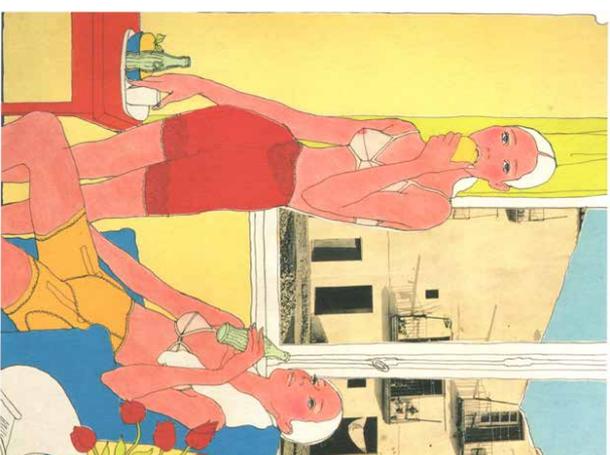




THE POLITICS OF

The political impact of illustration on culture and society can be subtle and dramatic. **ZOE TAYLOR** examines two different visual approaches to political issues in the work of fashion illustrator **ANTONIO LOPEZ**, and **TOM OF FINLAND**

STYLE



Antonio, Frenchie Eve, 1966. Courtesy of the Antonio Lopez Foundation

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), the media theorist Dick Hebdige writes of the practice of resistance through style. "Although he is referring specifically to the way in which subcultures challenge the dominant culture by subverting its signs and investing them with new meanings, the idea captures what's at stake in the work of Antonio Lopez and Tom of Finland."

Antonio Lopez and Tom of Finland. Lopez not only resisted but, in the words of his close friend artist Paul Carravacis, "burst" for all time: the Anglo-Caribbean mryopia which dominated fashion until his arrival." Born in Puerto Rico in 1943, he moved to New York with his family at the age of seven and rose to fame in the 1960s. Twenty-seven years after his death, he continues to be regarded as the most influential fashion illustrator of the late 20th century. I recently spoke to Carravacis, who is now the president of the Antonio Lopez Foundation, to find out more.

It should be noted that although drawn by Antonio Lopez and simply signed 'Antonio', much of the work was made in collaboration with his creative partner, Juan Ramos. Many of their favourite models were became icons including Pat Cleveland, Cheri Markland and Donyale Luna of Asian. Carravacis points out that Lopez and Ramos "were among the very first to introduce people of colour into a world that had not acknowledged their existence before, other than as an oddity or a diversion." "This wasn't always welcome. "Some editors, particularly the ladies at American *Vogue*," explains Carravacis, "were very critical of Antonio drawings because they did not fit in with the image the magazines wanted to convey. This was in the 1960s."

European editors, however, were more open-minded, and more more so than Anna Piaggi, who, as editor of *L'Espresso* in the 1980s, gave Antonio complete creative freedom. See, for instance, the 1983 illustration that shows black women dancing together, some wearing the controversial zoot suit and with obvious fashion underlines. Lesser known are the photographs he inserted into

