger, J and Dobb, M (2008) Ways Of Seeing. Pg. 83]

Berger talks about oil painting as not just a technique but an artform. As it was developed when there was a demand for such things within its roots of society. With oil painting comes connotations and symbolism because of its use within religious art and the high ruling class of the fifteen hundreds in Europe. This is evident in its need for producing images of a specific world view into our world, real life. It heavily relied on the idea of artistic rules within its practice, in a way, its own visual language. This can be linked to Finland's work because he primarily worked in one visual style which he made his own using ink or graphite. Maybe it's the stylisation of the images that make the viewers gaze to a symbolism of sex and power.

Much like oil painting and the way Berger speaks about it, Finland's primary work and his medium could be considered to be needed at the time, but only from his specific experience and perspective of things. This usually symbolises the intentions and ideology of a ruling class, But in contrast Finland's work focuses on his own singular ideology which he heavily influenced on others. His repressed sexual feelings towards men was a direct opposite to the ruling class of the time. Meaning that a key mediation of his work to the viewer is the need for sexual gratification or giving into one's fantasies, it's a rebellion.

Another symbolic theme within this specific work of Finland's is the line between domination and masculinity which directly is stuck within a parallel of itself. This concept of sadism and masochism is a theme in his work which symbolises control, dominance and supremacy within sexual relations in the leather and fetish community. The fine line between pleasure and pain which some will find obscene and others would find it blissful. The men in the artwork are depicted as enjoying themselves in a lustful bounty of affairs between each other, the wisp-like and delicate dynamic lines which completely is overridden by what they are doing.

“That of falling victim to love, losing one's supremacy and independence, becoming the docile slave of the beloved, no longer hunter but prey.”

[Zuffi, S. (2010) Love and the Erotic in Art. Pg. 266-267]

Zuffi talks about the theme of sadism in art as a mild depiction of oneself losing their free-will which in this particular Finland work is a key theme as it features imagery of heavy BDSM and depictions of fantasy intercourse. This has semiotics in terms of Finland's own depiction of man dominating man which directly parallels the misogynistic strains of mainstream culture that exist even until today. The choice of featuring multiple figures in different acts gives the work movement and symbolises the physical feeling of pain and touch one might receive in a sexual act within his universe. His own depiction of the world around him. A struggle for power between love and romance in a society that doesn't hold it in high favour.

This finalises Finland's ability to symbolise his own morales and his own mind on a canvas.

He sees the world this way because the 'Leatherman' addresses his own perception of himself as a homosexual. Especially being way ahead of his time in terms of societal rules.

He engineered his own artwork to create a persona for a small group of queer men to embrace, which became a widespread phenomena around these communities in Europe and eventually the USA. It has become an iconic and timeless face of the fetish community. A symbol of hope and fantasy for those who wish to give into their desires. One will see his work and be left with questions, the main question being, what connotations does this leave them with, Is it just mindless porn, or a stroke of genius.

Figures

Figure 1. Laaksonen, T. "Tom Of Finland" (1968) Untitled

Source: Finland, T and Hanson, D. (2022) Dian Hanson: The Little Book Of Tom Of Finland 'Bikers'

<https://unitom.co.uk/products/the-little-book-of-tom-bikers>

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