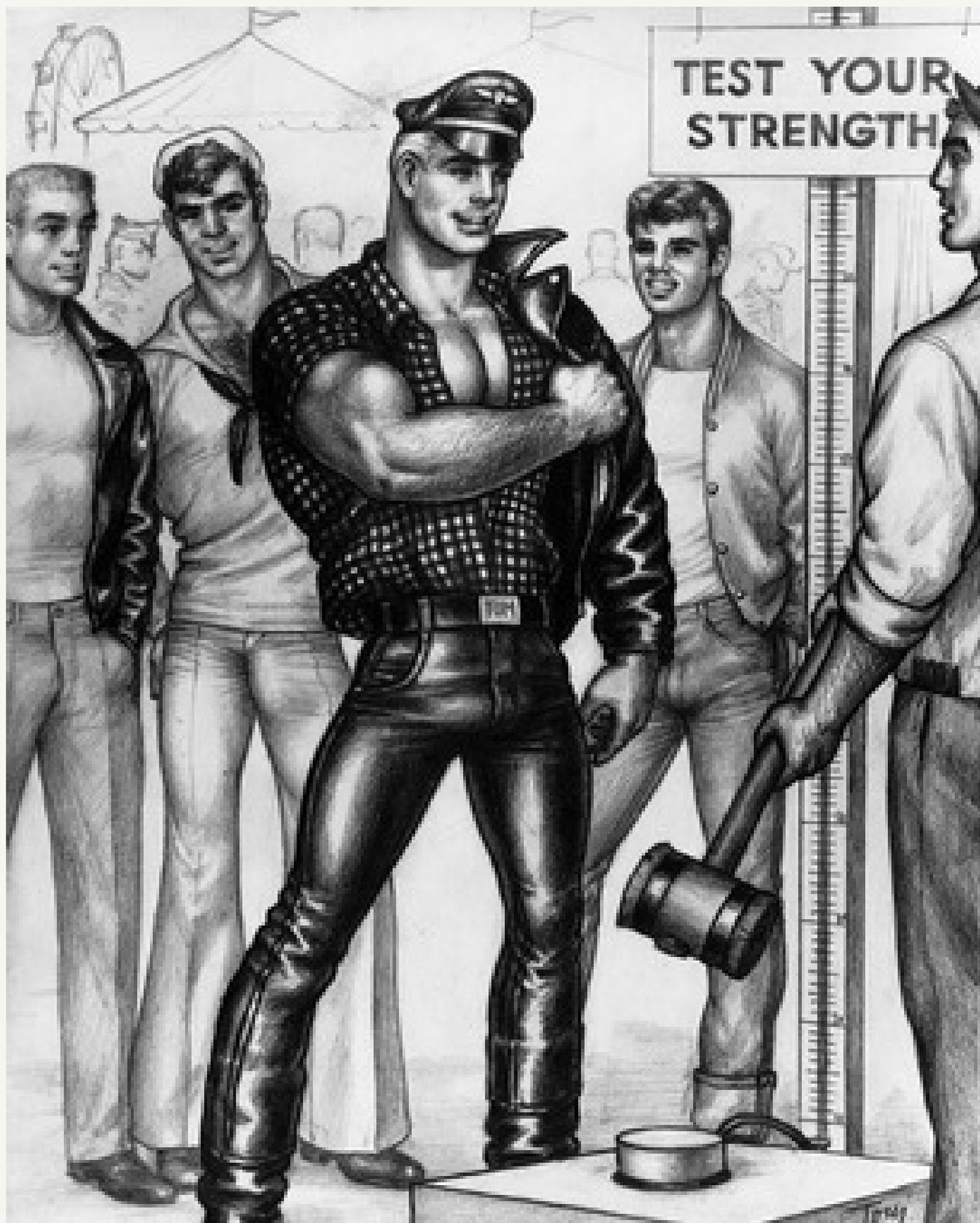


## Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland at MOCA

A retrospective on the work of two of the most influential figures in post-war homoerotic art

