



# REX REQUIEM

## Corrupt Beyond Innocence His Life Before His Legend Became Myth

His Words and Thoughts

“Rex: Persona Non Grata”

—Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York

“The world of Rex excludes you  
or draws you in at your own risk.”

—*Drummer* magazine

“My drawings define who I became.  
There are no other ‘truths’ out there.”

—Rex

### 1

#### REX INVENTING REX

Art is a harsh mistress. Art asks everything of the artist. Art keeps the artist alive until all that is left of the artist is the art.

*Rexwerk*, the summary name of Rex’s beautiful book of forbidden sex, smacks of Germanic discipline, of American homomascularity, and of the authentic homosurreal art that imitates life the way, once upon a time, it was lived after midnight by men hunting other homomasculine men. Beginning in the 1960s, Rex helped create our gay culture that thrives on homoerotica because life enhanced

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK**





by the renewable energy of Eros is the best panacea for gay men wounded by homophobia. He was a product of his own will. His work was his life.

This isn't a history of Rex (1944-2024). It's a memoir. An archival memoir. A personal eulogy in which renegade Rex speaks for himself revealing a new autobiographical visibility to a midcentury founder of the gay gaze. With the passing of this self-generating genius, the curtain can go up on the dramatic adventure of his high-brow and low-down life.

How strange. How sad to be 85 and waking Rex, 80, the last of the red-hot pioneers. He leaves this editor of *Drummer* magazine the last man standing in the "Tontine of Leather" in what the profound Sam Steward, friend of Gertrude and Alice, dubbed the "*Drummer* Salon." Counting Rex, our vanishing circle disrupted art history, defied gay censorship, and entertained millions.

Our fraternity included a who's who of Stonewall-era inventors of the gay gaze: artist Tom of Finland, emphysema, 71; photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, AIDS, 42; poet Thom Gunn, heart attack from acute polysubstance abuse, 74; author Sam Steward, pulmonary disease and barbiturate addiction, 84; filmmaker Fred Halsted, suicide after death of lover, 47; Oscar Streaker Robert Opel, murder, 39; artist A. Jay Shapiro, AIDS, 56; photographer Lou Thomas, AIDS, 56; artist Bill Ward, AIDS, 69; filmmaker Wakefield Poole, 85; artist Olaf Odegaard, 59; author Larry Townsend, non-AIDS pneumonia, 77; videographer David Hurles, complications from drug-induced stroke, 78; and a few others like artist Dom "Etienne" Orejudos, AIDS, 58.

As editor-in-chief of *Drummer* from 1977 to 1980, I was privileged by the centrality of *Drummer* to review and publish and socialize with these trailblazers. How exciting it was in that first decade after Stonewall when these men arrived at my desk and unzipped their brilliant portfolios that, in fact, helped create *Drummer* and the very leather culture they celebrated. See a "Tom." Dress like Tom. See a "Rex." Fuck like Rex.

In his origin story, Rex legally renamed himself "Rex West" invoking Marlboro cowboys when "Rex King" might have been more

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apt because “Rex” in Latin means “King” and he, never a queen, ruled the wild kingdom of Rex World. It may as well have been called Rex Neverland because Rex, whose self-defining late-in-life portfolio was his *Peter Pan* series, was a Lost Boy. He claimed he ran away from home to the streets as soon as he could, first at age eight, and finally at sixteen. He carried the gay gene for *nostalgie de la boue*: the erotic attraction to blue-collar men, low-life culture, skid-row adventures, and ritual degradation—redeemed by the magical thinking of orgasm as male worship. He was a socially distant mystery wrapped in a leather jacket.

What I write about him is memory struck from our mutual lives after we met in 1978. He whose birth name has yet to be revealed—because “Rex West” is on his passport which also claims he was born in Connecticut—was not one of those Beau Brummell dandies who polish their boots with champagne. Rex pissed beer on his kinky boots. There’s a maxim in the closing line in John Ford’s cowboy film about outlaws, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” Rex worked hard at the mystique of his legend. But history seeks facts.

When word circulated that after he finally rejected the United States, he had suffered and died alone in the last of his many self-imposed exiles far away in poverty and obscurity in Amsterdam around April 1, 2024. I suspected, knowing him, always a tempestuous trickster, that news of his death was perhaps an elaborate April Fool’s joke, like Tom Sawyer faking his own drowning to see what the world had to say about him.

At the same time the San Francisco *Bay Area Reporter* published a brief obituary on Rex on April 10, the *New York Review of Books* published its May 9 issue with a cover drawing by Tom of Finland to illustrate its long cover essay, “Tom’s Men.” What Jarrett Earnest wrote about Tom, who inspired Rex, made the same point I’ve made for years in *Drummer* about Robert Mapplethorpe’s revolutionary contribution to art—which applies equally to Robert, Rex, and Tom.

“Tom of Finland’s [Robert’s, Rex’s] work has transformed from midcentury gay pornography to twenty-first-century art, but its

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troubling dimensions, as well as the ways it has creatively shaped the desires of a diverse range of queer people, cannot be ignored.”

During one of our long conversations when Rex asked me to wait until he died to write about him with permission to quote him, it was as if he wanted the surety of at least one designated mourner who had observed, interviewed, and published him from the start of his long career.

In the Dutch morgue, there were no collectors of *Rexwerk*. And as far as is yet known, there were no personal mourners. But for those dying with no kin in Amsterdam, the Lonely Funeral Project provides a volunteer poet to read a custom poem based on what the departed revealed of his life. What could a poet say about an artist who kept his life secret? About an autistic man who committed social suicide cutting off people, gay culture, and an American nation he felt had betrayed him?

Our lives and careers ran parallel. I am a participatory New Journalist who liked him and never saw a Rex drawing that was not perfection. To promote the struggling artist, I wrote about him in *Drummer* and other magazines from the 1970s through the *fin de siècle* and was a producer of his Berlin exhibit, *Rex Verboten* at the Gallerie/The Ballery, during Folsom Europe Fair, September 2016.

For years, we collaborated, and talked on and off the record, depending on his mood swings. He always addressed me like I was an audience. I listened. He told me, “My work is very dependent on my moods.” He was a genius on paper where as a pointillist artist with both a Rapidograph Pen and a 3.5mm Rotring Ink Pen—inking like a tattoo artist dotting human skin—he controlled the million ink dots that composed each drawing. He was not happy that he could not control, could not dot the i’s and cross the t’s, of the gay press. He always knew what he wanted to do and how he wanted to position himself for public consumption.

When shooting the *Rex Video Gallery: Corrupt Beyond Innocence* for him in 1989, I suggested we needed a bang-up final shot. He said, “Go for the Dot.” He was not being reductive. He was being essential. He showed me how he had used a photocopier to keep

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enlarging one small dot from one of his million-dot drawings until that one dot grew to fill the entire frame.

In fact, the ultimate Rex drawing is that Dot which sums him up.

To honor his art direction, I used my macro close-up lens to enlarge one dot of one picture, drilling down more each take, the dot becoming larger, shedding literal meaning for abstraction, until the entire screen was filled with one last shot of one huge perfect Rex Dot. Now I mourn his life has come to an end. Dot. Dot. Dot. Full stop.

In May 1996, Rex, was anxiously coping with his issues and intense mood changes around abandonment, trust, betrayal, control, and social withdrawal.

**Rex:** I know I've been terse with you about writing about me in gay magazines. I have no reason to suspect you of anything, but crazy things happen like when my fans don't destroy my letters to them. I destroy all my letters. When I let you publish my interview in your *Mapplethorpe* book [1994], I know it was absolutely quoted perfectly. It sounded like me as I was reading it. All the pauses, the commas, it was exactly the way I talk. It all came back to me. If you're talking to the BBC, then you can talk freely about me. Excellent stuff. That's a different context than writing something for a gay magazine.

If Alistair Cooke [BBC host of *Masterpiece Theater*] came over today, I'd sit right down and babble my head off.... If my life belongs anywhere, it belongs in an historical book, not in some porn smut gay rag. To sell gay magazines the editors want upbeat sexy articles. How many dogs did I suck and at what parties did I do it? And I don't live that kind of life. I want to be revealed in my best light. I've gotten neurotic about this. That's the way I am.

I don't really mind when JD writes about me in his *Trash* magazine (hundreds of issues 1975-2020) because no one really reads it. ["JD" was Rex's longtime friend, the vitriolic and aggressively reactionary conservative John Dagion

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(1935-2020) who retired from New Jersey to cruise young Mexican laborers at reststops in Republican Florida near the same time Rex fled to Amsterdam.] JD's written more about what I've done and where I've been in life than anyone, and nobody actually sees it. He knows everything. I really think the man is a saint in a way. His porn is the best and I don't think he is appreciated that much and I know he is sensitive to that so I try to support him. When you're 65 like he is, you're shaking anyway by just growing old. That's an age when it's hard to make new friends. Especially if you're in the sex business. He's basically retired. When I see him, I realize he's an old man. When you're growing old, you've got to take chances. We're all isolated. As I was saying to JD, you know, the world is coming to an end.

Someday historians will need to go through his zine. I told [our mutual friends] Trent [Dunphy] and Bob [Mainardi] that it's not that I mind you writing about me, but not while I'm alive. If you're going to write about what I've told you, put it in a book of interviews where it belongs. From my point of view, you've always respected me and you should show respect for me on this. Tell people that's just the way he is. Agreeable till he's not. Tell them, "When he's dead, we can print it. While he's alive, it isn't worth alienating him."

**Jack Fritscher:** So I've got to outlive Rex? That's a terrible bind we're both in. This is like after I interviewed Sam Steward in 1972, he told me I couldn't publish the interview until he was dead because he had to live off his stories [about Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Doctor Kinsey].

**Rex:** I don't wish you dead. Of course, I'm going to outlive you. I'll make sure of that.

**Jack Fritscher:** You're going to outlive me?

**Rex:** Absolutely.

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**Jack Fritscher:** You'll make sure of it? [Because he worked for the Mafia, I joked.] Have you taken a contract out on me?

**Rex:** No. No. No. We'll go on forever.

As an eyewitness monitoring his career, I had a constant human regard for him that often went unrequited. He was a voyeur who hated to be observed.

In the world of gay origin stories, Rex would not be the first gay teen escaping the closet of a bourgeois family home and rewilding himself as an outrageous outlaw with a new street name. Kafka, who liked to lick the legs of blond boys, said, "I am my stories." Rex, who liked to lick the legs of leathermen, said, "I am my drawings."

The self-possessed artist owned himself. He once told me during the many years we chatted for hours on the phone—when I took shorthand or recorded him by agreement—that he, who in his bestiary of men often drew horny canine companions, decided to call himself "Rex" because it was the perfect name for a dog who is man's best friend. When Rex was a bookish teenager suffering the existential pains of an abandoned pup, he dived into Nietzsche and may have read his line, "I have given a name to my pain and call it *dog*."

He repeatedly insisted he had been abandoned at birth—although, in a Greek-Dickensian plot twist, Oedipus Rex later said, in the 1990s, he reconciled with his mother whom he supported in a retirement home where she died and left him a fortune he lost in the stock market. He always concealed the 1944 year of his February 5 birthday which I calculated as closely as possible from his emails. On September 9, 2021, he wrote he was 78. On December 17, 2023, he wrote, "I'll be 80 in less than two months"

A born fabulist hellbent on controlling his narrative, he impeded his own entry into art history. Rumors he himself may have started had it he was the black sheep son of a United States senator. Or some industrial magnate. Or some Mafia boss. In his kitchen-sink drama, he claimed as a young boy he had to work alongside rough itinerant field hands on a tobacco farm in Connecticut. He said he was an orphan who became a double orphan when his adoptive stepparents

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died. He said he drifted to New York in the 1960s where he told me he was a kept boy in his twenties, had half a dozen lovers, and attended art school on the dime of a sugar daddy. His longtime friend Clyde Wildes has a photo of Rex standing like a fashion model outside the Ritz Hotel, Place Vendome, Paris, December 1965. Whether his tangled origin story was fact or fiction, you'd have to ask the man who shot Liberty Valance.

In 1975, he told the *Village Voice*, "I nearly died seven times. I've been chic and elegant. I've had a nervous breakdown. I've been in three institutions. I've ridden with motorcycle gangs.... I'm thirty years old."

After Rex died, a man who said Rex was once his lover told me that Rex, who was tending bar anonymously, told him he had been hired in the late 1960s as a staff artist for a cigar-chewing Mafia publisher who gave him the code name "Rex."

At the time of the 1969 riot at the Stonewall Inn owned and managed by the Mafia, Rex was twenty-five and living in Greenwich Village where gays interacted for mutual benefit with the Genovese crime family who owned most of the gay bars. Two years later, on March 29, 1971, Francis Ford Coppola began romancing pop culture into the sexy allure of the Mafia when he started shooting *The Godfather* on location in the streets of Lower Manhattan.

Rex recalling his first decade in Manhattan said, "I was in New York long before Stonewall. I think I went by, on the night it happened, to the bars on Christopher Street. It was just a little disturbance with people caught between the Mafia and the cops. It was the 60s, there was always a disturbance going on. At the time, no one paid much attention outside the Village. Then, my God, it mushroomed!

"During the next year," he said, "the gay press made a 'thing' out of it. It became like the landing of the *Mayflower*. There were only about a hundred people onboard, but a million people claim they're connected to Plymouth Rock like the six million who rioted at Stonewall.

"I had gone to the Stonewall once. It was a little dance bar and now a little coffee shop. I first read about it in the gay press that

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turned it into a political symbol. Basically the police arrested some people in a bar raid. It was no pivotal moment in history. Think of all us who were already out for years. We'd already pivoted with our work."

Rex was not married to the mob, but he may have fallen for some of the hot *guido* gangsters he met when he worked for Star Distribution. Star, the Mafia's main publisher and distributor of adult material, was paying Rex to draw covers and illustrations for its 1970s gay pulp-fiction series *Rough Trade*. During those years, 1976-1985, his home bar where he was often hired for specific tasks was the Mafia-owned Mineshaft. Rex who liked tough guys and their attitude might have picked up a Rexian sense of their Sicilian *omertà*, their code of silence, a gay *omertà* born out of the protection of the closet, in his refusal to talk about himself even under questioning.

Young Rex was too provocative, disruptive, and subversive for his own good. He had reason to protect himself. Like gayish playwright Alfred Jarry saying "shit" in Paris in 1896, and gay writer Lytton Strachey saying "semen" in Bloomsbury in 1908, Rex said "leather S&M" in New York in 1975. He was a modernist trying to make gay art new. When the Psychedelic 1960s exploded in a glitter bomb at the 1969 Stonewall riot, gay character changed. Rex helped embolden the new decade with his art. He became *persona non grata* for challenging the fixed horizon of short-sighted establishment homosexuals. Rex took them to the edge and pushed them over the edge.

Five years into his career, his shocking pictures debuted suddenly like thunder in the New York press on July 7, 1975, when journalist Richard Goldstein, interviewing Rex about his new gay gaze, attacked him with an exposé in the *Village Voice* and labeled him a "Naziphile" for drawing explicit scenes of leathersex and saying, "The greatest S&M trip in history was the Nazis."

To understand Richard Goldstein's hyperventilating investigation of Rex, consider the source. Goldstein, the *Voice* rock critic who in 1967 created a media scandal when he irked Paul McCartney by trashing *Sgt. Pepper* after listening to it on a broken stereo, was

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a closeted gay man struggling with his identity while married to a woman. He told *The Advocate* in 2015 that his life experience at that time was like, God help us, the *Boys in the Band*. With his gaze on that miserable horizon in 1975, it was four years before he came out in 1979.

Pirandello would have had a picnic with these two characters in search of authenticities in the mix of art and politics. In Rex's first media interview, why did he consent to play defendant to prosecutor Goldstein whose militant scorn was wrong for all his otherwise right reasons of anti-defamation vigilance? Whether Rex who called himself an anarchist was a Naziphile or a Nazi or a right-wing fascist conservative or not, the postmortem answer lies not in Goldstein's confusions, but in readers studying the trajectory of Rex's life and art while using critical ability to consider that my allegations about Goldstein are based on Rex's allegations about Goldstein as well as on research and on internal evidence in the *Voice* article itself.

As an iconoclast making new icons, the truth is, Rex broke the norms of received gay male identity. Like Tom of Finland and Robert Mapplethorpe, Rex glorified the new male selfhood and gender identity of post-Stonewall leather homomascularity by turning symbols—Nazi, Catholic, Queer, American, and otherwise—on their heads while launching raw and radical S&M content as a bonafide subject in art.

Goldstein, like Susan Sontag who called leather culture “camp,” was investigating 1970s “Fascinating Fascism” and “Nazi Chic.” If Rex and his kind were camp to Sontag, why not to Goldstein? In an age of Nazi hunters, war-baby Goldstein (born like Rex in 1944) was *en garde* in his article, “S&M: The Dark Side of Gay Liberation: Flirting with Terminal Sex.” Calling out Rex as “Exhibit A,” he stopped short of calling Rex a “Nazi,” but did he overreach Rex—and himself—when he took a broad swipe at leather culture itself for flirting with fantasy fetishes of Nazi drag, insignia, and roleplay?

There is an irony that Goldstein's article calculating the “horrors” of S&M was so filled with delicious information warning “what not to do” and “where not to go” that perversatile leathermen

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exiting the closet in 1975 re-purposed his words as a Gay Guide to S&M Things to Do and Leather Places to Go.

As a gay boy re-purposing media in 1950, I didn't know dirty magazines existed until a priest clutching the pearls of his rosary warned us altar boys to keep custody of our eyes and avert our gaze away from the sinful men's adventure magazines in drugstores where I rushed to feast my queer eye on bare-chested buddies fighting vicious animals on the cover of *Argosy*.

Gay boys growing up in a straight world learn to squint the gay squint that turns straight stuff gay. That's the first and basic gay gaze.

Rex and I each cocked an eye to build our own teen spank banks. We both learned to narrow our eyes to blur busty Nazi blondes like "Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS" on the cover of *Saga*, so we could focus on the well-built American soldiers Ilsa was tying up nearly nude in soft-porn articles like "The Conquering Fräuleins."

In our postwar childhoods, we war babies grew up with American media portraying Nazis as escapist entertainment everywhere in a pop culture created to relieve the stress of a nation of veterans and home-front citizens dealing with the PTSD caused by the war.

In reaction, the 1960s and 1970s became a nostalgic period of swinging sex, transgressive art, and pop-culture cosplay. Rex's contemporaries like the Beatles put Hitler obscured on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*; Kenneth Anger shot gay Nazi bikers orgying across the screen in *Scorpio Rising*; the Residents art-band titled its album *Third Reich Rock 'n' Roll*; glam-rock metal bands and punk rockers like the Sex Pistols wore styles akin to the Nazi-spiked fashions of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren; Warhol shot his business manager Fred Hughes and socialite model Maxime de la Falaise wearing Hitler mustaches; Jim French of New York's iconic Colt Studio named his porn studio after a phallic gun and pseudonymed himself as a fine artist after the famous German gun: "Luger"; Mel Brooks went camping with *Springtime for Hitler*; and 1970s films like *Cabaret*, *The Night Porter*, *Seven Beauties*, and Pasolini's *Salo* sold tickets because audiences never tire of Nazi gowns and uniforms.

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The activist culture critic, playwright, and university professor Sarah Schulman, a creator of the ACT UP Oral History Project, once asked in general “why some people are micro-critiqued, and others say and do vile, regressive things that get overlooked.”

What made Rex different from those diverse artists? What made Rex an easy target? What made Rex a “Naziphile”? Was it his politically incorrect point of view? Was it because he declared the constitutional rights of masculine Eros, and the free choice of consensual male domination and power, in a prescriptive feminist age when vanilla gays had no clue that leathermen were fisting Foucault right and left?

Rex stood out for better or worse because Rex always stood out. His smoldering personality was that provocative. His work was that good. Even before the *Voice* article drove him into seclusion, he was as much a cult artist as Tom of Finland. His fans who never thought of him as a political artist never quit the pointillist seer whose visions of erotic anarchy documented the iconography of the apolitical leather identity they lived.

Rex’s cool gay gaze, like the *Drummer* gay eye, was rooted in that postwar context of those pulp-mag artists who, mining Nazis as sexy gold, created the seductive covers of “straight male adventure magazines.” He built his repertoire by queering their aesthetic, and redrawing their images, for the emerging new genre of “gay male adventure magazines” like *Drummer* and *Honcho* that flourished during the Golden Age of gay magazines from 1975 until their death by internet in 1999.