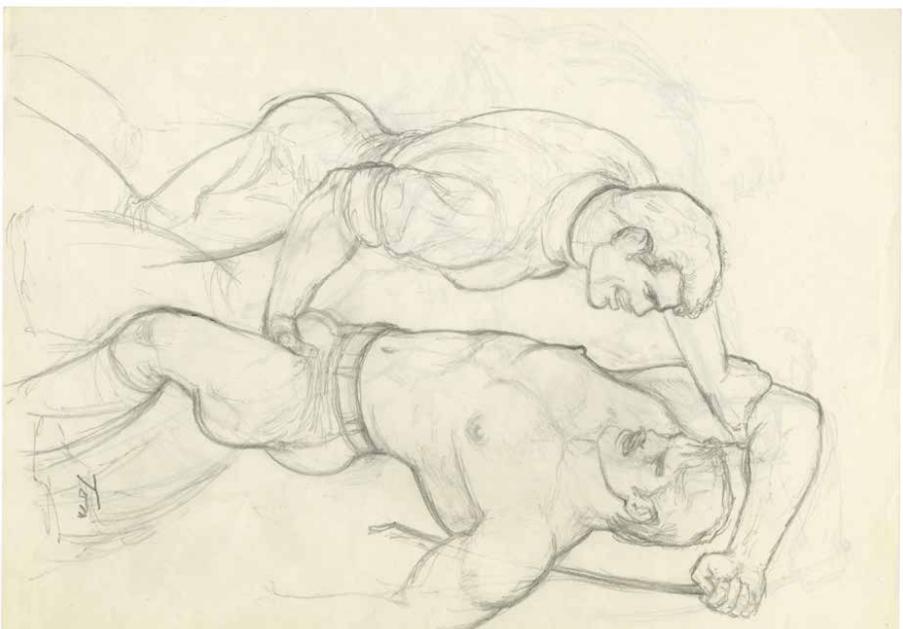
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his drawings, such as those of r downtown houses passed behind the two broad-looking white girls in the 1966 lingerie illustration (p59), made for French *Elle*. Carravacis recalls how the illustration was originally submitted with a photograph showing police brutality at the civil rights protest in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. But because of similar illustrations submitted to *The New York Times*, "I think that the background was changed, and they compiled." But a number of drawings did get published with photos of urban tower blocks or workers in the background, contrasting "realness" with the fantasy of the drawings. Carravacis says, "This was Juan's idea. He wanted to contextualise the drawings they were doing for *The New York Times* magazine... with photographs of the workers on 7th Avenue."

Carravacis observes that such subtexts were probably not fully appreciated. "Any racial or sexual underlines and/or any substantial social commentary in their work before (the 1970s) would just not have been noticed by the public at large – although they may have been vaguely intimated by the perceptive viewer. However, he says, "over the gay revolution of the final 1970s in, Antonio began to explore the subtextual messages in his work as Alex Katz and Andy Warhol recognised an agenda, or at least a substantial message that far exceeded the criteria of simple fashion illustration."

Last September, I attended a discussion at London's ICA, Art vs. Illustration, which opened my eyes to these largely unknown political and social subtexts in Antonio's work and highlighted the power of illustration to influence culture. It formed the second half of *From Style to Substance: Tom of Finland and Antonio Lopez, a day of talks* organised as part of the exhibition *Keep Your Tanker Lumber! (Works on Paper)*.

The discussion of Tom of Finland alongside Antonio was fitting. Born Toekoo Laaksanen in 1929, Tom was, like Antonio, a gay artist working in commercial contexts. While Antonio sought to reconfigure the mainstream, Tom of Finland's work was made for the gay subculture.



Tom of Finland, Untitled, c.1978, untitled, signed, graphite on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Copyright Tom of Finland © Foundation. Courtesy Stuart Shaw, Modern Art, London

Tom of Finland's unabashed representations of gay men are regarded as precursors of the 1960s pride movements

Yes his stylised homoerotic drawings had major repercussions for both gay and straight culture. His new focus of gay masculinity visualised a hyper-masculinity that, as Camille Paglia noted, wrote "with the cultural legacy of Oscar Wilde, who promoted and flamboyantly embodied the androgynous aesthetic". Edward Laube-Spink has observed that Tom "altered the way gay men think about themselves and their bodies, and the way they dress, with dress and physical attributes that gay and straight men alike began to inhabit."

Inspired by Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1953) and the new spirit of nonconformity promoted by queer culture, Tom appropriated archetypes of straight masculinity – bikers, lumberjacks, cops, sailors – and recast them, first in suggestive narratives of queer desire for magazines such as *Physique Pictorial* in the late 1950s, then later (when censorship laws became less oppressive in the 1970s) in more explicitly explicit scenarios of liberated gay sex. These archetypal characters appear most abundantly in *Kate*, his comic series spanning from 1968 to 1986, which focuses on the sexual exploits of a motorcycle leatherman. Tom's drawings are considered to be the inspiration behind the leather scene and, more significantly, the subculture of the 1960s pride movements regarded as precursors of the 1960s pride movements. They were bold and politically charged at a time when, for instance, Supreme Court judges felt free to declaim homosexuality as "amoral".

Both artists' careers spanned the era of civil rights and gay liberation and so their individual influence perhaps should not be overplayed – a number of forces were at work. Nonetheless, their work shows the power of drawing practised commercially to reinvigorate and, through stylistic force, convince audiences of alternatives to the mainstream consensus – a practice that can be called "resistance through style."