by **Yale Breslin**  
on 01 November 2013





Tomorrow, 2 November, the [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles \(MOCA\)](#) will unveil [Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland](#), an exhibition profiling the works of [Bob Mizer](#) (1922–1992) and [Touko Laaksonen](#), aka [Tom of Finland](#) (1920–1991). Organized by MOCA curator Bennett Simpson and guest co-curator Richard Hawkins, the exhibition showcases two artists whose works were focused on the erotic. Hawkins, a contemporary artist who worked for the Tom of Finland Company in the early '90s (and also happened to be a longtime fan and part-time collector of Bob Mizer), spoke with CH about the upcoming exhibition.

This exhibit features two of the most significant figures of 20th century erotic art. Why did now seem like a good time to present this exhibit?

It was fortuitous, actually. MOCA had just acquired two amazing Bob Mizer works for their permanent collection at a moment when [MOCA Curator] Bennett Simpson was beginning to make a few visits to the Tom of Finland Foundation with an eye, I think, for also adding some Tom of Finland drawings to the museum's collection. Though initially two unrelated activities, once the museum realized that the two artists worked so closely for so many years, it became obvious that an exhibition was imminent.



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**I know there will be unseen catalogue boards in the exhibition. Can you tell me a little bit about this?**

There are 30 or more of Mizer's catalogue boards in the exhibition. While not the most obvious choice, they show in a static format the sheer enthusiasm with which Mizer approached his practice. They also fit well with pages from Tom of Finland's resource binders—of which there are 12 in the show, the largest presentation ever shown of Tom's collages. As a collage artist myself I'd have to admit that this was one focus for the show very early on. For Tom's collages at least, you'll be able to see evidence of an artist being within his own contemporary culture but refusing to be determined by its mandates, restrictions and prejudices.

**It seems like a very progressive exhibition. Was there any hesitation with it?**

None at all. Bennett and I agreed early on that we shouldn't hold back for the sake of showing within a public context that might be, arguably, much more conservative than the private domain in which these works were originally distributed. Both of these artists' works were about sex and were meant to primarily stimulate and induce sex. To forget that, or to edit that out or to portray the work in a less explicit light would seem to be a betrayal of the works' intentions.





**Besides being two significant individuals in their dedication to homoerotic art, what is it about these two figures that synergizes when their creations are side by side?**

Mizer himself was an early pre-Stonewall advocate in the pages of "Physique Pictorial" for self-determined rights, whether those rights be about the distribution and possession of illicit materials or his early support of the Mattachine Society. But, the most important thing to remember is that both Bob Mizer and Tom of Finland worked in a time when the images they were producing were always under the threat of prosecution. Nonetheless, they both seemed to thrive on the idea that sex is not only worth portraying but also worth pursuing and stimulating and advocating—no matter its contemporary criminality. Surely, they seemed to believe something as important and fun would one day be legal.

**As they both have an extensive archive of work, what was the curation process like?**

I think you'll find a number of well-recognized favorites for all the longtime fans, but also a few amazing discoveries. The Tom of Finland resource binder collages have rarely been shown and I believe this is the largest presentation of them ever displayed. The Mizer catalogue boards [have] recently been shown but never in such quantity. Editing was difficult, obviously, but Bennett's and my concentration seemed to be less dedicated to range and versatility and more about consistency and integrity of vision. For Mizer, as an example, there always seemed to be a return to a storyline where media—whether it be broadcast television, Hollywood films or store bought magazines—seemed magically to come to life. Through this, the impulse to generate your own culture rather than be dominated by the one given you seemed to be one of Mizer's most important messages.

**What is the overall message of this show?**

A lot of advances on the road to a more liberated position in the world have been made by insisting—and stimulating—our erotic selves. Call it porn if you want, but it provided a lot of fuel for the rights that we enjoy today.

*Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland opens tomorrow, 2 November, and will run until 26 January 2014.*

*Images courtesy of Bob Mizer Foundation and Tom of Finland Foundation*



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