Although Goldstein actually wrote he was personally “nauseated” by Rex’s art, to his credit, he never accused Rex, whose ethnicity remains unknown, of the mortal sin of antisemitism.

As a gay humanist, I have to ask why, as part of the commercial gay-pride establishment in New York, did Goldstein try to sound an alarm on Rex and leather culture itself? Was Rex in leather drag typecast as a convenient polar opposite of leftist gays in Stonewall drag? Did Goldstein correctly sense that Rex was a nascent conservative leaning right as seems later in Rex’s own words in our interviews? Was there gay-on-gay animosity because of leathermen’s own

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brand of gay male masculinity, denounced as politically incorrect, with its erotic rituals and dedicated bars with virile dress codes that, like women's safe spaces excluding men, excluded effeminacy with door signs like "Leathers Not Sweaters."

One short year later, as Goldstein had cautioned, the Leather Apocalypse arrived on a cloud of poppers when the quintessential leather club, the Mineshaft, opened its world-famous door, bathtub, slings, and buckets of Crisco to thousands of international leathermen with Rex as its official artist till its closing eight years later.

"It's almost," Goldstein, a constant critic of male power, wrote, "as if gay culture has taken on the Yeatsian task of creating its own rough beast—the leather man."

Did he really think that garden-variety homosexual hedonists playing at being sexual outlaws sporting hankies, nipple-clamps, designer vests, and Iron Crosses as junk jewelry in leather bars were neo-Nazi Hells Angels?

The spring-loaded wisecrack about the "anarchy of man-beasts" and the "end-time chaos" of leather revelations included visual exploitation. At least, the page design looked very like sexploitation. Did the publisher have a double motive? The anti-leather page layout took the opportunity to illustrate itself with two S&M drawings of Rex's "rough beasts" because that kind of prurient "Exhibit B," for readers squinting to find bits of porn to take in hand and repurpose, would sell more copies on newsstands.

It's to Rex's credit that the penniless artist won many column inches of free publicity in the *Voice* when he stood up for himself with clever ripostes about the human worth of leather culture, about the evils of corporate culture, and about his theories around American religion, politics, and fascism that have since come true.

From my interaction with Rex, the *Voice* feature because it found valid reasons to question his art and politics wounded him deeply. Rex never suffered critics gladly. Feeling scapegoated, the autistic artist was all on his lonesome without much fraternal support when the *Voice* hit the streets three weeks after publication of the first issue of *Drummer*. That West Coast leather magazine, unknown to Goldstein, escaped the *Voice* inquisition even as it became a refuge

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for Rex, and the international magazine of record for twentieth-century leather culture.

In 2004, Goldstein alleged he was fired by the evolving *Village Voice*. He threatened a lawsuit, and went on writing books excoriating the formal gay right of which the independent Rex, who was no Leni Riefenstahl, was never a part.

Whether history finds Rex's avant-garde work Naziana or not, the article deprived the struggling homomasculine gender artist of nuance and cast him as a villain in the cultural narrative of gay-stream gatekeepers.

The PTSD he suffered was collateral damage not intended by Goldstein, but the high-profile trauma ignited his lifelong distrust of the gay press. He began guarding himself with fierce anxiety.

"The Press!"

That complaint was the first thing that came out of his mouth the first time we met. Was he spinning reverse psychology every time he proclaimed he did not want to be in gay magazines to cover for the fact that the national gay press loudly warned by the *Village Voice* was afraid of him and his shocking, and sometimes illegal, art in their pages?

To correct that, *Drummer* rode to his rescue and published his first magazine cover drawing on issue 10, November 1976. Years later when he was living bicoastally, he told me about his misbegotten return to New York in 1992 to open his own "appointment only" Secret Museum Gallery (1992-2001). It was a little too secret. What a shock when, seeking his canonical due, he began making the rounds of the new young millennial magazine editors who had taken over publishing lacking mentoring from the previous generation-gap of editors dead from AIDS. Anyone can open a gallery. They had no idea who he was and they didn't care what embarrassing veterans of the gay liberation wars they left behind. They scratched their heads and touched their man buns because Rex was off their gaydar. The internet did not exist before 1993, and they could not be bothered to look at the extreme portfolio of some vaguely vagrant old guy they did not know was a transgressive beat-punk artist years before Patti Smith sang at Hilly Crystal's CBGB in the East Village.

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**Jack:** As an artist, how do you defend your problematical and often outlaw material? How do you face editors and critics?

**Rex:** I don't have to face them because I never face anyone.

**Jack:** But your work does. It's so much beyond the pale.

**Rex:** They will talk to the work and the work will talk to them and it will end there. I know a lot of people who are appalled by my work, but they never confront me or address me.

In 1976, Rex became the official artist of the legendary after-hours club, the Mineshaft (1976-1985), two years before his friend, the other keen eye, Robert Mapplethorpe, became its official photographer. Rex was two years older than Mapplethorpe who collected his drawings. I remember one day at lunch on Castro when Robert asked Rex: "How do you do it? How do you make your drawings so erotic?" Rex just smiled and said, "More pasta?" The blistering raw eroticism Robert saw in Rex, and hungered for, he never achieved.

Rex is to drawing what Mapplethorpe is to photography, but Rex is edgier with a *mise-en-scène* more daring than the cool formal world of Mapplethorpe who had to deal with temperamental living models while the unfettered Rex without borders pulled his conceptual models out of his chiaroscuro imagination—or from magazine photographs as did Mapplethorpe in his collages.

If Mapplethorpe flew first-class on private jets with his patrons, Rex rode slouched across the cheap seats at the back of a Greyhound bus jacking off the hard men of his dreams and collecting dots of cum. While Mapplethorpe created his pictures for the eyes of the professional art world of critics and collectors, Rex created his perfect moments for the eyes of ordinary people who relate personally to his images in which they find emotional satisfaction they may not be able to analyze. Mapplethorpe told clients, "If you don't like this picture, maybe you're not as avant-garde as you think." Rex had the very same attitude.

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Rex once told me: “I want to draw pictures nobody has seen before.”

Mapplethorpe once told me: “I want to be a story told in beds at night around the world.”

Profiling Rex in *Drummer* 12, January 1977, with three Rex drawings in the article, “Rex: Unusual Erotic Work from a Superb Leather Artist,” we rebutted the *Village Voice*. One image we published pictured a muscleman on the telephone, and the other a sailor riding exposed and hard on the subway slouched under a poster that Rex had Rexified of the Marlboro Man whom both Rex and *Drummer* kept in mind as a source image. The same issue illustrated reporter Gary Collins’ exposé of prison sex horrors in his lead feature, “Male Rape,” with Rex’s gang-bang drawing, “Male Rape.”

As keeper of the *Drummer* Archives, I’m quoting here that Rex article—that has no byline—to give Rex fans, readers, and researchers direct access now and in the future to this hard-to-find classic issue because this is the kind of reportage most likely written by Oscar Streaker Robert Opel who wrote a series about artists in *Drummer* issues 2, 4, 9, and 13, culminating in his interview with Tom of Finland in issue 22.

The evidence of Opel’s authorship lies in the timeline. Opel would have written this January article for publicity at the same time he was writing publicity for his April show at his Fey-Way Gallery where, before he was murdered there July 7, 1979, he mounted the first Rex Exhibit in San Francisco: *Rex Originals*, April 8-19, 1978.

Rex came to *Drummer*, hat in hand, in the 1970s, almost at the same moment as did Mapplethorpe with his hat because both New Yorkers needed monthly *Drummer* to build their brands with thousands of national and international readers. In 1989, *Drummer* continued its general support of sexy REX by specifically promoting him in its “Second Short Story Contest” seeking fiction based on a Rex drawing. Years later, in 2018, the *New York Times* published “A Trio of Short Fictions Inspired by Robert Mapplethorpe Photographs” written by Michael Cunningham, Elif Batuman, and Hilton Als.

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*Drummer* was a first draft of leather art history with its star-making adoration of talents like Rex, its coverage of his drawing process and of his first live-work studio in New York at 178 Christopher Street conveniently next door to the marvelously sleazy Christopher Hotel at 180 Christopher where leathermen rented rooms by the hour, and Rex spent nights, months, and years of sex research on his knees studying *tableaux* of life models in knock-down-and-drag-out scenes he turned into art. During the Golden Age of Gay Magazines (1975-2000), gay artists from Rex to Mapplethorpe to Bill Ward, who was the artist most published in *Drummer*, to Tom of Finland needed and courted editors to build their careers in the national web of gay magazines that started up after Stonewall, crashed with AIDS, and died at the dawn of the internet.

*Drummer* reported:

“Uh, there really is a Rex, isn’t there?” The voice answering on the telephone is hesitant. It’s a fair question. Though the drawings that are signed “Rex” are earthy, highly real and personal, still there is something in that technique that doesn’t seem quite human. Something suggests the infinite detail of a photograph. But if you pick up a magnifying glass to check it out, well, it’s only lines and dots and black and white after all. A drawing doesn’t give itself up to you like a photograph. It eludes you.

There is a Rex, but Rex doesn’t give himself up to you either. Not many people meet Rex. An interview? It’s out of the question. Reserved, intense, wary of outsiders and newcomers, Rex is an enigma, as disciplined and demanding in himself as the taut technique of his drawings. He’s handsome: fine sharp features, dark hair, tight-muscled, the classic grin of a GI. Definitely handsome, and always soberly dressed in black, always wearing those thick-soled German army boots you sometimes see in Rex drawings.

Rex lives and works in the kind of fortress you get used to in New York. A cool dark space with a precision finish. Photographs are everywhere—men, machines, aircraft hangars, horses, and Tom of Finland drawings. “Everyone,” Rex

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says if you ask him, “owes Tom a lot. He took the rugged American man, made him larger than life, and gave him back to us.”

In a room like a bunker, drawings for the next Rex book are tacked to cork walls below a khaki parachute that spills out of an army helmet in the center of the ceiling. Some of the drawings are finished, just the way they’ll be published. Others are being worked on, a process that can take months. The outlines are already there, the male flesh still blank, perhaps just a leather sleeve Rex has totally completed, highlights glistening, the teeth of a zipper. Already they are beautiful and hot just like that, unfinished. (“A drawing is complete at several stages,” Rex said once. “Something in each stage has to be sacrificed to the final drawing.”)

What makes the finished drawings so hot? For one thing, these are not pretty fellows all draped in fetish symbols. The boots and leathers, the uniforms, the clamps and chains express a horny urgency. The men who grapple with each other with such a fierce passion are not always even handsome. Some of the best men in the world of Rex are brutal.

Rex never sets up a narrative series. All the story is there in one flash, telescoped into a single moment and isolated on the page. These are drawings you look at one at a time. In each one, Rex distills the action we have all seen, done, or imagined, but which we get to bring off only rarely and never so well.

The settings are immediate. The action can’t wait for a safe place or better time; it explodes on the spot, in the johns, on a subway car, in lockers or a room at the Y. But there’s a cryptic quality in the atmosphere, a sense that even the litter on a seedy hotel room floor carries a special message. Though you recognize some familiar images, Rex gives them a private twist. Take the classic leatherman on the cover of *Männenspielen: A Portfolio by Rex*. Rex captures the dull shine of his jacket and the topman’s traditional leather cap, but you can’t read the expression in his eyes; they are strangely

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remote. And he licks his lip in a disconcerting gesture. Why? In anticipation? A cool appraisal? There is something elusive and seductive in these details, too.

And the titles! Last year, hardly anyone knew the meaning of *Männespielen* (let alone how to say it). Rex explains it as German slang meaning men's games, a kind of rough locker-room horseplay. The games these men are into make heavy horseplay: games of power, games of submission, played out in an intense hush.

His new book is called *Icons*. Images of worship. And new games that express a kind of rugged communion. Rex is finer than ever. He draws his icons from his own world. The world of Rex excludes you or draws you in at your own risk.

Those who never got a friendly flash from a sailor in the subway might see Rex drawings as a pure exercise in fantasy. But the *Drummer* man who moves in this world himself? He knows.

After Opel's January 1977 *Drummer* article, I first wrote about Rex in my feature about the Mineshaft in *Drummer* 19, December 1977.

*The Mineshaft Is a Fantasy by Rex.* The essence of the Mineshaft is found in page after page of Rex's drawings in *Männespielen* and *Icons*. If you get off on Rex, you'll like the Mineshaft and you'll understand why the Mineshaft chose him to design its 1978 poster and T-shirt. Rex epitomizes in his work the concept of the Mineshaft Man.

Within days of publication, Rex sent me five drawings and a letter expressing his gratitude for coverage in *Drummer*. I responded on February 16, 1978.

Dear Rex, Thanks for your letter full of kind words on my writing and for the even more generous gift of your latest work...I'd be delighted to write an article featuring your professional "comeback" [after the *Village Voice* fiasco] with your approval of the copy as well as make a point of your

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new mail-order availability. I will, as you desire, focus on your work rather than on you personally. The discipline in your work has long impressed me. Yours, Jack Fritscher, Editor-in-Chief

He responded in a letter dated February 21, 1978, airing his smoldering resentment of the New York establishment misunderstanding his art.

Dear Jack: Thank you for your letter of the 16th. I am most grateful for any coverage I might get from your publication, especially at this transitional stage of my career. I'm enclosing the drawings you requested.... I would very much like to see your viewpoint about my work, much as you interpreted the Mineshaft poster. You'll be more objective about the work and I would definitely want some critical points mentioned.... I've a great many critics.... A paragraph exploring my [New York] detractors would prove most interesting.... Many thanks for your help, Rex.

Rex was a visionary artist of gender, of homomascularity, for men who prefer men masculine. That made him a perfect match for *Drummer* which published his work and his equally hot commercial advertisements for popper companies, leather bars, and telephone sex lines. Durk Dehner, co-founder of the Tom of Finland Foundation in 1984, who labeled both Tom's work and Rex's work *homomascularity*, wrote: "*Drummer*, ground-breaking for its time, set precedence for all male representation to come."

Rex played an important part in creating the virilizing homomascularity standard of positive male gender presentation that became *Drummer* policy. Rex's gay eye helped usher in the New Wave of gay masculinity that came out of the closet in the 1970s in life and on page and screen. While he drew the faces of homomascularity, critics often mistake his homomascularity work as toxic hyper-mascularity.

But gay homomascularity is not straight hyper-mascularity which is a negative term embracing midcentury military toughness, misogyny, and male supremacy wrongly applied to the

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gender-positive work of Rex and Tom of Finland. Critics liking labels might do well to consider that the work of Rex and Tom is not hyper-masculine. Durk Dehner emphatically said, “Tom’s work is homomasculine.”

Hyper-masculinity is an exaggeration of aggressive XYY male behavior and bodies that like Neanderthals don’t fit in our majority XY culture. Studies report a large percentage of the American male prison population is locked up for being XYY.

Ringmaster Rex was fascinated by the menagerie of gay desire in the zoo of gay bars where thousands of men presented themselves magically zipped up, and shape-shifting identity like ritual animals—anthromorphic bulls, bears, pigs, ponies, dawgs, and pups—vested head to foot in the virilizing fetish of blue-collar clothes cut from full-grain cow hide.

He established his zoological art as edgy and bad-ass when he broke the taboo against bestiality which he made literal by adding man’s best friend to many of his pictures. He assaulted the gay gaze, and panicked the gay press, by turning taboos into totems representing emerging new queer masculine animality. He drew Montague men for hero worship by Capulet men who, like him, were homomasculinists born with a fatal attraction to bad boys and the dangerous hyper-masculinity of onward-marching soldiers of religion, nationalism, and capitalism.

Rex drew his men to look “straight” because he liked men that way and because of the gay fetish “in search of” straight men. His men read as masculine-identified men “in search of” one another, like a pair of straight Marines on leave drunk-fucking each other in a cheap motel with not a gay culture thought in their buzz-cut heads. Freud warned in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that “concepts of *masculinity*, like those of *femininity*, whose meanings seem so unambiguous to ordinary people, are among the most confused that occur in science.” So, why not query *homomascularity*?

Rex’s sophisticated drawing for the landmark twentieth anniversary issue of *Drummer* 100 (November 1986) is an icon of his platonic ideal of a leatherman. His hard-boiled cover image of a hairy-chested muscle biker with a cigarette dangling from his insouciant

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lip evokes a cynical underworld anti-hero in a lobby poster for a Hollywood film *noir* unreeling in a fleapit theater that's seen better days.

Rex was a fine artist with a keen eye who prowled “half-deserted streets” and dared “visions and revisions.” He was a skid-row existentialist of “J. Alfred Prufrock” proportions. His rented rooms where men come and go fucking with Michael and Angelo were inspired by the archetypal rooms he cruised in the molly-house of the Christopher Street Hotel. As a “landlord” managing the rooms in his voyeuristic drawings, his proprietary point of view was the gay gaze of a slum lord spying on his tenants through keyholes.

In his 12-10-2015 picture “The Nightwatch,” he “drew from life” documenting the scene in the sex-cellar Darkroom of Amsterdam’s Cuckoo’s Nest bar. As an ancient eye revealing his lifelong voyeurism in the 9”x18” drawing, he included a tiny selfie of his own face hiding in a corner spying on the leathermen carousing in the basement orgy room where he spent many a night smoking dope and sniffing poppers.

His real-estate locations in his erotic imaginarium read like a road guide to YMCAs, saloons, toilets, flophouses, carnivals, prisons, shipyards, and truck stops cruised by itinerant construction workers, greasy gas jockeys, muscle bikers, tattooed fighters, succulent young bums, pissing ex-cons, armpit suckers, studs seeking head, and the rogue cops who roust them.

Rex’s men are unshaved lone wolves in jockstraps, leather, boots, and torn tank tops, who ring their tits and pierce their dicks tied off with leather thongs, who pay-per-hour in sleaze-bag hot-bed hotels where sailors, Semper-Fi Marines, cops, and drifters flop back on cum-stained mattresses—the smoke of their cigarettes drafting out the crack of their door down the hall to the common washroom where other grifters running power games of humiliation and domination stand around the funky urinal dripping beer piss, and the graffiti-covered stalls are drilled with gloryholes glazed like donuts with cum.

Rex told me, “Everybody thinks I can draw everything whereas I am extremely limited. I give that impression because I am so

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shrewd about limiting my repertoire. What I can't do, I don't do. So when you think I can draw everything, I don't show you the things I can't draw. In my pictures you never go outside because I can't draw nature. That's why I have to stage my sex scenes indoors at night, because I can't draw nature."

Rex's work invokes the human solitude of straight painter Edward Hopper who featured lone women waiting in the *noir* spaces and all-nite diners in his suggestive night paintings, "Office at Night," and "Night Windows." Hopper's superb "Nighthawks" became such a pop-culture icon it was parodied by Austrian artist Gottlieb Helnwein who, recreating Hopper's exact interior, inserted four movie stars to replace the original figures in Hopper's midnight diner: Elvis is the soda jerk serving James Dean sitting solo at the counter to the left of Marilyn Monroe laughing with Humphrey Bogart. How interesting if Rex had ever tried to Rexify "Nighthawks" with a quartet of Rex men.

His pictures feature men dealing erotically with masculine isolation and existential loneliness, killing time with sex during restless nights in single-room-occupancy hotels, dive bars, and gas stations warming hot dogs on roller grills. He limns a short-order cook out of "Nighthawks" in his chrome-plated diner drawing dated 1-9-82. Created from his study of his life lived on the skids, his art, exquisitely corrupt beyond innocence, is authentic.

He once informed me: "I've had enough sex to know what happens in the world. I don't think I've ever drawn something that I haven't done or known someone who's done it."

On July 2, 1979, when William Friedkin, the Oscar-winning director of *The Boys in the Band*, *The French Connection*, and *The Exorcist*, began filming *Cruising* on location in the streets of the Village, Rex was traumatized once again by the *Village Voice* whose war on *Cruising* was yet another of its assaults on leather culture. In the July 16 issue, staff reporter Arthur Bell (1939-1984) attacked the film, leather decorum, and Rex's Mineshaft when he incited violence by calling up mobs to "give Friedkin and his production crew a terrible time if you spot them in your neighborhood." Bell and his henchman, the troubled Vito Russo, the author of *The Celluloid*

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*Closet*, impugning the shooting script, tried to cancel the creative process of director, cast, and crew whose film, as art-in-progress, they were disrupting with no idea of the holistic final cut. So much for critical thinking in the gay civil war.

