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Resistance Through Style

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 aptly describes the achievements of Antonio Lopez and Tom of Finland.

Antonio's fashion illustrations not only resisted but, in the words of his close friend Paul Caranicas, buried 'for all time the Anglo-Caucasian myopia 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 Caranicas, 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 who became icons – including Pat Cleveland, China Machado and Donyale Luna and 'discoveries' such as Grace Jones – were black, Latino or Asian. Caranicas points out that Antonio and Juan '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. As Paul tells me: 'Some editors, particularly the ladies at American *Vogue*, were very critical of Antonio drawings because they did not "fit in" with the image the magazine wanted to convey. This was in the Sixties.'

European editors, however, were more open-minded and none more so than Anna Piaggi, who, as editor of *Italian Vanity* in the Eighties, 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 lesbian undertones.

Lesser known are the photographs he inserted into his drawings, such as those of rundown houses pasted behind the two bored-looking white girls in the 1966 lingerie illustration below, made for French *Elle*. Caranicas recalls how the illustration was originally submitted with a photograph showing police brutality at the civil rights protests in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. But he says of similar illustrations submitted to the *New York Times*: 'I think the juxtaposition was too much for the editors, who asked that the backgrounds be changed, and they complied.' 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. Caranicas 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.'

Caranicas observes that such subtexts were probably not fully appreciated: "Any racial or sexual undertones and/or any subliminal social commentary in their

work before [the Seventies] would just not have been noticed by the public at large – although they may have been vaguely intuited by the perceptive viewer.” However, he says, “Once the gay revolution of the mid-Seventies set in, Antonio began to be taken more seriously in art circles; artists such as Alex Katz and Andy Warhol recognised an agenda, or at least a subliminal 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 Timber Limber (Works on Paper)*.

The discussion of Tom of Finland alongside Antonio was fitting. Born Touko Laaksonen in 1920, 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. Yet his stylised, homoerotic drawings had major repercussions for both gay and straight culture. His new icons of gay masculinity visualised a hyper-masculinity that, as Camille Paglia noted, broke “with the cultural legacy of Oscar Wilde, who promoted and flamboyantly embodied the androgynous aesthete”. Edward Lucie-Smith has observed that Tom “altered the way gay men think about themselves” and “began to elaborate an identity type, 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 biker culture, Tom appropriated archetypes of straight manliness – 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 ecstatically explicit scenarios of liberated gay sex. These archetypal characters appear most abundantly in *Kake*, his comic series spanning from 1968 to 1986, which focuses on the sexual exploits of a moustachioed leatherman. Tom’s drawings are considered to be the inspiration behind the leather scene and, more significantly, his unabashed representations of gay men are regarded as precursors of the Sixties pride movements. They were bold and politically charged at a time when, for instance, Supreme Court judges felt free to declaim homosexuality as “immoral”.

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 reimagine and, through stylistic force, convince audiences of alternatives to the mainstream consensus: a practice that may be called ‘resistance through style’.

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