Even John Rechy, no lover of leather, spoke out against Bell's "prior censorship." Distressed by Bell's propaganda, Rex, forever the consummate New York artist, realized he had to exile himself from New York. So in 1980, he followed gay migration westward moving like Harvey Milk, who had his own appointment in Samarra, from the gated cliques of Manhattan to the open city of San Francisco. Like his peer, fine artist and photographer Jim French aka Rip Colt of Colt Studio, he left behind his dark New York studio to open up his second act to new West Coast vibes.

On March 1, 1981, Rex, the recluse, hosted the opening exhibit of his San Francisco studio and gallery and home South of Market Street in a three-story Victorian, fifty feet off Folsom Street, at the deep dead-end of the Hallam Street *cul de sac*. Like his New York home next door to the Christopher Hotel, it was conveniently located sixty feet across the narrow lane from the entrance to the orgiastic Barracks bathhouse that opened in an abandoned blue-collar flophouse hotel, May 15, 1972, where the action was also what Rex witnessed at the St. Mark's bath at 6 St. Mark's Place in the East Village. The crisp designer interior he created for his studio in the light-industrial slums of SOMA was very New York: black walls, gray carpet, and track-lighting spotting his framed drawings and his work in progress.

Three months later, on July 3, the *New York Times* announced the news: "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals: Outbreak Occurs Among Men in New York and California—8 Died Inside 2 Years."

One week later, on July 10, outside Rex's studio windows, the mythic Barracks, vacated for renovation, exploded in an arson fire that traumatized him on top of the traumas he suffered from the *Village Voice*. The worst fire in San Francisco since the 1906 earthquake burned his new Rexwerk atelier to the ground and made him so famously homeless that the Mineshaft back in New York hosted a fundraiser so he could keep on working in San Francisco. Mineshaft

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manager Wally Wallace told me in our 1990 video interview, “Rex is our Michelangelo. So is Tom. So is A. Jay.”

In the *Mineshaft Newsletter*, Wally Wallace wrote:

CASINO NIGHT TO HELP A BUDDY OUT. (Rex Benefit) TUES. OCT 20 [1981] 9-12 PM. In July the largest fire since its earthquake swept the Folsom Street area in San Francisco leaving 120 totally homeless. One of the victims was Rex, the artist of the Mineshaft logo, who lost all his earthly belongings in one night. The Mineshaft gave a benefit for him in San Francisco and now we are having one in New York from 9 until Midnight on Tuesday, October 20th. It's a Casino Night with lots of prizes for the winners...with some recent Rex work on display... Please note that another Casino Night will be held in early November for the Gay Men's Chorus and their Bux for Tux Fund.

With the Mineshaft proceeds, Rex rented a squat in a warren of rooms at 199 Valencia above the popular gay leather biker bar, the Rainbow Cattle Company, which was later renamed Zeitgeist. He told his gallerist friend Bernd Althans that because of his post-traumatic stress about the fire, he did not leave his room and did not draw for a year. When finally he quietly picked up his pen, he drew some of his best work. Overcoming his depression, he rose like a phoenix from the ashes of the fire, and created a poster offering his new drawing “Phoenix” as an original signed Rex picture to support AIDS research in New York: “Win the Rex drawing ‘Phoenix.’ Support Karposi’s Sarcoma Research at the NYU Medical Center. [Raffle] Drawing at the Spike, 120 Eleventh Avenue, September 22, 1982.” “Phoenix,” signifying his recovery and resurrection, then became the cover of *Rexwerk*, published by Les Pirates Associes Editeur, Paris, 1986.

One of the few pre-fire works to survive was his drawing “Leather Bar”—picturing seven leathersmen standing side by side—which he had drawn and then leased as a poster-advertisement for French director Jacques Scandaleri’s 1978 erotic film, *New York City Inferno*, the first film shot inside the Mineshaft. The movie featured

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leather poet-artist Camille O’Grady, fresh from CBGB, singing her piss song “Toilet Kiss” with her band Leather Secrets. Scandaleri returned the original drawing to Rex in New York in the 1990s. In 2013, three years before Rex would be inducted into the Tom of Finland Foundation Hall of Fame, he gifted “Leather Bar,” his earliest surviving original, to the permanent collection of Tom’s Foundation.

Later during Covid, Rex said his life always lurched from disaster to disaster. Nevertheless, it seemed no headlines, plagues, fires, and politically correct critics could ever dent his true grit.

Rex told the Tom of Finland Foundation in 2017:

People say I’m stubborn just for the sake of being difficult—just to have my way. But I’m someone who has had to fight for decades against society, the law, church and state—even the art world itself—in order to get my art before the public uncensored. There is simply no “polite” way to battle against these great odds that I have had to battle against for the past five decades. Saying “please” does not work when taking on these powerful, entrenched institutions. So I fear fighting the status-quo in the long run has made me rather abrasive and abrupt at times when trying to get my art before a society that essentially won’t allow it to be seen. Or rather, allow it to be seen on “my terms.” But my bark is worse than my bite.

Durk Dehner wrote in the *Tom of Finland Foundation Newsletter*:

Rex is well versed in the knowledge of our base cravings and desires and that same force has driven him to meticulously lay down scenarios that others dare not manifest. He has been adept at creating imagery that pays homage to that nature that gives us *the strongest of erections with the most powerful of orgasms*. [Italics added] Both Rex and Tom of Finland did not want to compromise their freedom of expression in exchange for getting the approval of the greater society in which we live.

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From the start of his career, Rex, like Mapplethorpe with his *XYZ Portfolio*, turned to self-publishing keeping in print his run of softbound 36-page unbound portfolio “books” that began in 1975 with *Männenspielen*, and continued with *Icons*, graduating to his first hardcover book, *Rexwerk* (1986).

But the politics and ignorance during the long slow-motion fall of the American Empire that—years before 9/11—began with the assassination of JFK in 1963 and picked up speed with Reagan denying AIDS in the 1980s, turned America’s greatest living gay erotic artist into the expatriate who in 2011 fled America for Amsterdam where erotic joy and backrooms reminded him of the best of the 1970s in New York and San Francisco.

## 2

### SWINGING SIXTIES: PIONEER GAY POP ARTISTS

The artists who were Rex’s contemporaries were an international underground of homomascuine art appreciated for its aesthetics inside the pop art of the Warhol 1960s. When the Tom of Finland Foundation named Rex to its Hall of Fame in 2016, Rex wrote in the *TOFF Newsletter*:

Mine was the first generation that came out of the closet to the art world a decade *before* Stonewall. We paid a heavy price in those early days for drawing dirty pictures as they were then called, sacrificing in many cases, our lives, jobs, family ties, and homes for daring to depict “The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name.” Our art was burned and destroyed in raids by police and postal authorities. The work was condemned and spit upon by church and state, and especially by the legitimate art world for whom we were rude intruders storming the gates of their conservative ivory towers. What we dared to depict of the naked male form were criminal acts back then and those of us who portrayed them, criminals.

Tom of Finland, who as a teen in occupied Finland had sex with Nazi soldiers whose politics he hated, but whose uniforms he loved, drew clean-cut blond Aryans while Rex’s barbarian Aryans

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have their own Nazi genes courtesy of Rex's own Nazi fetish. If ritual S&M fantasies became real, they'd be homophobic nightmares—and that's the counterphobic thrill of the magical thinking of masturbation and sex play as sexual healing that Richard Goldstein never considered.

The New York S&M artist Mike Miksche aka Steve Masters (1925-1965), who in the 1960s excited the young Rex, was the six-foot-five bomber pilot and real-life Marlboro Man model and sadistic suicide who beat up Sam Steward (1909-1993) consensually for the camera of sex-researcher Alfred Kinsey. In his crisp tattoo-inflected Vitruvian-man style, he drew the strength of post-war gay men, posturing tattooed cousins of Rex men, made defiant by their military service, and made proud by winning the war.

Masters and fellow New York artist Jim French (1932-2017) who was the founding photographer of Colt Studio in 1967 with my longtime friend Lou Thomas (1933-1990), founder of Target Studio, who shot a dozen *Drummer* covers, were both Madison Avenue advertising men with formal training who drew and photographed butch guys in the New York S&M leather scene. French aka the fine artist "Luger" aka "Rip Colt" photographed and then sketched the same kind of alpha men Rex drew. Rex, however, flipped French's aesthetic of Colt men who were aloof, unavailable, clean-cut sex gods to be worshiped. His Rex men were alternative sex gods, muscular, aggressive, sweaty brutes to be served.

Chicago artist Domingo Francisco Juan Esteban Orejudos aka Dom aka Etienne (1933-1991) was co-founder with photographer Chuck Renslow (1929-2017) of Kris Studio, the Gold Coast bar, and the International Mr. Leather contest. Like Rex, Dom also created kinky bar ads, posters, and illustrations of leathermen evoking folk-art circus banners not unlike the mustached "Strong Man" and tattooed "Sword Swallow" in fantasy paintings flapping on canvas panels hanging outside peep shows and freak shows lining carnival midways. His images, like Rex's intense carnival and *Sex-Freak Circus* images, were primal and had romantic appeal because they tripped leathermen smoking pot and drinking beer in his Gold Coast bar back to a time when things seemed simpler for

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a brokeback man on a motorcycle. Dom introduced the concept of “gay bars as art galleries” when he premiered his murals inside the Gold Coast he and Chuck founded in 1958, four or five years after the world’s most likely first leather bar, Cinema, as reported in Larry Townsend’s 1972 *Leatherman’s Handbook*, opened in 1953/4 on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles.

Al Shapiro aka A. Jay (1932-1987), the art director of Clark Polak’s *Drum* magazine (1964-1967) which Rex read, was also the founding New York art director of *Queens Quarterly* (1969). For the June 1974 cover of *QQ*—which likely helped trigger the *Village Voice* attack on Rex in 1975—Al published a rare color drawing by Rex just before Al quit *QQ* to move to San Francisco where I met him and his new lover Dick Kriegmont at the Barracks baths in late summer 1974. Three years later in a package deal, Al and I joined *Drummer* together as art director and editor-in-chief: March 17, 1977 to January 1, 1980.

While Rex was deadly serious about male representation, the good-natured Al satirized homomasculine sex, leather fetishes, and camp in his monthly cartoon strip, *The Adventures of Harry Chess*—which, beginning in Polak’s *Drum* (10,000 circulation) before moving to *Drummer* (42,000 circulation), was the world’s first ongoing gay comic strip. Almost in tandem, Rex’s first *Drummer* cover was issue 10, November 1976. Al’s first cover was issue 15, May 1977. Rex’s gay gaze presented one kind of “leatherman look” on the cover and Al’s quite another. In 1980, Al told me in his *Drummer* interview: “I marvel at Rex’s technical aplomb and his sleazy male content.”

Don Merrick (1929-1990) aka Domino was a New Jersey construction worker, lumberjack, and cab driver who, although their styles were different, drew the same type of men as Rex. Their gay gaze was fraternal and complementary. Domino’s grafitti-like scratch-and-sniff scribble style created fantasy men sketchier than Rex’s pointillist men. While Rex drew Rex men from his idealized imagination, Domino sketched realistic blue-collar Joes from his working life. Rex drew homomasculine men. Domino drew straight men. He told me about his Rex-like harvesting of seedbearers in





*Drummer* 29, May 1979: “Right now, I’m trying to instill in my memory the face and greasy work clothes of the manager of a certain New Jersey Amoco station. I’m determined to get him alone one of these days, so that I can memorize the rest of him.” More verbal than Rex, Domino added the mixed dimension of graffiti-dialogue balloons—worthy of a Kilroy in a toilet stall in a bus station—inside his S&M frames to narrate his drawings. Rex, who did not speak until he was four years old, knew his pictures spoke volumes and were beautiful beyond words.

Rex had a special regard for his friend, San Francisco artist Chuck Arnett (1928-1988), a founder of the Tool Box bar (1962), whose mural on the cement stone wall behind its bar had been published in *Life* magazine, June 26, 1964. At that culture-quake outing of gay masculinity, Rex, the new kid in New York, was twenty years old. Sixteen years later in 1981, he spoke of Arnett when, after the fire, he was so desperate to get his drawings into gay rags to spur mail-order sales that he agreed to be interviewed for a feature I was writing about him for *Skin* magazine, volume 2, number 6.

**Rex:** I like Chuck Arnett very much. I think he’s too strong for the mainstream of gay appreciation and he’s probably best known for his Red Star Saloon poster [1972] as well as his works at the Ambush Bar.

For October 17, 1990, Rex drew the ad poster for the Lone Star Saloon’s first Anniversary Earthquake Party, celebrating the bar’s destruction, survival, and move to a new location—from 1099 Howard Street at 7th Street to 1354 Harrison—because of the October 17, 1989, Loma Prieta earthquake which also destroyed the *Drummer* office. Cued by the name of the Lone Star, he drew a red star (one of the few splashes of red in Rex’s black-and-white drawings; often reproduced as a white star) raised high on the long arm and fist of a leatherman that was homage to Arnett’s famous Red Star Saloon poster, and to the red, black, and white of the Nazi flag.

**Rex:** I think Arnett is the only true American fine artist with any track record in the homoerotic world. That man can lay down pastels like Renoir and not compromise the strength

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK**





and raw sexuality one bit. Very immediate stuff, never lets his technique get in the way to shortchange his content or, more important, his audience.

Later in the interview, he assayed Tom of Finland and offered his Rexian theories about gay art, entertainment, and class prejudice.

**Rex:** Tom of Finland is the father of this business. There's never a sense of degradation or tawdriness in his characters. There's never anything sleazy about Tom's creations.

**Jack:** Some critics consider your men sleazy.

**Rex:** My men are working class. If critics see that as sleazy, perhaps they have a class hangup. My working-class heroes are sweaty real reflections of life. Gays confuse the definition of sleaze. Real men aren't sleazy. There's actually something rather pure about the dirt and sweat earned from honest labor. The stink of the working class is quite different from the self-indulgent stink of laying about in a bathtub in the backroom of a gay bar. The homosexual fascination with filth is based in part on a deep-seated conflict and fascination with the working-class background. In its origins, filth came from honest labor, hence honest emotions, hence honest people. As opposed to make-believe [bar] filth that is "applied" rather than "earned." Yet another fantasy of pretend sweat and dirt. Hence, pretend people.

Each of Rex's contemporary artists was a star with his own passionate fans. But no artist scares the horses the way Rex's intensity challenges the politically correct vanilla gay gaze. Some "artistes" are artists and some are entertainers. With *entertainment*, you get exactly what you bargained for. With *art*, something you might not have expected happens. The artist, like Rex, confronts you. You look. You see. Your way of seeing begins to change. You change. Your dick as a medium of magical thinking rises up like a magic wand that channels you forward into unexpected mindsets and sex trips you had no idea you were going to like so much. In Freudian

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terms, middle-class Super-Ego values taught by your parents slip another notch sideways toward your sex-driven Id and the strange men whose candy and rides you were warned about.

**Jack:** When you speak of other gay artists, what do you mean?

**Rex:** By the term *gay artist*, I don't mean the window dresser at Macy's creating flower pastels on weekends, or the tidy lesbian making abstract sculpture in her garage. I mean people who have directly undertaken the terribly difficult chore of portraying the human form engaged exclusively in homosexual acts or the homosexual lifestyle. These are the artists to whom I direct my criticism.

**Jack:** The marketplace here in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Europe, seems suddenly flooded with these gay artists of whom you speak. Nude and copulating forms seem everywhere.

**Rex:** Yes. And I find most of them have everything going for them but one vital ingredient: no real sense of real male sexuality. Much of their work is heavy in technique and low on originality, content, and realism.

**Jack:** From years of artists submitting to *Drummer*, I've noticed that instead of drawing authentic pictures based on the sex they've actually had or seen, many of them base their pictures on other pictures. Like Tom's. Like yours.

**Rex:** *Ersatz* sex. Erotic art without sex is like light without heat. Porn needs sex. If an artist lacks the facility to communicate real sexuality, then he should go into interior decorating, or portrait work, where his skills—and feeling—can be put to better use.

**Jack:** You use the terms *erotic art* and *porn* interchangeably.

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**Rex:** I prefer *porn*. There are no doubts as to its intention. It's like coining a four-letter Anglo-Saxon word from the Greek. Sometimes I say *erotic art*, but I prefer *porn*. That makes you stand up and be counted. Also, fanatics don't attack *erotic art* with the same verve they'll censor *porn*. And of course the word *art* intimidates all Americans. We all know we're suppose to "revere" *art* and "hate" *porn*. Aren't labels convenient? People naturally get confused when one is the other so I like to interchange them frequently when discussing these things. It keeps people thinking.

**Jack:** As an artist, are you a pornographer?

**Rex:** I certainly hope so! Otherwise I've got a lot of explaining to do to myself as to where the 1970s went.

Still, porn—like beauty—is in the eye of the beholder. In reality, much of the sex in my drawings is more ritually suggested than actually portrayed. But the end result should cause a hardon for men who like men. Really like men.

To be clear about Rex, one of the main purposes of erotically-charged gay art from toilet walls to museums is masturbation. Tom of Finland and other one-handed artists like Laguna surfer Skipper aka Glen Davis (1944-?), who drew for *Drummer* 15 and 186, talked of their process in connecting their penis-to-pen hardons to their viewers' hardons. Tom said, "If I don't have an erection when I'm doing a drawing, I know it's no good." Skipper added, "My drawing starts in my dick and the drawing's done when I cum. This can take hours."

Rex explained on his website:

It's all about the penis. The penis in all its varied "states" grabs your attention as little else does in life, If only for the fleeting moment of recognition and revulsion it takes to turn away from it. So the penis as "image" really does have the potential to emotionally and physically fulfill the maxim that art should "move you." In the case of pornography, the artist is presented with the option to literally move his viewer

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with “physical” results that few other art forms can match, bang for the buck.... It’s a win-win for both the artist who gets creative satisfaction from creating it, and an audience that often gets delirious “satisfaction” from viewing it.

**Jack:** You often load whole feature-length movies into the content of your single-frame drawings. Your realism, intensity, and content all turn some guys on and others off.

**Rex:** Yeah. Just like real life.

**Jack:** But aren’t you possibly too tough...too masculine?

**Rex:** One can never be too masculine in my book. But make sure you’ve got the right definition to that word too.

**Jack:** Why have you so defiantly devoted your considerable talent to *porn* as opposed to *art*?

**Rex:** I wanted to contribute something I felt people needed. It seemed to me the world didn’t need anymore portraits, still lifes, automobile ads, or clown faces. It seemed to me there was never enough porn. Then too, I like to think that porn separated the men from the boys. Art for me was too similar to entertainment, which in turn amuses you. Porn on the other hand—good porn that is—can shake you up, attract or repel you. True art has the ability to move, to change. But, on the whole, I think people dislike art because in reality they dislike being changed. Porn on the other hand asks nothing other than that you enjoy yourself—so powerfully that it actually changes a physical portion of your body from soft to hard. Perhaps porn is a kind of Super-Art. In my case too, porn allowed me to present a “type” of man who is perennially out of favor with the artistic “set” who find a nemesis in the hard-assed working-class hero.

**Jack:** How ironic because so many of them fancy “Marxism.”

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**Rex:** I think for gay men to have so underestimated the working-class male is very wrongheaded.

Unlike many published gay artists, Rex studied anatomy and was an intentional *flaneur* and voyeur of men on the streets. He was a Platonist in search of ideal body parts, making a fetish of classic chins, cocks, feet, and hands. Like Charles Atlas selling muscles in comic-book ads and Dr. Frank-N-Furter creating custom-made hunks in *The Rocky Horror Show*, in just seven days Rex could make you a man.

In 1984, during an afternoon picnic Mark Hemry and I hosted in our backyard for our friends David Hurles, Robert Mainardi, and Trent Dunphy, Rex, in an impromptu anatomy session asked me to put on my leather jacket to pose positioned with my wrist just-so, coming out of the sleeve, because he needed to make a Polaroid reference photo so he could sketch the exact angle of bone and flesh for the last tiny detail in his drawing “Pigsticker.”

Reversing the camera on Rex to shoot him for a reference photo was farcical. His longtime friend, tattoo artist Robert Roberts, told me about Rex’s reticence in terms of Roberts’ photo, “The Red Line”: “As you know, Rex adamantly avoided being recognized. He did, however, let me photograph his hand holding my grandfather’s plumb bob, then got all concerned that someone would recognize that it was his hand.”

In Summer 1987, Rex wrote with charming candor about his work and his marketing.

Dear Jack, As a follow-up to our conversation the other day, I’m enclosing the following items. 1. A copy of my present brochure, which you may or may not want to send out to your [Palm Drive Video] customers... 2. Here are some new works I don’t think you have. You may have seen them in censored versions in *Drummer* or *Inches*. It was just about a year ago [Summer 1984] I was up at your place with Bob and Trent and I made you pose with a leather “arm” for my “Pigsticker” drawing. So here’s a print of the finished version.

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Also, the “Cigar Face” [modeled on boxer Chuck Wepner] which I thought you’d like (another?) print of.... I’ve spent my whole year trying to develop these new “bum” faces—up to now it’s been hit or miss, close but not perfect.

In these last two drawings [in his *Armageddon* series whose shocking “Rex Man with Pan, the Goat” on the cover had to be censored and replaced with a Rex man hovering over a skull with a knife in its mouth while the Rex man sets fire to \$50 bills.]...I’ve finally hit the mark; got JUST what I wanted—no more, no less. I think the face on the cover art (burning the dollar bills) comes the closest to these new faces, but even he is not truly focused as are these new ones.

I always got good customers from David’s [Hurles/Old Reliable Video] mailing list; his photographs seemed to appeal to a type that would also like my drawings. I think your people [Palm Drive Video customers], off the beaten path, would also find them interesting. Write and let me know, or phone to speed things up. Best wishes, Rex

Rex was a good writer, an astute critic, and an intriguing artist-in-residence with his patrons and friends in San Francisco where in 1985 Mayor Dianne Feinstein controversially named him as one of the City’s one hundred most influential artists. In 2005 in our little on-again-off-again Bloomsbury, he wrote the introduction to *Speeding: The Old Reliable Photos of David Hurles*. To his dying day, Rex complained that his erstwhile friend David (1944-2023) never thanked him. Rex, like Shakespeare’s Iago, knew how to carry a grudge—even after David three years later suffered a drug-induced stroke in 2008 and spent fifteen nightmare years disabled in assisted living. When David died on April 12, eleven months before Rex, the man who kept an active frenemies blacklist, wrote, “My introduction to *Speeding* was eulogy enough for him to whom I haven’t spoken in thirty years.”

For twenty years from 1990 to 2011 when Rex made his escape to Amsterdam, Mainardi, author of *Hard Boys: Gay Artist Harry Bush*, and art collector Dunphy provided Rex with his own Larkin Street studio on the private second floor above their beautiful “olde

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curiosity shop” and photo archive where for fifty years they bought and sold collectible vintage erotica over the counter of their storefront, “The Magazine,” at 920 Larkin in the Tenderloin. In 2016, as art patrons devoted to preservation and history, they donated their four-story building to house and archive the physique photography and art of the Bob Mizer Foundation.

In 2012, Bob Mainardi (1946-2021) wrote:

Rex is one of the foremost artists of forbidden and politically incorrect sexual activity among men. His is more than merely “Gay art.” Rex the artist is a historian, a voyeur, a muckraker, and a trouble maker, a provocateur, a sensualist and a hedonist, the sensitive and observant portrayer of a secret world.... The world of leather and denim, steamy basements and grimy garages, anonymous sweaty tops and groveling sexpigs is perfectly suited to his black-and-white detailed and moody pointillistic renderings.

Rex, who had a mouth on him, told me Bob’s favorite artist was the Hun whom Rex did not like because the Hun could draw in two days what would take Rex two years. “I’ve analyzed this,” Rex said. “I’m jealous that the Hun can crank out the work so fast, really jealous of that. Then I justify it by saying the Hun’s work isn’t that good, but I don’t think that is just. A lot of people like his work. It’s very popular, more popular than my work today. He’s worked very hard at it. It’s work I’ve never liked. I think my work has a lot of taste. I’ve devoted my life to raising the standards of these things so that people will take it seriously. The Hun’s comic-book mindlessness to my eye—it might seem catty—but in a nice academic sense, it is just mindless. I think he’s a lunatic. So many young people are drinking him in and fashioning their fantasies around him. I see it as really detrimental. So many people prefer his work over mine, and I look at them and wonder.

“The Hun felt he was superior to me in language and everything. The weekend I was with him, well, I’m very forthright and rowdy. I talk a lot and use gutter language. He doesn’t talk like this. We drove around and whatever reaction I might have had to something,

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he would have just the opposite. It was like dragging a little old lady around. ‘Can we go to Knott’s Berry Farm?’ and ‘I can’t go out in the sun.’ And I’m thinking, this man is shoveling piles of piss on tortured campers? It just struck me as psychotic. I’ve had nothing to do with him since. He’s always tried to be very friendly to me and I’ve been very cold toward him.

“Bob here at the store,” Rex said, “is an intelligent man and sees it all, you know, but he’s also very naive, had a very sheltered sex life, hasn’t had the opportunity to do the things you and I did. He doesn’t relate to my work. To him it is unrealistic. I’ve had many people come up to me and say, where do you get these wild ideas? Even those medical things? Things, real things, that have actually happened to people.”

In 1981 I asked Rex, who so often drew from photographs, what photographers he admired.

**Rex:** There are two. Bob Mizer of Athletic Model Guild in Los Angeles has been photographing men for his AMG *Physique Pictorial* since about 1945. Nearly every man in America has come out on the subtlety of Mizer’s catalog of young American toughies wrestling in oil and posing in jockstraps, hard hats, and bodybuilder briefs. I think the brutal honesty of his lens is devastating in its ability to capture the quintessential sexuality of males as they “present it” to one another. His photographs are as unadorned as a passport photo with an immediacy which belies the fact they even are photographs—we see rather only a slice of life. For that reason, and because these are not “pretty” pictures, he has been overlooked by the gay media in general.

**Jack:** And the second photographer you admire?

**Rex:** David Hurles who runs Old Reliable Tapes and Photos [and would expand from four-minute silent Super-8 movies, still photography, and audio-cassette sextapes to video production in January 1982]. He’s a younger version of the Mizer School of Photography. Though documentary-like in tone, there is a subtle difference between Hurles and Mizer. The

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eye of Hurles works on more sophisticated content. His camera is totally unobtrusive, divested of any artifice whatsoever. Modesty prevails in these pictures and yet his photographs of young street hustlers and ex-cons vibrate with a straightforward vision of the world which most of us will never see or experience. These are the men you'd love to touch, but don't dare. Hurles is a genuine artist in this respect who, like Bob Mizer, seems to languish in the backwash of the gay media because the prerequisite "glamour" is not there.

Rex agreed when I recalled that when Bob Mizer who mentored Hurles died in 1992, David wrote one of the most touching and informative obituaries one friend has ever written for another.

**Jack:** Yes, it is odd that none of these men you've mentioned are really popular heroes in the gay media—raised to the stardom of Colt Studio or Fred Halsted.

Aggressively homomasculine Los Angeles film director Fred Halsted (1941-1989), the polar opposite of fashion designer Halston, was the *Drummer* columnist whose extremely Rexian leather movies, *LA Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage*, were inducted into the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in 1974. What Halsted intentionally made to be pornographic suddenly became avant-garde. The hemorrhoidal reaction of the politically correct to Halsted's mainstream validation led not to an embrace of Rex's work, but to the damning of leather culture and art in the *Village Voice* in 1975.

**Rex:** Yes, their total visions are, I think, just too heady for gay men generally. David Hurles, for instance, invests his photographs—by way of his street-hustler subjects—with a kind of terror a lot of time. Gays don't want terror anymore than they want real filth. Men, on the other hand, know terror and filth as simply more aspects of everyday life in the real world.





**Jack:** David said about himself and his work: “Terror is my only hardon.” Maybe the configuration of jerking off to terror reduces the stress of terror.

At this point in history, you seem like an artist working hard to maintain your vision and values in the midst of a gay paradise gone mad.

**Rex:** Perhaps. Do I sound too severe?

**Jack:** Probably. But how do you feel about being interviewed? Have you changed your mind about journalists?

**Rex:** Well, at least you haven’t asked me what’s my astrological sign.

Always on the hunt, Rex cruised out of his studio to sketch reference notes on location of real-life faces, bodies, penises, and postures of men enjoying themselves in truck stops, pool halls, steam baths, and USO waiting rooms at bus stations and airports. Mark and I once ran into him at San Francisco International when we were flying off to Paris, and he was, I suspect, hanging out there in the air terminal outside the open door of the busy USO Lounge, doing military recognizance of the cruising kind once so popular in Greyhound bus stations near army and naval bases. He later wrote that he so liked the postcard we sent him from the Louvre that he was going to use the figure on it for something, “maybe with angels,” saying he’d “never drawn angels, so it might be a sensuous bad angel.”

Rex had a talent for memorizing men of all kinds whose sex appeal he synthesized and amplified turning life into art. He once told me, “You’ve got to make ugliness dazzling.”

His Larkin Street studio was located, perfectly for him and his artist’s eye, in the skid-row slum of the Tenderloin district, the Rex Riviera, still lurid from its post-Gold Rush provenance of dive bars, pool parlors, boxing gyms, steam baths, burlesque joints, and vagrant men. To hit the sidewalks, he exited his studio through the street-floor vintage-magazine shop where Trent and Bob gave him archival access to literally millions of stimulating images in

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straight men's adventure magazines like *Saga*, *Stag*, and *Man's Life* which he referenced the same way Mapplethorpe found inspiration in the photos in 1960s gay magazines like *Physique Pictorial* and *Tomorrow's Man* in 42nd Street adult bookstores.

One example of Rex using pop-culture magazines as sources for his portraiture explains his gift for transforming offbeat beauty into beat-off art. In "Cigar Face," dated 3-10-85, he pictured his dramatic black-and-white close-up portrait, a gorgeous gargoyle, of champion heavyweight boxer Chuck Wepner—who fought Muhammad Ali—based on a color photo of Wepner on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, March 24, 1975.

That delighted me because I had saved and framed the Wepner cover of that issue when it arrived in my mailbox in 1975, and could instantly measure how Rex amplified sports reality into the sexual fantasy of erotic art. He dot-dot-dotted the intensity of Wepner's brutalist face and eyes, ingeniously adding a phallic stub of aggressive cigar, like the tongue of a grimacing Maori mask, delivering to the homomasculine gaze all the sexual threat and pugnacious menace the ugly-beautiful beast Wepner had on offer. When I complimented him on transforming this cover, he blushed as if he'd been "found out," as if his borrowing were plagiarism, but he quickly recovered with a little lecture about the synthetic creativity of sourcing images. He said Picasso said, "Art is theft."

**Jack:** Your drawings seem to feature these ordinary men—almost a kind of Everyman—in basically ordinary situations. They're rough-cut types—aggressive, obsessed.

**Rex:** They seem like normal men to me. Don't get me wrong. I enjoy beautiful people, but I'm suspect of beauty and its toll on the human condition. I've seen "beauty" close-up and it's not a pretty sight. So-called plain, ordinary, or even ugly people seem to have much nicer personalities in the long run.

**Jack:** Is that why you don't draw conventionally "beautiful" people?

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**Rex:** Actually, I don't think my particular audience is interested in beautiful people. On the other hand, many of my supporters have often commented to me on the "beauty" of these characters. So it's all in the eye of the beholder and where you're coming from, not where I'm coming from, as to whether I draw beautiful people. I'm also a realist and I'm aware that 95% of all men in this world are not beautiful. I know this fact and my audience knows it. We never went into this hunt looking for beauty. We were after men.

**Jack:** Do you prefer ugly people?

**Rex:** The concept is almost unknown to me. What others call ugly I've often found quite beautiful. Beauty always announces itself to the eye from a great distance. I spot it, but it bores me. To be young and beautiful is the easiest thing in the world to be. What fascinates me is how people endure when nature turns against them, is no longer on their side. Here the plot thickens and the real beauty—if there is any—will shine through. That's the only beauty I truly appreciate.

If the Platonic Ideal of a real-life Rex model could pose repeatedly for Rex, or star in a movie treating Rex's work as a cohesive graphic novel, he would be heteromasculine British actor Tom Hardy who is the incarnate archetype of virtually all of Rex's rugged homomascularity in his hard body and many faces tender to tough from his motorcycle outlaw in *Bike Riders* to his Mafia gangster in *Capone*, his prisoner in *Bronson*, his MMA fighter in *Warriors*, and his road-warrior outlaw in *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

**Jack:** How would you advise others to "judge" the appearance of other men?

**Rex:** First, forget about "pretty." The hard truth is men are not pretty. Pretty is a transient quality. Character endures. Men endure.

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**Jack:** Do you wish there were more men featured in today's porn and fewer pretty boys?

**Rex:** No. I'm not that opposed because I know pretty is the beginning and end for so many others. Let them have their pleasure. I object more that so much of today's porn suffers from "staging." Poor America, she's so manipulated. In the old days, a camera filmed people having sex, and we called it porn. Today, people have sex in order to perform on camera, and we call that porn. Think that last line over again.

**Jack:** One is real. The other is acting.

**Rex:** You see what I'm saying is that the energy of today's porn is different, and as such I think audiences sense it with growing dissatisfaction. I've noticed how many men react instinctively when they view "old" vintage porn—black and white, unprofessional models doing it in some motel room and being badly photographed. They're rife with blemishes, don't have on a touch of leather, and have bad bodies. Oh, but somehow the "reality" really excites viewers. Today's gay porn consumer isn't entitled to one single mysterious shadow on face or body. In glamorizing porn we've also made it dull.

**Jack:** What do gays who buy *Drummer* and publications like it end up with?

**Rex:** *Ersatz* men, I suppose.

### 3

## MATTRESSES STAINED WITH THE MEMORY-FOAM OF MANSEX

Rex draws for big boys grown up enough to face their fantasies that must be fed. Like a toy machine gun, his Rapidograph pen rat-a-tats the dots he shoots into his target images. Cameras shoot at the speed of light. Drawing takes longer. He once told *Drummer* that he often has to do sixty or seventy versions of something to get the final version right. Culling those versions with a big game hunter's eye, he

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builds and captures an essence and accuracy the viewer's experience confirms.

Who hasn't been to the baths and bars and after-hours clubs and seen and felt, but been unable to capture in words or graphics, exactly the *frisson* and soul which Rex communicates in his *Rexwerk* drawing "Bathhouse"? That drawing was one of the five I published in *Son of Drummer*, helping readers get into his drawings with expository titles like "21 Tongues" and "Mad Doctor."

In his "Bathhouse," which is a heptptych of interconnected scenes like six film frames of male sex circling on a Grecian urn, Rex shows cinematic brilliance about the flow of serial sex romping, and deserves respect for his Edward Muybridge-like capturing the athletic joys of Dionysian promiscuity.

Rex was inspired by his experiences at both the original and new St. Mark's Baths (1965-1985) in New York which as the largest gay bath in the world was a centripetal Xanadu of spinning international DNA and divine decadence before politics and plague destroyed the sanctuaries of bathhouse culture. Once upon the Titanic 1970s, before the iceberg of AIDS, the St. Mark's halls and cubicles offered the dedicated sex tourist, voyeur, and vagrant cocksucker more peepholes and gloryholes per square inch of plywood than a grille in a priest's confessional.

When latter-day people shake their judgy heads and cluck out the bias of hindsight that leathermen didn't know what was lurking around the corner, well, who does?

"Bathhouse" is his nostalgic homage to the sexy, seedy glory of the tubs now gone with the wind. Each cubicle in the drawing sweats with Rex's S&M humidity: hairy, buzz-clipped and rough-shaved, muscular, tattooed men, tramps, thieves, vagabonds, killers, decked in the stuff of fetish trips he makes you see, smell, and taste—armpits, toenails, smelly socks, pissy jocks, sweaty uniforms, dirty jackboots, and outhouse leathers. Cocks drip cheese through thick lips of hood-winking foreskins that were his signature body part. Nipples big as pencil erasers stand erect on hairy pecs. Rex's roustabouts live on the wrong side of the tracks in no-tell motels with mattresses stained with the memory foam of mansex.

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In 1977, when I assigned Mapplethorpe to shoot the cover for *Drummer* 24, I asked him to use my friend and playmate Elliot Siegal, the manager of St. Mark's, as his model because Elliot looked like a human version of the kind of hard man *Drummer* iconized and Rex drew. Mapplethorpe so liked the scruffy biker-punk authenticity of Elliot that he shot him and his lover Dominick in 1979 for two pictures in his *X Portfolio* of thirteen signed gelatin silver prints in a black-cloth clamshell case which Sotheby's called "one of the most provocative ensembles of photographs in the history of art."

Linking Robert and Rex to equate them because Rex's portfolios were as important as Robert's, I published *Drummer* 24 with its Mapplethorpe cover simultaneously with my specially curated New York Art issue, *Son of Drummer*, in September 1978, placing my article "The Robert Mapplethorpe Gallery (Censored)" next to my article "Rex Revisited" with a centerfold by Tom of Finland, drawings by Etienne and Bill Ward and Harry Bush, and photographs by David Warner, and Lou Thomas of Target Studio, and erotic fiction by poet Thom Gunn aka Sam Browne. In those pages, I printed nine photos from Mapplethorpe's forthcoming *X Portfolio* alongside five drawings from Rex's portfolio magazine-books, *Icons* and *The Paladin File*, published by Trading Post Enterprises, 960 Folsom Street, in San Francisco.

Because of Rex and Robert, gay history took a legal step forward in 1979 to protect the rights of the people who create gay media. Immediately upon publication, my *Son of Drummer*, my passion project promoting my two friends, became involved in likely the first gay copyright infringement suit in the United States when *Blueboy* publisher Don Embinder aka Don Westbrook (1935-2017), infamous in American media for his business associations with the Mafia in gay bars, hotels, and publishing, bound several thousand copies of the copyrighted 62-page *Son*, most of which I'd written, inside an issue of the *Blueboy*-owned *Numbers* magazine.

*Drummer* attorney Steven Ames Brown said that Embinder in Florida thought it was a joke when *Drummer* dared file suit in the U.S. District Court in San Francisco; but Embinder lusting

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to include the stylish Rex and Robert in his gay vanilla lifestyle magazines, stopped laughing when, to avoid trial in 1981, Blueboy, Inc. settled to credit *Drummer* \$20,000 of advertising space inside *Blueboy* over three years.

Back in Rex's day, the Mafia was always trying to get in gay pants. In 1979, a few months after the publication of *Son of Drummer*, Rex who knew the Mafia first hand, laughed when I told him that Don Embinder had telephoned to ask if he could hire me away to write for *Blueboy*, and I told him writing *Drummer* was quite enough.

Embinder coveted my "Rex Revisited" feature because he wanted the Rex drawings:

Rex has a new series called *The Paladin File*, a portfolio of quality 8x10 glossy photo reproductions of his latest work. Their quality insures the fidelity and minimum loss of detail which have made Rex drawings a hallmark.

Set No. 1 is called "On the Road." Not a story, it is five different drawings never published before, set in the world of truckers and transients along the highways of America. The men are brutal, primitive, fine.

Set No. 2 is titled "Leathermen." This is the world of black leather, bikes, bondage, and submission. Each set contain five 8x10 glossies suitable "as is" for framing and holding in one hand. Each set: eight bucks. Two sets: fifteen. All photos: super-hot! New sets are to come. Smart man.

Rex has located Rexwerk in San Francisco because in the coming 1980s, he predicts, San Francisco, particularly South of Market, SOMA, will be to erotic male artists what Hollywood was for film artists in the Golden 1930s. San Francisco is now the Dream Factory. For homomasculine men, South of Market is the Back Lot, and Rexwerk is the major erotic studio.

Rexwerk Gallery is open by appointment only on Saturdays and Sundays from 6 to 9 PM. Call for appointment: (415) 863-18XX. If you can't wait to get to the Source of It All, send a \$4 check or money order made out to Drawings by Rex, Box 347, San Francisco, CA 94101. You'll get three

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glossy 8x10 prints on Kodak photographic stock insuring faithful reproduction and minimum loss of the fine detail to help you make it through the night.

Rex is our gay Ovid—the ancient Roman poet who changed people into animals in his *Metamorphoses*—because Rex always surrounds the metamorphoses of his homosurreal and amoral alpha beasts with the taboo iconography of bestiality: dogs, horses, goats, snakes, monkeys, and apes morphing into humans. His men themselves are a magical bestiary of sex dawgs and dogs, pigs, and bears who don't give a fuck and will fuck you up. The seductive adrenaline threat of his forbidden but irresistible animality is palpable: “Don't throw me into that briar patch.” You don't want to look, but your gay gaze can't look away. You dare not risk inviting real-life hard men into your lovely home, but you can feed your hungry head while holding a Rex drawing of a magnificent manimal in one hand.

In drawing after drawing, like storyboard frames for a narrative film by Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, or Kenneth Anger, Rex dots his dudes into existence as veterans of male initiation rites and rituals in factories, prisons, and the military. His men are a roll call of rough romance: sturdy blue-collars who suck, fuck, fight, drink, drug, and dominate in rooms of falling plaster, naked light bulbs, dripping washbasins, a shower down the hall, the floor littered with the macho refuse of their mondo-sleazo juke-joint pleasures, Budweiser beer cans, crushed Lucky Strike packs, guns in the glove box of a pickup truck, knives, drug syringes, and condom scumbags.

If war-baby Rex, who said he loved Europe from reading hundreds of grownup books as a boy, had a literary avatar, it was Genet mixed with his selfie character Querelle in his novel *Querelle de Brest* (1945) with illustrations by Cocteau. Genet's opening pages, all of them, are pure “Rex” who could also have illustrated the novel. The way Genet himself was the two maids (played by male actors) role-playing their mistress in his 1947 stage drama *The Maids*, Rex was both Genet and Genet's own avatar, the man Querelle, in his homosurreal drawings sleazing through waterfront saloons, dens of thieves and sailors and hustlers, and leather bars where serial

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fuckers, rough sex, drugs, sadomasochism, and sodomy measured manliness.

In Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1982 film *Querelle*, the homo-masculine actor Brad Davis (1949-1991)—who, small-boned at five-foot-nine, had the same lean physique and height as Rex—plays Querelle in this gay screen classic whose operatic leathery art direction overtly styled after the fashion of Tom of Finland could just as well have been styled on Rex. It's amusing that with Rex militantly hiding his birth information, the last shot of *Querelle* is a picture of Querelle/Genet's handwritten birth certificate with a voice-over saying, "Father unknown. Apart from his books we know nothing about him."

In 1978, Rex created a close-up drawing of a leatherman with his tongue licking out the mouth of an overflowing condom that Robert Opel used as an invitation to Rex's opening at Opel's Fey-Way art gallery. Each mailed invitation arrived with an actual condom glued on by Rex himself. On the condom, the printing in tiny four-point black ink on the yellowish rubber read: "Rex Originals, Fey-Way Studios, 1287 Howard St., San Francisco, April 8-19 [1978]. Reception for the Artist. April 7, 8-11 PM. Admits 2." Prime among all the clever 1970s mixed-media pop-art objects, and invocative of Satanist Aleister Crowley's actual dots of sperm ejaculate reproduced across the cover of his book *White Stains* (1898), this rubbery archived invitation for *Rex at Fey-Way* is precious fragile. With themes of Satanic hedonism, Rex, like Mapplethorpe, often pictured the face of the Devil in his work.

**Jack:** Your drawings are intricately littered with working-class debris.

**Rex:** Yes. The exhaust of real life. No designer sheets.

Rex's men celebrate the independence of their physical bodies and sexual choices defying Mom's Apple Pie, the Golden Rule, and the American flag the anarchist artist wanted to burn. His hard men we can't keep our eyes off are the "trash" our parents warned us about, and the forbidden stranger danger makes us hard. His men are icons of the rugged gender identity that homomascuine men

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adore: an endangered erotic micro-orientation of virility we boys grow up protecting, against all odds, in our own secret Boy Scout hearts despite blowback from straight men and vanilla gay men who forget about the diversity and range and beauty of all the alternative masculinities on the Kinsey Scale from drag queen men to knock-down-and-drag-out leathermen.

His homosurrealism in his drawings like his identical conjoined twins sharing two torsos and two dicks in *Sex-Freak Circus*, dated 7-30-91, reveals the *doppelgänger* truth of identity and psychology that his play-pal Thom Gunn offers in his Barracks bathhouse story, “Star Clone,” in *Son of Drummer* and in his Barracks poems: “1975,” “Saturday Night,” and “In The Corridor.” Gunn’s morphing men are brothers to the men Rex renders.

## 4

### REX AND THOM GUNN: PINBALL PICTURE AND POEM

Thom Gunn (1929-2004) and Rex—the leather poet and the leather artist—were friends with benefits who met by chance on Friday, November 7, 1975, when Gunn flew from San Francisco to New York, and headed out to cruise the Ramrod bar at 394 West Street in Greenwich Village. The British immigrant Gunn, at forty-seven, was the internationally famous San Francisco author of the leathery *My Sad Captains* (1961) and, later, *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992). Rex and I never had sex, but we had Thom in common as a playmate.

New Yorker Rex, at thirty, was suddenly famous because only four months before he and his art had been profiled in that scandalous anti-S&M feature article in the *Village Voice*. Gunn wrote in his diary for that November 7: “I go out, & in Rr [Ramrod bar, one minute from Rex’s apartment] meet Rex, of the drawings [Village Voice], & go home w/him for nite, nice long & mental.” In December 1980, Rex gave Thom the “Rex Calendar 81” inscribed: “Thom: Good Luck in 81.—Rex.”

Rex was proud of his best-selling series of three Mineshaft calendars. On New Year’s Eve, 1982, he posed for Mineshaft photographer George Dudley who shot Rex smiling and holding his

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1983 “Miner with a Pickaxe” calendar, standing with manager Wally Wallace next to the Mineshaft’s main bar. There’s a more famous “Rex” photo by Richard Young of Freddie Mercury partying at Legends Nightclub in London, 1979, wearing a white T-shirt with one of Rex’s Mineshaft silk-screened drawings on his chest. Mercury, who read *Drummer*, also wore a Rex T-shirt under his leather jacket in Queen’s 1978 music video, “Don’t Stop Me Now.”

On March 1, 1981, Gunn wrote: “I am invited to opening of Rex’s show on Hallam Alley. I take Allen Day [1941-1987, the S&M pen-and-ink artist aka ‘Strider’ whom Gunn helped move from Boston to San Francisco in 1977]. Afterward, we go to Brig for a short while.”

Rex had drawn a poster, “The Liberating Experience,” for the Brig, now the Powerhouse, at 1347 Folsom Street, that was owned from 1978-1983 by German immigrant Hank Diethelm. He fascinated Rex, who was erotically envious, because at fourteen Hank had been drafted into the Hitler Youth before he was rescued by American soldiers in 1945 when Rex was one year old. In 1983, a trick from the Brig murdered Hank in an S&M bondage scene in his home which was set on fire.

Back in that day when just walking in the door of an anything-goes leather bar was considered permission enough, gladiators in the consensual arena, just for kicks, played at public sex in plain sight as part of the do-it-yourself floor shows in the bars and baths because if you want something to happen at the high-school dance, you have to make it happen. The difference between a straight whorehouse and a gay bath is that at the bath the patrons are the whores.

When Rex learned the German word for such horseplay, he titled both volumes of his 1976 portfolios *Männnespeilen*. On July 11, 1985, ten years into their friendship, Gunn wrote: “Tied up Rex’s cock in the Ambush. & an awful sissy brt me home but soon left.”

Their simpatico S&M bond was enduring, nurturing, and productive. On Christmas Day in 1996, Gunn was invited to Christmas dinner at a friend’s apartment: “About 14 there, inc Rex, with whom I arrange for [San Francisco journalist-historian-curator] R[obert] Prager [died 2014] to interview.

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The pointillist and the poet worked our milieu of bars studying the “Nighthawk” faces, poses, and postures of male leathersex in SOMA. Both hung out at the Ambush bar on Harrison Street where Chuck Arnett tended bar, and the colorful pinball machine stationed to the right of the door as you entered welcomed you into the dark bar. The social life around that pinball was so popular I think it may have been that exact pinball machine that Gunn and Rex iconized in their work—although it could be any pinball in any bar.

I paid attention to such cultural convergences, because to me, as editor-in-chief of *Drummer* living the life and seeking new content for a hungry monthly magazine, both artists were documenting specifics of our SOMA sex culture we all knew even then before AIDS could not last forever. In *Drummer* 24, September 1978, at the same time I published the feature on Rex, I wrote the leather satire, “Castro Street Blues,” with the admonitory tag line: “Years from now when you read this—and you will read this—remember The Way We Were (1978 Style).” Which is what we are doing now.

In 1979, Gunn and Rex, possibly triggering each other trading bar gossip over coffee, simultaneously created matching pinball art. Gunn produced a graphic of his pinball poem “Bally *Power Play*” as carefully as Rex drew the spermy pinball picture he completed January 26, 1979, picturing rough beasts hanging around the pinball machine in the Ambush bar where artist Lou Rudolph [1951-1992] also often sat sketching the “cabaret” scene on location like Toulouse-Lautrec and Otto Dix drawing the nocturnal under-worlds of Paris in the 1890s and Berlin in the 1930s.

Observing the choreography of postures and “bodily gestures” in gay bars, Thom and Rex realized that pinball machines brightened up the dark with their big attractive windshields of flashing painted glass that rang up the score and lit the action-packed faces and torsos of the players and gamers. In fact, negotiating the playing field of the noisy pinball machine without going “tilt” is akin to negotiating the playing field of the bar itself reflected in the pinball’s Freudian array of lights, noise, spring-loaded plunger rod, banana

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flippers, bumpers, rollovers, free balls, captive balls, kick-out holes, and the drain at the bottom where balls are lost.

In the pop culture of fisting, the pelvic thrusts of crotch and belt buckle thrown by the player leaning into the pinball machine call attention to the performance of his powerful forearms and hands fit for fisting, and undulating butt suitable for rimming and fisting. As American artists, Gunn and Rex—whose drawings would be perfect for the lit back-glass of a Bally pinball machine—both felt the pop-art call of the game the same as the painter Wayne Thiebaud with his “Four Pinball Machines” and Warhol with his Polaroid photograph “Pinball.” Is it any wonder Mapplethorpe had a pinball machine in his studio?

So, being cool in an age of mixed media and collage, Gunn, to help raise money for social justice, allowed his “Bally *Power Play*” words to be designed into a small graphic poster by the Massey Press who published his “Bally” as a single-poem broadsheet of four leaves, in a small folio, limited edition, of ninety with thirty-five signed, on handmade paper, 10x15, hand-printed by David Brooks of Massey Press, illustrated by Mary Harman (not by Rex) and sold to benefit the Body Politic Defense Fund.

At the same moment, Rex was selling prints of his four brutalist leather pinballers (plus one manspreading knee) grinding into the Ambush pinball machine to his own list of clients, and through *Drummer* mail-order to thousands of readers. Mary Harman’s polite depiction of Gunn’s pinball machine may have suited the straight fundraiser, which, loosening its modesty, could have tripled its money at a leather-bar fundraiser if Gunn had insisted on a second very impolite version illustrated with Rex’s pinballers. In that charmed 1970s-1980s circle of friends, Rex in the round robin of peers was to Gunn what Gunn was to Mapplethorpe and Mapplethorpe was to Rex and Rex was to Tom of Finland.

Ranking Rex and Tom, French editor Ralf Marsault in 1986 described the unique Rex as “One in a Century” in *Rexwerk*, his book of fifty drawings (1975-1985), with its blood-red cover emblazoned with Rex’s stark black-and-white drawing “Phoenix.”

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The ever-mysterious Rex dedicated *Rexwerk*: “For Jim [who is “Jim”?] who is so much a part of these drawings.”

Rex gave me a copy of this limited edition *Rexwerk* hand-stamped number “0572.” About the art of Rex and his Rapidograph pen, Ralf Marsault wrote in *Rexwerk*:

Enter into this arena of exclusively male violence. [Too often writers, critics, and scholars analyzing the S&M kink scene use the word *violence* which is non-consensual action when what they are describing is consensual *action* which is the true word to use.] But in order to face the Ringmaster of this superbly insolent danger, we will have to grovel. For to be like Rex is to renounce our ideas, abdicate our origins and to accept in silence, kneeling in communion before The Dot.... Rex is unique in this century.

Rex who knew art history engaged with ideas and psychology to relate to his audience in his black-and-white tenebrism not unlike Caravaggio who in rich dark colors also depicted visceral groups of languorous, almost lewd, S&M men going at each other, top and bottom, in chiaroscuro scenes of homoerotic action. Rex drew his pictures from an insistent masochistic voyeur point of view because most people looking at porn choose a bottom’s psychology in their sensual search for domination and worship.

Drawing alpha men to conjure orgasm was good business. In the magic world of recreational sex fantasies, bottoms search for tops so the top can, in all the coded roles of Master/Coach/Cop/Dad/DI/Trainer, work/beat the shit out of the bottom; get the bottom’s shit/act together; and basically save/transfigure the bottom from the graceless impotence of his worthy/unworthy self washed clean in a baptism of piss and a shower of sperm.

A porn fan loves porn that scratches his masochistic itch for bottoming because he gets to be forced to be bad so it’s not his fault. *Drummer* courted this guilty pleasure, cultivated this masochistic gay gaze, so successfully that thousands of men sent us money demanding more so that by 1978 we were printing 42,000 copies of each monthly issue. During its twenty-four years of 214 issues,

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*Drummer* presented artists like Rex to millions of international readers.

## 5

### REX, RELIGION, AND RIMBAUD

Some guys have a favorite Rex drawing that gets them off while dismissing another Rex work they “can’t stand because it’s, well, too heavy!” To each his own. *Heavy*, like *beauty*, is in the eye of the beholder. Does anyone like all the work of any one artist? *Drummer* 12 warned: “He draws his icons from his own world. The world of Rex excludes you or draws you in, at your own risk.”

Rex had warned the *Village Voice* about his inclusive gay gaze which was, especially in New York, an erotic ethnic attraction not unique to him. “Young Puerto Ricans are born into sex and they’re tough. They’re gonna murder someone in a few years—and they’re like the ‘Mona Lisa’ to me.”

Rex cornered this niche market in tandem with our mutual friend David Hurles who said of his own Old Reliable street hustler models, “I would rather sniff the armpits of a tough young Mexican boxer after a fight than climb between clean sheets with a Colt model.”

How perfect if over the years when I bought David tattoos for two of his birthdays in 1977 and 1982, we’d only thought to ink him with a Rex original after the fashion of the illustrated tattoo artist in Rex’s “Tattoo Works.” But that was years before Rex began designing tattoos for clients.

In 2018, Robert “Mad Dog” Roberts wrote in his book, *Mad Dogs and Queer Tattoos: Tattooing the San Francisco Queer Revolution*:

After I got my first tattoo... I got another tattoo which I asked my friend, porn-noir artist Rex, to design. It was two hearts connected by a lock, with flowers and the phrase “True Love.”...[When I started tattooing], business for me really jumped thanks to my friend Rex, who did an interview of me for *Drummer* magazine [issue 112, 1988] titled “Prick the Skin,” putting me in an international spotlight. [With Rex freelancing tattoo designs as a side hustle, Roberts recalled

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inking a client's] abdomen and pubic area with a tattoo designed for him by Rex.

Had he wished, Rex could have been a great tattooer. The designs on his figures [the tattoos he drew on his Rex men] aren't just hasty representations of any old piece of ink. They are immaculate little gems, some interpretive, others quite original, and they glow with the best qualities of tattoo conception: tight design perfectly balancing elements of dark and light, as well as provocative body placement.

Rex's style of pointillism, sometimes called "stipple," is in the tradition of the great pen-and-ink illustrators such as Virgil Finlay, Wallace Wood, and Berni Wrightson. The use of dots to build form is readily adaptable to tattooing and works well in combination with standard techniques.

In the autumn of 2005, Roberts began tattooing Rex's friend, Clyde Wildes, with Rex tattoos. He inked Wildes' arms, but time and tide canceled a shield-size full-back tattoo that—reproducing the sex-gangster cover of Rex's *Armageddon*—would also have nestled the face of a tongue-flicking sinister Satan chin deep into the top of Wildes' callipygian cleft. The image on his left shoulder and biceps replicated Rex's drawing of boxer Chuck Wepner that Rex based on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. If any one face-portrait represents signature Rex, it's Wepner.

In his 2018 book, Roberts was kind even though Rex, his Brutus, had wounded him deeply. Clyde Wildes noted, "For years, Rex and Mad Dog were inseparable. When Mad Dog's partner Tim died in 2007, he decided to leave San Francisco and move to Palm Springs. Rex took the news of Robert leaving San Francisco very hard and never forgave him." In the way Rex dumped his friend David Hurles, he dumped Roberts who was born April 19, 1947, and died of cancer eight months after Rex on November 5, 2024.

Rex dreamed up his drawings to please himself, but he welcomed patrons who kept the starving artist afloat by buying his tattoo designs, T-shirts, and portfolio books. The first drawing in *Rexwerk* is a kneeling leatherman, 10-30-83, inviting you, rather like a Rex Selfie, into the book he's holding with a raised forefinger

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beckoning, “Come here. I dare you.” Some ideas work too well not to repeat.

In 1994, the Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation, a new museum seeking attention at 127 Prince Street in New York, titled its October 25 to November 26 exhibition *Rex: Persona Non Grata* and sent out glossy limited-edition postcard invitations like the 2-16-92 drawing of a Rex Man tattooed with “USMC” and “Tiger” while horsing around with his friend tattooed with the horsey name “Flicka.” A second postcard featured a tight close-up of fingertips pulling apart a foreskin revealing the glans of a cock head inked, as if tattooed, with the signature word *Rex* drawn by Rex.

His drawing, “21 Tongues,” 8-15-76, was commissioned by one of Rex’s close patrons. The title, he told me, was a personal joke between them because there are not twenty-one tongues in the drawing. Perhaps the client was a priest satirizing the traditional Catholic hymn, “Pange, Lingua” [“Sing, My Tongue”] written by theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) to celebrate men bonding with the perfect Body of Christ. Various composers have created musical fantasies of the hymn. Why couldn’t Rex who delighted in drawing sacrilegious pictures of S&M monks and priests draw one?

As if pointing out the sacred, *Drummer* 12 reported in 1977 that Rex titled his 1976 book of “sex worship” and “rugged communion,” *Icons*. Rex, a nonsmoker, whom I never saw under the influence of any substance, seemed to be white English-Irish-French stock whose work, like Mapplethorpe’s, smacked of cultural, if not personal, Catholicism in the religious iconography of several drawings like his exquisite monks of the Inquisition.

Kinksters thrive on gay codes of double entendre and ritual worship. Aquinas’ text of Transubstantiation trembles with homoerotic desire to become One with the Alpha-and-Omega Man, Christ, with carnal lyrics that could caption “21 Tongues” about *flesh* and *blood* and *seed* and *hand* and *man with man* and *adoration* and *newer rites*.

Whatever the sacrilegious joke, this specific drawing has universal appeal to consumers of fetish pornography seeking domination and submission. In his work, Rex is an empath who feels their needy

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lust and feeds it with his gods and monsters, like the vampire in the drawing dated 10-3-82. He is a sideshow barker who attracts them into his carnival tent to give them what they want or what he thinks they need so he can sell their sex thrills back to them via mail-order.

“21 Tongues,” with its own “theme song/hymn,” is also a “holy picture” in the gay religion of Eros and Priapus. Rex’s design here evokes religious art in its placement of its figures. It’s all about worship of the ritual kind acted out nightly in the sanctuaries of back-room bars, bathhouses, and the Church of Saint Priapus founded, with its confessional gloryholes, in San Francisco in 1973. Viewers identify with the naked thirst of his groundling acolytes kneeling along the Communion Rail of the Piss Trough eager to receive and worship the elevated alpha male who streams a powerful flood of piss down on them, dick in one hand, and one hand on his heart, in the way the elevated Christ streams rays of grace down from his bleeding wounds on thronging worshipers in centuries of traditional religious paintings of Christ, such as Raphael’s *Transfiguration* in which unworthy humans kiss the feet of godhead.

In a kind of 1950s Hollywood sci-fi drawing dated 9-20-82, Rex channeled gay German Symbolist Sascha Schneider’s 1904 “Hypnosis” to create his solo leather Superhero—whose Superpower is the Gay Gaze itself—with long, force-projecting laser beams shooting out of his eyes like Superman’s X-ray Vision.

Rex’s worship is men. Rex’s religion is anticlericalism at its best. In several drawings, he reduces worship, and religion itself, and Catholicism especially, down to orgies of depraved priests, blasphemous monks, and debauched altar boys in his bawdy Chaucerian scenes that could have illustrated Maria Monk’s 1836 classic book *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, or, *The Hidden Secrets of a Nun’s Life in a Convent*. Going way beyond the pietistic sadomasochism so beloved by Fundamentalist Christians cuming in their popcorn boxes at Mel Gibson’s bloody S&M fetish movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, Rex could make his “Passion of the Christ” irresistible to gay sadomasochists with a taste for blasphemy.

In the January 3, 1991, *Bay Area Reporter*, Rex, the disruptive activist, wrote a bare-knuckle Declaration of Independence:

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I think as a child I wanted to grow up and become an Anarchist because I was so repelled by the perpetual venality on which American society operates—all doxed up in the U.S. flag, crucifixes clanking ominously whenever a new thought appears in the room. All the great museums and universities of the world, including the Vatican, contain their prized collections of Pornographic Art. Nearly every great artist from Michelangelo to Picasso has tried his hand at Pornographic Art. The artist exists to make waves. You have to take chances. Do whatever people don't want you to say or do or be. The forbidden has power. You'll note that Pornography has only two real critics: the Church and the State. Everyone else seems to know where babies come from and what goes on in the real world when the lights go out. And what goes on is that during sex—and thoughts about sex—Church and State lose their suffocating control over our minds. For those precious minutes they cease to exist in our lives. Censorship is a desecration of the artist's idea. So drawing Dirty Pictures is very much an act of Civil Disobedience, much more satisfying and probably more productive than burning the flag... So I decided to become a Pornographic Artist... I think when Pornographic Art is well done, it does come close to Anarchy. But it has to be very well done, and that's very rare. But it's what I strive for—to really get their juices flowing till they lose control: That's Anarchy. The gay press is going through a conservative time. There is a conspiracy of silence. They're frightened and intimidated. At first, I put up with it. I left out cum and fucking. [Now] I'm only drawing what can't be published.

At the same moment the scandalous Mapplethorpe obscenity trial raged in Ohio in September 1990, my friend and collaborator, former *Drummer* editor John Rowberry who had become editor of *Uncut* magazine, reviewed Rex's new publication, *Rexland*, with the sardonic warning of gay self-censorship: "We can only show you one of them in this 'family magazine'... [and] only hint at the subject matter of the other eleven."

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In 1995, when Rex, the profane theologian, was proposing a series of erotic drawings based on the Bible, he told me: “You once were Catholic. You must know your Bible backwards and forwards. I don’t. I have no religious training whatsoever of any kind. I’m very lucky which is one reason I think I’ve always been so open-minded. I didn’t have to overcome any guilt or anything. The downside though is, outside of the movies, I never learned anything about some of the great sadistic sexual stories of the Bible. The Bible always struck me as one of the most barbarous and obscene and earthy books. It’s been re-written so many times, even by gay guys [the gay King James I of England self-published his bespoke King James Bible in 1611], why not draw *The Bible According to Rex*?”

“The punishments,” he said, “are so cruel and so out of proportion and everything is so black and white. Good and evil are on a preposterous level. In that sense, it is such a wonderful piece of literature. The fact that I’ve always hated it, it is time for me to come to grips with it and make something aesthetically out of it in my own art life. The male ‘Dance of the Seven Veils.’ Magnificent biblical faces. I think the sexual aspect lends itself to a perfect S&M script. I don’t want to do it as a joke. I want it to look so serious that it will move religious people.

“I must tell you,” he prophesied, “I don’t approve of religion. I think it is the cause of all evil because it politicizes it, like nationalism. All the religions come to the same kind of nastiness. The world is in desperate need of spiritual awakening. Not a religious awakening. Everyone is searching and instead of looking into our own abilities we have to constantly fall back on these tenth-rate religions. All the religions right now are on the offensive and they’re all growing, whether it’s Jehovah’s Witnesses or Billy Graham or Islam or the Catholics or the Mormons, they are all just going nuts, all over the planet. In Russia, religion is booming.

“It’s 1995,” he said, “and I’m thinking about the next century. Am I going to put ten years into my Bible project, or my *Peter Pan* project? In *Peter Pan: The Lost Episode*, I want to tackle something we all think we know: death. I’ll make the whole thing happen at night in the dark in eleven sex scenes, and a cover, with filthy sailors.

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“I don’t want to clash with any other Peter Pan concepts. I want to make it as nasty as I have ever done in a room, like a dungeon, full of candles to give it a religious quality and a sinister quality. That’s what makes my pictures work for masochists.”

Living near San Francisco’s waterfront Barbary Coast, the historic vice district next to the Tenderloin, Rex hoisted the Jolly Roger of pirates targeting established authority. “Captain Hook,” he said, “is a natural for this, already sinister. I looked for him for a long time and finally found him, a wonderful rat-faced character in a comic book. He’s one of the ugliest characters I’ve ever drawn. Incredible detail. Every vein. Every pockmark. His skin is like leather. Every crease. The bone structure. His broken and chipped teeth. A sneer. Very sexy. Very hard to do. Made even more fabulous by my lighting. If I get his eye right, it would be in the Louvre. Very few artists in this country would take ten years to work on twelve drawings.”

“But in ten years,” he asked, “where will the audience be? What will the world be like? I think that by 2030, there will be such a fundamental rethinking of religion that religion will take over. It will be church and state together in all the countries. It won’t be happy. The laws are going to be changed. We are going to go through years of a real hellish rediscovery of religion in the name of benefiting society. All this censorship and hypocrisy about art is just an excuse to arrest everyone in the country and take away civil rights and suspend the Constitution. Right now, the austere bad guys have control and are just terrorizing us.

“I’m mentioning this dreadful future to you, Jack, because you could be of help to me, if you’re not appalled by it. I know I’ve appalled you on occasion.”

I kept quiet. I had learned never to rise to his bait so I listened to him talking about his *Peter Pan* that was his lewd *Lord of the Flies*.

“The Puritans who came here,” he said, “were all insane. And intolerant. They hanged a teenage boy [Thomas Granger] for having sex with animals. We’ve had 200 years to develop these religious nut cases. I’ve always wanted to draw a Tijuana donkey act, go back to my roots, but if these people had their way, nobody would be going to the bathroom. This is what gay political correctness is about.

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They're afraid of their shadow. Government is criminalizing every conceivable thing. This is coming out of a fear of the new technology that no one understands and the immense poverty of the social system.

"None of the religions is going to pan out. Religions have only survived because of geographic isolation. They could all delude themselves for millennia that they were 'It.' And the tragedy now is that they are finding that they are butting their heads up against another God and another God and another God and none of them agree. So after a certain point it is the Tower of Babel and we have to live in this world of media babble. That's why the educated countries are the first ones to get suspicious of God, because when you see 25,000 religions cutting off the genitals of their women and slicing the dicks of their men, your love of their grandeur really fades. But up to now this has never been talked about."

Like Mapplethorpe using the tropes of religion to illustrate transformational sexual desire, Rex could have drawn and sold inspirational calendars of hot young male martyrs suffering in Rexstasy to Pentecostal Christians, Catholic priests, and altar boys. In our homomartyrology from Saint Sebastian to Pier Paolo Pasolini to Derek Jarman, Rex was heart and soul a free-thinker re-conceiving gay incarnations of male flesh, and sanctifying male rituals, profane and depraved. For all his underground versatility, snotty gay gatekeepers kept him out of their establishment art loop even when he had, like Mapplethorpe, the cheeky buzz of Beelzebub in the devil-may-care faces in his art in which, because he said he liked to read books about Satanism, the face of Satan and his minions frequently recur thematically.

When the Limited Editions Club commissioned Mapplethorpe to illustrate Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* with eight photographs in 1986, it could just as suitably have commissioned Rex—who like the teenage Rimbaud ran away from home for the sake of art—to contribute eight drawings to pair perfectly with Robert's eight images in that deluxe Quarto edition of 1000 numbered copies.

During one of our years of occasional meals together, a certain time over hamburgers, fries, and a microcassette tape recorder in

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the Blue Muse diner where he was a regular, Rex said, “I’d love to do a version of the Bible, twelve scenes, because the Bible is so sadistic. Religious paintings are almost all obscene, clothing ripped to shreds. Samson at the mill. All I have to do is rip the loincloth off. Brothers selling brothers as slaves. Jesus being taken naked down from the Cross by rough Roman soldiers.

“I think the ‘Last Supper’ painting would be a natural for me. Everyone would get the reference. We know that supper table. You can show it and those languid male postures in many ways. Also for a good artist like myself, it would be an honor and a challenge to learn from Leonardo. I wouldn’t want to debase it in any way. I would want to transpose it. Sort of like taking a symphony and making a masterful transposition to a piano piece.

“I have a magnificent German etching, an amazing sexual one of Jesus being taken down from the Cross by all these men. It’s very erotic, everyone’s naked and sexual. It’s all there. All I would have to do is buff up those bodies, add those dicks. That’s the way life really was. This is a case where you don’t want to change anything. I’ve never done anything where I’ve outright copied. By just changing a few elements, I want to show how you can absolutely rewrite history.

“This will drive religious people crazy. But I don’t want to do it as a joke. I want it to look so serious that it will genuinely move religious people.”

And get leathersmen off.

Pop culture is all about remakes and sequels. Pasolini filmed his version of *The Gospel of Saint Matthew* starring Jesus as a Socialist in 1964, the same year Kenneth Anger parodied the Gospels and Jesus and Nazis in his gay biker film, *Scorpio Rising*. Director Wakefield Poole shot his 1974 film *The Bible* that I showcased on the cover of *Drummer* 27 in 1979. Painter Delmas Howe (born 1935) dealing with his partner’s death by AIDS in 1993 created fourteen large canvases depicting the “Passion of the Christ” acted out in vivid color by S&M leathersmen in his exhibit *Stations: A Gay Passion* set in the ruins of the West Village Christopher Street Pier, three minutes from Rex’s 178 Christopher Street studio.

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Delmas, who could have done a double exhibit with Rex who liked his work, painted powerful huge canvases of gay American manhood tortured and crucified by fascist American homophobia. Mark Hemry videotaped Delmas' San Francisco opening of his *Stations* at the Luggage Store Gallery, 1007 Market, on September 7, 2001. Four days later, the exhibit ended abruptly because everything shuttered after the 9/11 terrorist attack which also put Rex's own Secret Museum Gallery in New York out of business. Two weeks later, at the very subdued annual Folsom Fair, police in body armor stood watch with rifles on rooftops all up and down Folsom Street. Just like a tense drawing by Rex.

## 6

### COLLABORATING WITH REX ON PAGE AND SCREEN

Rex was always avant-garde by years and decades. So writing about him in *Drummer* before he introduced himself in his January 1978 letter, I've both read him and listened intently as a proper first-responder journalist to the rarity of his every word spoken in person and in telephone conversations. I never cared if he was playing me. As a former Catholic seminarian studying ten years for the priesthood in the 1950s, I'd learned how to shut up and hear confessions using critical thinking. From the first day I saw his astonishing work, I knew he was a young talent to watch.

As an academic writing about gay popular culture, I took years of "Rex notes" and filed them in my archive because I did not want him or any emerging gay artist I met through *Drummer* to become lost to history. Perhaps his reluctance to be written about or photographed was a primal survival reaction he adopted as a youngster reacting to the boyhood of homophobia he described to the Tom of Finland Foundation. Nevertheless, we worked together professionally on page and screen. Depending on his mood and his need for free publicity, the private person he was sometimes let writers profile his public work in various magazines. I'm grateful he allowed me to shoot several archival black-and-white 35mm pictures of him who thought his letters once read should be destroyed—even though people who received them can remember what he wrote.

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Deflecting publicity may be a great strategy to ignite a cult around one's work, but it also disrupted communication, scholarship, publicity, business, and history around him who once was miffed because an art dealer told him he wasn't famous enough in celebrity culture to sell at higher prices. Or in Japan.

Whose fault was that? His mystique hurt him. The reverse psychology of silence as a publicity gimmick may have worked for Greta Garbo, but I can't forget how Rex fumed in the early 1990s when those new next-gen gay magazines in New York blew him off because they'd never heard of him, or perhaps because they had heard he bragged he was troublesome and they didn't need the grief from him and his poison-pen letters.

Maybe the contrarian talked or didn't talk to be quoted, but talk he did to be provocative because acting up he was hooked on the rush of endorphins he got watching people watching him "performing Rex." He liked that he was known for bursting forth to speak his mind publicly with aggressive opinions about his work and the world. Venting is social maneuvering as entertainment. He was one of those incorrigible artists who is so eccentric you hope to sit next to him at a dinner party.

What a relief on August 22, 1988, when the dysfunctional *Drummer* publisher John Embry sold the magazine he'd never really understood to Anthony DeBlase, PhD (1942-2000) and his lover psychiatrist Andrew Charles, MD (1939-2006). To celebrate the historic transition, Rex and Trent Dunphy and Bob Mainardi immediately announced their intimate "*Drummer* Restoration Dinner Party," Folsom Fair weekend, September 28, 1986, 2:30 PM, to welcome the new publishers upon their move from Chicago.

In the weeks before the party, Rex set a perfect tone when he drew a customized invitation of a "Greaser Leatherman" for the gentlemen's soiree. If ever a *Drummer* Salon dinner party for ten gay men was ripe for a screenplay, this sit-down summit had characters, wit, and intrigue enough for a Merchant-Ivory production. Celebrating the exit of the old regime of Embry, the long-time *Drummer* creators around the table in the photography-filled Dunphy-Mainardi Victorian included art director Al Shapiro and

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his partner Dick Kriegmont, photographer Mark I. Chester (born 1950), Mark Hemry (born 1950), and me.

Rex was a raffishly attractive tablemate keeping the conversation moving even as DeBlase launched into an emotional monolog about their first two months of owning *Drummer*. Tony said they thought they had purchased *Drummer* free of any encumbrances, until they were immediately besieged by creditors and vendors hoping the new owners would pay them what Embry still owed them.

Rex sort of laughed. I sort of laughed. All of us who were owed money by Embry sort of laughed when DeBlase cracked a nervous joke hoping that none of us would ask him to pay what Embry owed us. At that moment, Tony invited Rex to draw the cover illustration and me to write a cover story for the historic special issue *Drummer* 100, November 1986. DeBlase, giving Rex this second cover, later gave Tom of Finland his first and only *Drummer* cover, issue 113, February 1988. DeBlase's anointing of Rex was as significantly important as DeBlase's creation of the Leather Flag (1989) and his founding of the Leather Archives & Museum (1991). But he didn't pay us either.

Rex then, later, and always, reckoned his insights meant to be quotable were too important to gay art history not to be leaked privately to friends and journalists who could pass his words along like publisher John Dagon who as Rex's designated press agent printed personal scoops about Rex in his *Trash* magazine. My grail as a gay historian was always to sit Rex down to speak his mind into my video camera as he did for my audiotape recorder. But he would not give face.

In May 1995, regularly updating each other, he sent me reproductions of two drawings with a hand-written note on a yellow Post-It saying, "New stuff for your files. Not to be copied under pain of death." Over the years, our work in tandem was published in magazines like *Drummer* and *Skin*, Volume 1, Number 6, 1981. Together we collaborated on the matched story and drawing, "Tele-Fuck," dated 2-20-83, for a phone-sex feature in *Just Men*, Volume 2, Issue 2, January 1984. We teamed again for the drawing "Officer





Mike: San Francisco's Finest," dated 6-13-83, in *Just Men*, Volume 2, Number 4, May-June 1984.

That same year, publisher Winston Leyland commissioned a Rex original, dated 4-22-84, for the cover for my novel *Leather Blues* for Leyland's Gay Sunshine Press. What a cover to judge a book by. The requested drawing of a smoldering leatherman was so perfectly Rex that Rex re-purposed it regularly and posted it as the opening image on his website Rexwerk.com. Winston also hired Rex to draw the cover of *A Sand Fortress*, a reprint of the 1968 novel by prolific 1960s novelist John Coriolan. Rex re-purposed that drawing for one of my Palm Drive Video display ads in gay video magazines.

Collectors and Onanists know Rex from the dozens of magazines that did dare to publish some of his selected drawings: *Drummer*, *Honcho*, *The Advocate*, *Folsom*, *Toy*, *Just Men*, *Inches*, *Torso*, *Stroke*, *Uncut*, *In Touch for Men*, *Instigator*, *Straight to Hell*, *Manifest Reader*, *Mach*, and *Trash*.

## 7

## **THE REX VIDEO: REX MEN WILL LEAVE A STAIN ON YOUR BIG SCREEN**

In 1987, at the height of AIDS, and because there was no inexpensive way to produce coffee-table photobooks to publish and preserve endangered erotic artists during the plague, I decided to do on video the archival work we did in *Drummer* to save art history. In a sense, I put *Drummer* on screen with my series of erotic artist galleries featuring *Drummer* artists like Rex, Domino, the Hun, A. Jay, Skipper, and Etienne who died just as we began working together.

Rex had mentioned his interest in making a Rex video as a fresh way of publishing and marketing his work more widely into gay popular culture because people bought more video cassettes than books or magazines. So I took him at his word, and shot a sample reel which I sent and pitched to him in a letter five years before the internet became available to the public on April 30, 1993.

On April 5, 1988, I wrote:

Dear Rex. Having once talked with you about you expanding your palette into the video medium, both because

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you were interested, and I said I would....included with this letter is a working print, a rough cut. Actually the finest compliment I can pay your *oeuvre*, as friend, fan, and fellow artist, is to move my graphic “video eye” over your single-frame graphic concept.

I sought, as a writer, to pull out the characters, the drama, the detail, the tension by making sometimes six pictures out of your one frame. Your style is very filmic. You often draw in storyboards [where] within the frame various action/emotion occurs, and inside a single frame as in the six separate panels of sex action in the six separate cubicles inside your single “Everard” [St. Mark’s] bath drawing [published ten years before on the first page of the Rex review in *Son of Drummer*].

You translate beautifully from page to screen. The graphic artist on video! From stasis to movement! From drawings spread out on a table to drawings thundering across screens! Taping your drawings is a fresh rebirth of your past work.

Through this introduction through a new medium, your audience, now a video audience, can buy you, in fact, re-buy you, because you are now in their new medium of choice—while at the same time presenting you to men who buy videos but never buy books or packets of drawings.

The probing macro-lens gave me an even greater appreciation of your art in both form and content: from the stylized execution of details in the tin ceilings in the blue-collar hotels to the contents of an open glove compartment. In short, I tried to pull out the drama and detail of your drawings which typical American viewers, unguided, with no critical ability, may miss when presented with your single frames, not knowing consciously where to look, or not perceiving how you finesse and focus your graphic, emotional, erotic power.

The Rapidograph style never looked so looming, dotily impressive. (“Sunday in the Park with Rex.”) The video leads viewers into a cumulative Impressionist experience. As

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frame after frame, sequence after sequence of your drawing spins across the screen, the accelerating effect is mesmerizing, potent, dirty, lascivious, magical. Action! Adventure! Pages of drawings stream by handlessly. Your men keep coming, insistent in eye contact with the viewer, one after the other, like increasingly magnificent contestants in a bodybuilding competition.

Effortlessly, the viewer sits, watching, “hands free” for stroking, carried along by Rex in motion. The video turns the pages of all your work for the viewer. If you have created, say, a 1000 single-frame drawings in your career, the video camera can multiply each of those drawings at least five times, increasing the visuals of your work to 5000, expanding both the time-code length and the design field of the single frame, showcasing your art with all the detail of a private tour through an erotic gallery.

I was amazed, watching the finished sample edit, to be swept along by the sheer force of your 8x10 images coming, boom-boom, staccato, at me on the 40-inch screen. What an expansion! What a discovery! I hope this surprise package pleases you. I can pay your work and your art no greater compliment....

If, as you said to me, you wanted to make a video, perhaps this is the first one. If you like the concept, it's yours. I think the time has come at this *fin de siècle* for Rex to be showcased, marketed, and appreciated as a video artist. Garbo talks! Rex moves! Let me know what you think of this little experiment. When it come to drawing men masculine for men who like men masculine, nobody comes close to you. As ever, Jack

So in 1989, Rex brought fifty-some images, some priceless originals and some excellent copies of originals, to my rostrum camera to be sorted on my easel into a storyboard narrative for the 65-minute film-noir feature, *The Rex Video Gallery: Corrupt Beyond Innocence*.

I recognized the challenge set up in *Drummer 12*.

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Rex never sets up a narrative series. All the story is there in one flash, telescoped into a single moment and isolated on the page. These are drawings you look at one at a time. In each one, Rex distills the actions we have all seen, done or imagined, but which we get to bring off only rarely and never do so well.

My job was to create a streaming loose narrative while remaining faithful to Rex's eye to which I was sensitive because, mixing media, I wanted to be absolutely true to his gaze. I tried to climb into what Rex might do with a video camera, and treated every drawing as a single frame in a movie montage unreeling *Rexwerk*. I took my cue from the coiled kinetic energy in his single-frame drawings and translated his energy into the actual kinetics of film through the use of panning and zooming and editing of the kind Ken Burns uses to give life to vintage photos.

I set each drawing on my easel, and shot five or ten minutes of each picture, Take One to Take Ten, starting and stopping a dozen times from a dozen different points of view as if each drawing were a real room, a real set on a real soundstage. I treated Rex's men as real human actors waiting to hear "Action!"

My goal was to lift the silent hands-on haptic experience of Rex from static page to moving-picture screen using camera movement, depth of field, tracking shots, zooms, and editing juxtapositions to inject movement, rhythm, time, and sound that were implicit in his dynamic still drawings.

If Character A was looking at Character B, I focused into Rex's 8x10 picture with a close-up of A's face and eyes and then panned across the small drawing to the face of B at whom A was staring to catch the reaction in B's face.

Then I'd pull back to a wide shot establishing the context of the two men in the room; then an insert close-up of a crumpled pack of cigarettes; a fast zoom shot in on a dick; a foreshadowing insert of the face of a new Character C who would not appear in another separate drawing until ten minutes later in the narrative; then a return to a three-quarter shot of Character A looking at B.

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All this lens work and editing, that took two months to create a 65-minute video, was to add the emotional movement of erotic rhythm and pacing to the still drawings. All this technique was to drag the viewer's gay gaze and critical thinking into the sum total of the drawing, directing him, tutoring him, to look at details he might have missed looking at the whole. With Rex's work the devil truly is in the details. Typically, timing the beat, I'd shoot straight on into a drawing, my video frame framing his frame, for an establishing shot to expand the perfect moment of one single drawing into a ninety-second sequence investigating that drawing.

Oftentimes, shooting around Character A and Character B, I'd focus on a detail, and then pan the camera from a tasty detail in Drawing A to a tastier detail in Drawing B fusing the two separate Rex pictures into one streaming organic graphic created by juxtaposition to guide the viewer like a museum docent leading the public walking through an exhibit.

The pre-digital VHS format itself added a certain vivid electronic pulsation to his static images. Rex himself did the art direction for the dramatic finale in which he summed up his indelible pointillist images into one Big Dot that, as it fades back into the dots of the first drawing shown in the video, evokes audience movie memories of the big dots of circular planets and moons made dramatic by the pounding chords of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

So what does a Rex drawing sound like? To create the distinctive erotic audio design of Rex's murmuring world, we chose not to use "found music" like *Zarathustra*. Instead, Mark Hemry who edited and produced the video engineered a hypnotic slow-jacking house beat on one audio track—as if it were music from another room down the wet, dirty hallway at the Waiting Arms Hotel, a fisting palace that existed briefly on Folsom Street in the 1970s.

Over that muffled thump, he mixed and reversed a variety of sex-pit sounds in a lowdown act of performance art. He built his soundtrack directing his Foley artists (us two) to pour water from a pitcher into a bucket of water to mimic piss in toilets escalating from teasing trickle to streaming force. To suggest flophouse halls,

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we stomped out footsteps, zipped and unzipped our leather jackets, stroked our chaps for the hot creak of leather, flicked lighters, coughed, spoke ruzza-buzza whispers, crumpled paper, slapped our thighs, scraped our boots on floors, flushed toilets, jangled chains, and rattled keys to capture Rex's world.

On April 5, 1990, I sent him the first copy of the finished video.

Dear Rex,

Congratulations! Here's the *Rex Video Gallery*. Thank you for your patience. Life is short. Art takes longer. We're very pleased with the look and sound of the video. We're sure it will sell nicely based on how well *The Hun Video Gallery* is selling. To that end, because, as we told you, one hundred percent of all the income from the retail price goes directly to you, we're enclosing a \$200.00 advance against your first royalties to help tide you over. Thanks for not pressuring us while we worked to translate your art to video with great care. Thanks also for giving us the latitude to interpret your drawings. You've always known how much we appreciate your work. Hope you are enjoying *Some Dance to Remember* which we sent off to you some time ago. All the best, Jack Fritscher and Mark Hemry

On April 10, 1990, Rex, who was a mad perfectionist about duplication of his drawings, wrote a letter revealing both his kindness and his analytical mind in his own words.

Dear Jack: It works! I'm very pleased with the *Rex Video Gallery*. I can't think of a single thing I'd change. I want you to know—especially—that I think the soundtrack you're created is SUPERIOR to the one [sample] I submitted. You've really "captured" the essence of what I was trying to create.

Also the "voice" is excellent and as a "performance" is much more orchestrated to the visuals on screen than mine could have been. Every pause, sigh, and sink-drain gurgle falls in the appropriate place—like a [Bernard] Herrmann score for a Hitchcock film. I think this soundtrack is a real

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trend-setter—a new form of soundtrack design for the porn film.

I was aware when turning the sound off how “ordinary” the pictures became, and yet how seamless and dynamic they become when the “narrative” sound is on, unobtrusive. It really makes the whole thing work. I can clearly see the care and work you guys have lavished on it. I dare say it’s lovingly done. It sure looks like the film I planned.

As emphatic as I am about my ideas, I’m never so foolish or vain to assume it’s the only point of view possible. Apparently, you were able to work with my concept. Unreal.

The only spot I caught a change that you made was at the very end when the BIG DOT fades back to the beginning picture, and that was right and correct and better to do so. I’m very impressed with the camerawork.

It’s a shame no one can appreciate what a technical tour de force the miniature camerawork in that film is; the pans are so smooth and confident that the drawings appear to be as if they were giant tapestries that you could pan for yards across. Little do people realize, you’re panning for thirty seconds across a scene that’s only two inches in length! Between the sinister soundtrack and the power of the close-up photography, it’s amazing how [H. R.] Geiger-like the drawings appear to be. They become almost like paintings.

Yes, I was very impressed with myself thanks to you. Again, many heartfelt thanks to you and Mark for the work you’ve done on my behalf. I appreciate it. And all Best Wishes for your new book which I see everywhere and which I hope is doing well.—Rex

Five years later, on May 1, 1995, Rex, still riding high on the rush of the video, sent this letter.

Dear Jack. This is still a great video and will be a collector’s classic, but it’s in the wrong place [home video screens]. From the very first I’ve had the gut feeling that this really belongs up on a big screen—in a theater—without distraction, to be

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fully appreciated. You should pay money, sit in a darkened theater and see and hear this thing on a hundred-foot screen. If I had the money, I wouldn't hesitate to rent something like the Castro Theater and show it for a weekend myself. It's a film you want to SEE.

He was correct about small versus big screen. In 1990, our Rex video had debuted on a small screen as a "Best in Show" video installation, credited to Rex, Mark Hemry, and me at the New Langton Arts Gallery, San Francisco. By 1995, Rex had forgot that in 1992, Mark Hemry and I had premiered the video to great applause at the alternative 9th Olympia Film Festival in Olympia, Washington. It was a one-night lecture event which Rex did not attend. So he missed that first big-screen experience and the champagne kick of the Olympia Theater marquee spelling out our double bill of *The Rex Video Gallery* and *The Hun Video Gallery* as "Rough Night in Sodom and Gomorrah."

In 2016, German curator Bernd Althans gave the *Rex* video its European premiere as a gallery installation in his *Rex Verboten* exhibit which I co-sponsored at Galerie/TheBallery, Schöneberg, Berlin, where all funds from the DVD sales of the *Rex Video Gallery* went directly to Rex—as they always had from every sale from the first. That exhibit, like the 1990 Palm Drive Video brochure, inviting the curious to step right up to Rex, double-dared fans to look at Rex's art as a way to look inside their own hearts, minds, and orgasms. "See life through the eyes of Rex, because, like Rex, you may be 'corrupt beyond innocence!'"

## 8

### TOUCH-ACTIVATED ART TURNS NAZI TABOO INTO TOTEM

Rex knew the territory on which he pissed ink. He drew each authentic *mise-en-scène* on white paper with his Rapidograph pen that tapped out his drawings that have no straight lines in them. He drew in seclusion with a bottomless jar of jelly beans and a package of Red Vines licorice sitting on his desk next to his small television monitor playing video cassettes of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the*

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*Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938) and videos of goose-stepping Nazi parades with Stormtrooper music because, like Tom of Finland and Hollywood, Rex liked the erotic aesthetics of Nazi style, uniforms, and discipline.

War-baby Rex, like postwar boomer punk rockers reshaping culture alongside him in the 1970s, created art and anti-art around the Eros and politics of fascist imagery to co-opt it, and make the point that Nazis were about control, and that punk, like leather culture, was about freedom. Staying in provocative character during Christmas of 2023, with three months to live, Rex told Trent Dunphy that while confined to a wheelchair after months “incommunicado” in an Amsterdam nursing home, he passed the time in his “terminal isolation and periodic depression” with “my Nazi recordings, Winston Churchill tapes, Wi-Fi, and Netflix.” He added:

I’ve had a remarkable life and cannot complain that I missed anything it had to offer. Our generation lived in the best of times. I look forward now to death which cannot be far off. “Existing” alone like this is not something I’m looking forward to in the long run. I’m ready to go whenever the iceman cometh. Given the way the world is going, I’m kind of glad I won’t be around for what’s coming towards us in the next decade.

Romancing the Nazis, Rex reflected his times better than the cringing *Village Voice* that cried a river over leather culture. In the mid-1970s, leather bars like the Ramrod in San Francisco were, on slow midweek Movie Nights, regularly screening a four-minute 16mm clip of the camp musical number “Springtime for Hitler” from comedian Mel Brooks’ *The Producers* (1967). In pop culture, the Liza-Nazi cautionary *Cabaret* (1972), and Liliana Cavani’s sado-masochistic *The Night Porter* (1974) used Nazi chic that in Cavani’s so-called “Nazisploitation” film equated sexual obsession with fascism, so said the BBC whose poll of critics listed *The Night Porter*, for which Rex could have been art director, as number 32 on the “100 Greatest Films Directed by Women.”

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Even so, soon after being hired as editor of *Drummer*, I told publisher Embry I'd quit if he did not stop printing a monthly display ad for the Gay Nazi Party, the gay "National Socialist League," with its Nazi insignia of "Winged Eagle and Swastika" that he began running in the very first issue of *Drummer*. Even as the now 93-year-old novelist John Rechy decided he did not like Tom of Finland using Nazi symbols, I decided Tom's aesthetic use was one thing, and Rex's psychodramatic referential use was another.

Born in the USA in 1939 before Hitler invaded Poland, I grew up during the war, which Rex, born in 1944, did not, and I could not abide Nazis literally *recruiting* in *Drummer*. That was a bridge too far.

The Gay Nazi ad had the nerve to take the song title, "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," from *Cabaret* and pervert it into the Nazi tag line "Tomorrow Belongs to You!" When Embry dropped the display ad, the National Socialist League, claiming it a violation of free speech, sued him, and he lost, case closed. The point was made and the ad quietly disappeared.

In 1939, Christopher Isherwood who knew a thing or two about Nazis warned in *Goodbye to Berlin*: "People laugh at them, right up to the last moment."

I wasn't laughing. Pushed by the *Anschluss* of the Moral Majority of the Republican Christian Right, and by the anti-gay Anita Bryant in 1977, I wrote a militant essay reviewing Pasolini's radically gutsy anti-fascist film, *Salo or the 120 Days of Sodom*, in *Drummer* 20, January 1978. To warn readers about the clear and present danger of American fascism, I cited Nobel Prize winner Sinclair Lewis' 1935 novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, a cautionary tale about a dictator taking over American politics, in which Lewis sounded the warning: "When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross."

On February 6, 1975, five months before the *Village Voice* shamed Rex in July, Susan Sontag, wondering how in the world repressive Nazis became eroticized, wrote in her essay "Fascinating Fascism" in *The New York Review of Books* that the gay attraction to the Nazi aesthetic is "no more than a variant of camp...which is

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unfettered by the scruples of high seriousness.” She added spot-on: “The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.”

Both Rex and Tom, worshiping athletic bodies like both the Nazi Party and Muscular Christianity, remind us of the politically-incorrect Freudian pleasures we sometimes think we should cancel in our “moral” selves when we feel we’re too “nice” to allow our “porn” selves to play around transgressively with taboos—as in one of leather culture’s seminal films, Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1964) which is a Jesus-and-Nazi-biker inflected gay sequel to Marlon Brando’s stylish outlaw film *The Wild One* (1953) directed by László Benedek who had fled Hungary when the Nazis came to power like a really bad biker gang which he Americanized as a subtext.

Rex’s “Black Socks” strikes some as a somber heavy drawing. The sailor being serviced is a cynical hard-ass: aloof, tattooed, uncut, hairy, muscular, and dominant. The tattooed biker who sucks the sailor’s foot through his black sock kneels, booted, in the ritual litter of porn mags, liquor bottles, and used yellow-mesh popper capsules that fuel restless nights of men following their cocks around. A third man stands reflected in the mirror. A fourth peers his big eye, focuses his gay gaze through the viewfinder of a gloryhole in the wall.

Who are these two extra men? Why do two toothbrushes stand in the dirty glass? The drawing’s strong voyeuristic sexuality, and its high technical skill, reflect what the curious critic might suspect is subtle clue to the artist’s personal gloryhole vision of ideal male life—that is, if it is fair play to seek autobiography in an artist’s fictional work. Rex did say, “My drawings define who I became. There are no other ‘truths’ out there.”

Maya Angelou wrote: “The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart.” Rex was likewise into drawing to make guys open their eyes and their brains and their fanatic hearts, and work from their dicks up to their heads.

I once asked him, “Do you think art can put thoughts into people’s minds?”

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He answered, “That’s true. Jane Austen could. Ayn Rand could. Why can’t we? I do porn to bust people’s balloons.”

Men are often most susceptible to subliminal new ideas when tumescence opens them to transcendence. In his touch-activated drawings, Rex was not afraid to push his subject matter past taboo into totem to teach the joy of fetish sex. His through-the-looking-glass point of view so fascinates and seduces the viewer that the stoned voyeur forgets he was at first socially or morally repulsed by the raw human scene that’s making him hard.

Men coming out of the closet of family, church, and state are often simultaneously shocked and thrilled that gay life offers so many alternative physical, intellectual, and psychic contradictions that liberate the soul. Tennessee Williams said, “I am a deeper and warmer and kinder man for my deviations.” Through the visual and emotional geometries of his canny draftsmanship, Rex uses the brief teaching moments inside the mind-opening magical thinking of masturbation to change and liberate the viewer’s conservative sex fears into self acceptance and erotic liberation where outlaw sex feeds the Dionysian soul that is not afraid to dance even though it means being torn to pieces.

Once you’ve cum to a taboo fetish, you’ve taken another bite from Eden’s forbidden apple of carnal knowledge. And you can’t go back to Kansas.

## 9

### EDWARD HOPPER, WALT WHITMAN, AND GAY AMNESIA

The way Leonardo da Vinci told the entire story of the New Testament inside the single frame of his “Last Supper,” Rex dumped more character, setting, conflict, plot, and theme into a single frame than most filmmakers shoot in a full-length feature. If masturbation is magical, Rex was a magician with ink, purposing his work to cause erections and orgasm. His dots had the power to make men cum.

“Mad Doctor,” 11-15-76, for instance, dramatizes a counter-phobic Nazi medical fantasy not offered by other artists who did not dig deep like Rex into gay men’s fears of, for instance, forced

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institutionalization for psychiatric gay-conversion therapies whose tortures were as late as the 1970s still a constant midcentury threat that he spun into a healing thrill of stress relief. A cheer went up in gay bars in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder.

That's why I published "Mad Doctor" as a full page in *Son of Drummer* to offer subscribers a sample of his latest book, *Icons*. Most of his work stems from contemporary real life, but his "Mad Doctor" fetish pictures—one dated 11-15-76; a second 12-31-77—were occasioned by fans, most of whom age thirty-something in gay bars in the 1970s were impressionable young boys during World War II. Their Nazi fears and sadomasochistic fantasies and divine orgasms were anchored in Third Reich medical sex experiments on captured males. In 1975, war babies and postwar babies high on pot and poppers were zoning out in theaters on the high camp of the Nazisploitation film *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS* while mashing *Ilsa* up in their heads with Rex's theatrical Men of the SS.

Rex who did commissions to buy lunch and pay rent preferred not to work with a client's detailed script, but more with a man's general concept. He was quite willing to develop the real guts of someone else's fantasy, because, he told me, "Drawing the sex comes easy." He laughed. "I spend more time drawing the lampshade lighting the sex. I figure I average out working at \$5.37 an hour."

So to support himself between commissions and bartending, he sometimes hired out as an interior house painter.

Imagine having your bedroom painted by Rex.

No matter what he did to survive, he lived to squeeze the ink out of Eros to fill his pen.

At the opposite extreme from "Mad Doctor" is "Jack Off," a quiet study Edward Hopper might appreciate with its Hopper-like window curtains billowing to show breezy movement within still paintings like "Hotel by a Railroad" and "Evening Wind." "Jack Off" is exquisite early Rex. Its romantic YMCA isolation of solitary love on a bored summer afternoon has made it a favorite of Onanists everywhere.

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Here the hunk is alone, independent, a Rousseauian noble savage, an American archetype, not necessarily queer, yet invitational, self-reliant, available, laid back like one of Walt Whitman's luscious common men. Rex and Walt were a pair of comrades. Rex's world of brokeback bromance contains Whitman's multitudes of errant men, aggressive, promiscuously anonymous, alone and in groups, that Whitman, himself a lover of bus drivers and soldiers, assayed in his queer "Calamus" poems in *Leaves of Grass*:

Whoever you are holding me [my art] now in hand....The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive... The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you would have to be abandon'd....

As a brilliant finale to his career, Rex could have canonized his American reputation by creating a dozen drawings, a *Whitman Portfolio*, illustrating select lines like the following from America's greatest poet who hung out at Pfaff's gayish bar in Greenwich Village in the 1860s. In 1975, a hundred years and a mile from Rex's studio, that location so revered in gay history became the disco "Infinity" at 653 Broadway.

Whitman's lines of poetry often read like picture-perfect captions for Rex's drawings.

"Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore, Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly...the homeliest of them is beautiful."

"All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine, I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there."

"If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles."

"To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean."

"I go with fishermen and seamen and love them."

"I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning, How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently

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turn'd over upon me, And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart, And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet."

## 10

### REX AT THE BLUE MUSE CAFÉ

From 1995-2000, Rex rode his bicycle through the debris of Tenderloin streets to eat breakfast almost daily at 10:30 at the Blue Muse Restaurant and Bar, 409 Gough Street at Hayes, near City Hall Civic Center, a mile from his Larkin Street studio, where the twenty-nine year-old artist and singer Cynthia Louise (Lloyd), one of those female servers gay men love, began kidding with him sitting, fifty-something, at his usual table over his usual omelet and fruit.

Voyeur Rex liked the Blue Muse for its morning quiet and its noisy weekend cabaret performances because no matter the time of day it was a sex-circus parade of neighborhood leathermen, artists, fetish freaks, and drag stars running for "Empress of San Francisco."

Cynthia told me on June 6, 2024, "I waited on Rex five days a week. I always worked the morning shift. The owner Sydney Wong said not to bug him too much while he was eating and reading the newspaper and checking the stock market. We all thought he was East Coast Money."

This was around the time his mother had died leaving him the nest egg he put into stocks and lost.

"He had an odor," Cynthia recalled, "of men, leather, and sex that was wonderful to me. I love gay men very much."

Living that sensibility, Cynthia, known as "Ciel," became one of the dedicated caretakers for Rumi Missabu, the disabled Cockettes founder and global star of *Elevator Girls in Bondage*, who died age 76, April 2, 2024, five days after Rex's death.

"I feel I'm a gay man in a woman's body, but I'm not trapped there. I'm a free agent. Rex always had great respect for my gender. I later became a dominant mistress for fifteen years so I understood his work which influenced me.

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“I liked the way he smelled which was sexy to me. I could smell what he was into. I knew what he was doing.”

“When did you find out that Rex was REX? Did he tell you he was an artist?”

“He was somewhat mysterious. He was quite like a sex-magic warlock. Sometimes he’d disappear for six months, but we never worried because he always came back. He talked more after he came to one of my openings and saw some of my paintings. We had a vibe of two artists connecting. One day when I served him his Coca-Cola, he showed me a box of about thirty pieces of jewelry, all, he said, from the women in his family. From his mother. He said he didn’t want to sell it. He wanted me to have it. Some very good costume jewelry plus a gold-and-amethyst ring and a gold wedding band. I was quite moved. He told me he didn’t care if I sold it which I didn’t because I knew he really wanted me to keep it.”

“Did you two keep in touch after you left Blue Muse?”

“Three or four years later [2004/5], I ran into him at Folsom Fair. He was a handsome man, but by then [age 60] he looked less muscular, drawn, like he’d been ill, but he seemed grander wearing a white shirt and jeans. He was still so charming and friendly. He invited me to go with him to an after-Fair party at Stompers.”

Rex confirmed his respect for Cynthia when he squired her into the ongoing leather salon at Stompers Boots, 323 10th Street, which was a boot-fetish oasis owned for fifteen years by the leatherman and local KRON 4 television news photographer Mike McNamee (1939-2018). McNamee, our mutual longtime friend, was the raw-boned six-foot-five Irishman, Harley biker, and filmmaker who had dared shoot 35mm erotic crucifixion movies outdoors on the roof of the Slot bathhouse, 979 Folsom Street, in the 1970s.

In 2016, Mike donated the pair of Stompers boots used to cast each bronze boot print set in cement honoring our leather dead—including Thom Gunn, Tony DeBlase, Chuck Arnett, Hank Diethelm, Robert Opel—in the “San Francisco South of Market Leather History Alley” on Ringold Street, where, as an advisor to the original concept, I’ve suggested new bronze boot prints be added





to include Rex and Mike whom Rex eulogized from Amsterdam in the *Bay Area Reporter*.

“I remember,” Cynthia said, “there were about forty men hanging out in Stompers shop and garden and Rex introduced me as his ‘Secret Wife’ which I thought was such a very sweet dear thing to do and I loved him for it. That afternoon, he finally came out and told me who he was as an artist and how he’d worked with the Mafia. He trusted me. He truly influenced the erotic side of my work. We exchanged phone numbers and addresses, but we lost touch. And still, I remember him tenderly.”

## 11

### MOST CENSORED GAY AMERICAN ARTIST

More than Mapplethorpe was at first, Rex was the gay American artist most censored by the gay press until Robert’s pictures were busted and put on trial as porn in Cincinnati in 1990. Vanilla critics who dislike Rex’s work object not because of his gorgeous technique, but more out of a misunderstanding of his challenging subject matter, his sexual psychology, and his homosurreal gaze and intellect.

From the first, the vanilla objections run to cliché and to truth. “Faces aren’t pretty. Bodies too muscular. Too rough. Too dirty. Too old. Too young. No smiles. No blonds.” I leave it to others to assess his use of disability (*Sex-Freak Circus*) and bestiality (dogs and horses everywhere) and young lords of the flies who are a tad too cherubic in many of his drawings, and in his *Peter Pan* portfolio which, from what he told me about the drawings I’ve never seen, may be beyond the pale of current legality. For good reason, *The Rex Video Gallery* was subtitled *Corrupt Beyond Innocence*.

As early as January 3, 1981, exactly six months before “Gay Cancer” hit the headlines on July 3, Kevin Davis in the *Bay Area Reporter* opened his review, “Power in the Forbidden: Pornographic Artist Rex Looks at ‘the Reality We Call Human Existence,’” advising:

The first thing you should know is that Rex doesn’t care what you think about smoking, IV drug use, pederasty, or bestiality.

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He says, “Censorship is a desecration of the artist’s idea. Throughout history the greats in every art form have shared one ingredient, and that is a passionate appreciation of the earthy—not always pretty—aspect of the reality we call human existence....Gay publishing was once the radical outlaw. Now we’re just giving away our hard-won freedoms. After the historical precedent of the past, the gay community has drawn a blank. [Still smarting from the lashing he got from the *Village Voice*, he said] The gay press is going through a conservative time. There is a conspiracy of silence. They’re frightened and intimidated. At first, I put up with it. I left out cum and fucking... [Now] I’m only drawing what can’t be published. Magazine distributors don’t fight. They’re a business now.”

It can be difficult to judge the exact age of a person in a drawing, or of an eighteen-year-old Marine recruit hitch-hiking in real life, but feisty Rex did not take kindly to any cautions about health, risk, and age in his pictures. So, did gay editors suspicious about the ambiguous legal age of his *putti* simply decide to play it safe and boycott his work in his lifetime? Time will tell if his representations of youth will cancel his reputation and the entirety of his art.

Even after his sixty-year career, Rex in America remains deeply controversial. And still too *outré* to publish. The prim continue to priss out at his raw masculinity, and yet some hide their spank-bank of his scary art under their mattresses, not wanting socialite friends to know their fetish taste for leather and the rough trade of a walk on the wild side.

No wonder Rex moved to Amsterdam in 2011. He was already working long distance with editors Stephan Niederwieser and Simeon Morales at Bruno Gmünder Verlag in Berlin who published his work as part of the gay art canon in the unflinching 2012 collector’s book, *Rex Verboten*.

Feeling new vigor in Holland, Rex introduced his revived on-line mail-order business with a press-release autobiography quoted here with permission for archival permanence and study from his website which may disappear. The lifelong fabulist role-playing in

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sex and life wrote his story in the third person like a treatment for a biographical screenplay to satisfy fans' need for a dramatic answer to endless questions of how he became Rex. As Thelma Ritter said in *All About Eve*, "What a story! Everything but the bloodhounds snappin' at her [his] rear end."

"Who am I?" Entering this world without parents, a name, a place of birth, and—most of all—without a history will launch this child on a life apart from others.... Free from the mental baggage imposed upon others by nationality and religion this child begins life with an open mind and a clean slate... This child will grow up to become Rex.... Diagnosed with autism as a toddler, the child was adopted by a farmer at the age of three to go live on a New England tobacco farm... He did not learn to speak until the age of four....

At the age of eight, he was in the fields working among the men, fetching water.... shirtless men sitting in the shade drinking beer, playing cards, singing and joking... These first indelible images of men planted a seed for a life-long attraction to working-class men...

At the age of ten, the farm burned to the ground.... [and] in the fifth grade, he was punished for reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.... He sought refuge in the local library where he was certain no other children would find him... when [he was] not contemplating suicide... .. tough working class bullies beat him up after school... Television taught him New York was an exciting place.... [So] he played hooky from school, stole some money, and bought a train ticket to New York [where on 42nd Street and Times Square he] ...found used magazines [showing Tom of Finland] in adult bookstores that convinced him New York City was his destiny...

At the age of twelve, it was as if he were boycotting childhood... He was cranking out 1,000-page novels... reflecting his own gloomy life.... [while] reading books on burlesque, slavery, adultery, white supremacy, incest, divorce, rape, infanticide, lynching, Satanism, and Marxism.

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At fourteen, the boy ran away to become a Beatnik in Greenwich Village....where the underage boy was quickly seduced... and took to it like a Duck to Water....

At sixteen, he was earning his own living [first as typist; then as kept boy] in New York City... He first learned about homosexual sex from straight men...in sleazy Bowery straight bars.

## 12

### THE EYE OF THE ARTIST: AGING AND LEGACY

Rembrandt, Goya, and Degas had bad eyesight. Monet suffered from cataracts and his paintings of his water lily garden at Giverny show how cataracts creating a kind of blurry “Impressionism” affected his work.

I remember Rex reacting when our dear mutual friend, the artist Al Shapiro who created the world’s first gay comic strip, *Harry Chess*, for Clark Polak’s *Drum* magazine in 1964, went blind from AIDS in the last year of his life. Soon after Al died, Rex and I were talking about artists and eyes.

**Jack:** With all your close work, how do you take care of your eyes?

**Rex:** Years ago they were getting bad, but they seem to have gotten better. I’ve trained them.

**Jack:** Second sight often comes after first sight is lost.

**Rex:** The poor cannot afford good eyeglasses. I have a good pair of glasses. The cost was awful, a lot of money. One of my eyes has astigmatism and the godsend was these cheap drugstore glasses. They’re wonderful. I buy packs of them. I use a lower-power glass during the day and a higher-power one when I’m working at night.

I had a bad eye infection for about five years. It was a sty and it was very disfiguring. I went to an ophthalmologist. He said, there’s nothing wrong with your eyes. You have very healthy, strong eyes. I said, what’s with this sty thing? He

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said, that comes from eye strain. It's sort of like a volcano, a big zit. It has to run its course.

But I said it's been going on for five years. He couldn't give me anything for it. And I had paid a fortune for that visit. It eventually went away. But I do eye exercises. Kind of train my eyes. I thought positively about it. Now I limit my drawing very strictly. I experimented with natural daylight light bulbs. I started paying attention to glare on paper. And I limit my working hours. It's worked out great.

**Jack:** How old are you, actually? In terms of...

**Rex:** Oh, in terms of my eyes? I'm a thousand years old.

**Jack:** I know, but when you tell a doctor how old you are...

**Rex:** Oh, I'm not telling you what I tell the doctor. I told him whatever age I was at the time. You know, they just want to get you onto the table and cut out your cataracts. It's all a racket. They don't tell you that diet and exercise can bring your eyes back a long way. I think the retina gets less flexible as you get older. Our eyes don't adjust to light so easily. That's an age thing. I'm working slower and slower what with my eyesight use reduced, and taking time off to earn money, and the world is getting more and more expensive and my audience is shrinking and shrinking.

I said to myself: Rex, you're not going to live forever. You might live a long time, but at the rate you work, it's taken you ten years to do twelve drawings. As soon as you get older, it's going to slow down. Maybe twelve to fifteen years to do the next twelve and then you're into your 70s. What are you going to do with the rest of your career? Just where do you see it going?

It came as a shock to realize that my career is already over [1988] in the sense that the volume of work already exists.

Then I thought, what do great Hollywood stars do when they get into their 50s and 60s? Then you can play the role of the Great Man. You have nothing more to prove. If

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you've survived that long, obviously your reputation is kind of made and, what I think you should do in your old age, is take the kind of chances that you couldn't take when you were younger when you were trying to become famous.

Obviously, when you pass out of the limelight, you're free to do what you want. You know how to do it and you can really enjoy the art which you couldn't do when you were younger and were pleasing people. Getting people to think you could do it.

That's why even more I want these last projects to add up to bodies of work. They might be the only things I am remembered for. People can say, "Here is Rex's *Sex-Freak Circus*. Here is his *Peter Pan*. Here is his *Bible*." The rest [of the individual drawings] will get kind of disseminated and buried into collections.

Up to now, I've never given that added dimension of taking on a whole storyboard or plot or theme or subject. Up to now what stories I've told are each in one picture—and magnificently so, I must say. It can be done.

I can tell the whole Bible in one picture. I have the skill to pull it off. But, in hindsight, I think I have done that one picture, that one plot, mastered that, and now in these last years I'd like to dwell on all the things I haven't been able to do. Like "water," for instance, for *Peter Pan*. I'm studying now how to draw water.

Drawing sex is now a minor thing with me. I do that in the first three seconds and then, like I told you, spend ten months on the lampshades and getting the light just right. That didn't use to be the case.

### 13

#### A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN PETARD

Rex's longtime Amsterdam friend and gallerist Marcel Sluiman curated *Rex Uncensored*, the first European public exhibition of all of Rex's existing work, in Sluiman's CNCPT13 Gallery in 2014. On

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August 13, 2024, Marcel and I chatted about his tender eyewitness memory of Rex who called Marcel, “Son.”

Losing Rex feels like losing more than a friend. We met in 2013 in my gallery CNCPT13 during Amsterdam Gay Pride. He just walked in and introduced himself. I did not know him, nor recognize his name until he pointed at my guest bookshelf hosting the gay bookstore Vrolijk. About fifty of his *Rex Verboten* books were for sale right in front of me, and that’s when I realized who he was. Like many people, I assumed Rex had died years ago, but here he was.

We met several times soon after to discuss his dream to exhibit in my gallery. We worked it out in weekly meetings that made us friends. We had dinners, walked for hours, visited gay bars, got high nightly in Amsterdam, and traveled a lot over the years. Rex loved Amsterdam by night. To him, Amsterdam and Berlin were the last places left on earth where you could find the magic of the gay fetishes he showed in his work: “For at least,” he said, “as long as it will last.” Rex was not an optimist.

When he lost his room in the Amsterdam Anco hotel, he rented a room in my house in the Jordaan district in Amsterdam centre, and during that time we spent six months in Thionne, France, where he created several art works far away from the fetish scene. After that, he finally got his very own apartment that he painted totally black just like his apartment in San Francisco and just like the black in his work.

Rex did not want me to make photographs. So even though I shot many private photos during our adventures, I never published them. He said his looks and surname were irrelevant and would just disturb “the fantasy of my fans.”

We organized his exhibition *Rex Uncensored* in my gallery April 4-May 1, 2014. In September 2016, we traveled together with our CNCPT13 exhibit to Folsom Berlin because Rex had been invited for a major “Rex” gallery exhibit [Galerie/The Ballerie, Schöneberg] with streets, a hotel, and several parties decorated with Rex art. We did

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the same two years later in Antwerp at Darklands. Sales were always a bit disappointing, but he got the attention for his work and name and that was all he really wanted. He loved the fact that nobody knew who he was, let alone that he was still alive.

[From February 23-25, 2018, the Darklands Festival, Europe's biggest annual fetish event, hosted Rex's last exhibit before he died: *Rex World 1968-2018: Back to the Future, 50 Years of Creating Art; The Rex Retrospective*. The Festival showcased over 200 Rex images, most never exhibited because of censorship and gay politics.

*Alphatribe* magazine celebrated the exhibit in issue 7, January-March 2018, with, on the cover, a Rex drawing of a black-and-white Leather Dog Face with the big word REX in red on its snout. The drawing also suggests in its Rorschach ink dots and blots a homosurreal leatherman's torso with elbows rampant.]

Rex was an observer. He was autistic, and basically lived sober. He ate the same pasta almost everyday except when we went out for our weekly dinner in a restaurant when he ate pizza with red wine or Coca-Cola. In the evenings, he'd sit down to draw, millions of dots year after year, and always with a joint and poppers on his desk, ready for action. "The best way to experience my work is high on a joint and sniffing a popper," he explained. While drawing, he listened to recorded speeches [Hitler and Goebbels] and European and American news from the first half of the 20th century. He owned thousands of recordings.

He lived from a few sales per year of originals and commissions and sales of Mineshaft T-shirts. He stopped drawing in 2019. His last drawing was a logo for a gay bar in Amsterdam.

His biggest frustration was losing so much original work in America due to a fire, and to theft, and the fact that about fifteen of his drawings went missing late in life. He found

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some peace knowing his work would show online forever. For good reason, he subtitled his exhibition in my gallery: *Rex Uncensored: Surviving Is the Best Revenge*.

While caring for my mother during her final illness, I did not see Rex in his final months. Not that I didn't try. He refused to see me because he did not want me to see him in his final days. He wanted me to remember him as the strong man he was: able to move, walk, talk, eat, debate and drink with. He always started his emails to me with "Hey, Son!" I never had a father. Rex came near.

Rex chose his own death.

He stopped eating.

He passed on March 28, 2024.

## 14

### JEALOUSY IS SELF-INFLICTED MASOCHISM

In Berlin on June 6, 2016, Marcel Sluiman, interviewed Rex in an unpublished audio recording in which Rex talks candidly about hating Robert Mapplethorpe, worshiping Tom of Finland, and dealing with his own personal struggle with old age and fame.

One night at a club in New York, Robert was annoying me and the hot guys in my group. Really hot and all different. No one liked Robert. He wasn't a warm guy. Very calculating. Patti Smith was becoming famous. I was becoming famous. He wasn't. This [annoyance] went on for about six months or year. He was an enormous pest. One night, my friends all went into the bathroom together, and I was all alone at the bar. So I said, "ROBERT! What do you want from me?"

He was drunk and I was drunk.

He lost control and slammed his fist down on the bar and said, "I want the fucking respect you get."

That was a great moment of truth for him. A very revealing moment.

He said to me, "With your talent, you could be a millionaire. Why don't you do something with your talent?"

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I had a fabulous career in fashion as a teenager in London, Paris, and New York. I said, “Robert, I’ve been where you want to be and it’s not a place you want to go.”

He said, “Oh, Mister Know It All, you’re such a fool.”

I guess I did know it all because he’s dead and I’m alive.

When he became really famous, I was envious of him. He used the leather scene because he could find creeps to photograph. Leather was a spectacle for him. He never got involved in those people’s lives.

When I saw him in San Francisco after the fire [1981] when I was very poor, living on the street, and working in a warehouse for fifteen dollars a day, he was coming down the street. He’d been giving lectures all around the world on photography at universities, flying to Europe getting two to three-thousand dollars for them. He was two years younger than me, but his hair had turned white. He looked like an old man. He looked so unhappy. He saw me across the street and he ran through the traffic and grabbed me like a long-lost friend.

That’s what fame does to you. It isolates you. You can never belong to the human race again.

That’s why I so guard that no one sees me. Because once someone sees me, I have no life. When I ask people not to photograph me or introduce me to people, it’s so I can go to backroom bars [avoid starfuckers, and have anonymous sex].

When I left New York, I was so famous. Everyone pointed me out, and I learned from that when I went to California. The reason I did this—that no one understands—is that people so enjoy imagining who drew this work that I could never live up to that. What’s wrong with having this mystery that lets people have this image about a wonderful magical person somewhere out there who does this stuff? Once they see I’m mortal and an old man, well, the mystery’s gone. I was pretty good-looking when I was younger. I looked like a Rex drawing.

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It's time I confronted this [aging] part of myself. I am kind of a legend. I've been doing this stuff for fifty years. So you only have to do the numbers and you're not going to expect a young man.

Tom of Finland told me, "You are so smart not to be photographed. I regret that I allowed it."

Tom was a god and a mystery to people. But that was before selfies and cell phones and cameras everywhere. So now I try to be as attractive and guarded as I can be. I've got to get rid of my stomach. I can do it. I must make the best presentation in the most sympathetic atmosphere that I can.

I'm sorry I'm vain. I've worked out all my life because I draw the male body and I have to learn about it, study it. In the old days, I had to pose for myself as my own model in mirrors.

At my openings, it's a freak show. That's why I present myself wearing a suit. I'm the only one who looks like a normal person. Like I came out of a fine hotel. I'm in control. I have to stand out. Because the people who come to my shows are fabulous. Rubber. Drag queens. They come in Swan Boats [spinning Björk's iconic swan dress worn at the Academy Awards 2001], or sealed up in leather with crucifixes and swastikas. It's party time at my shows. They're all young and gorgeous. So I play against type as the only one in a suit. I worked in fashion. So I know how to wear clothes. I should do more rubber drawings because they're very popular now. I consider leather *passé* actually. In America, not here in Germany.

## 15

### EXIT PURSUED BY A BEAR

Six weeks before Rex passed, he circulated a grand-finale email about changing his will. On February 16, 2024, he said he was "fading fast" and was "too weak to write" a new will and would need help from Amsterdam locals to do it. But if he did it, was the new will signed, witnessed, dated, and filed? Was he in his right mind? He

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who loved drama got so much satisfaction from the chaos of social estrangements in his daily life that it seems he wanted to continue his roguery beyond the grave.

His email threw his estate into disarray, which may have been the avowed anarchist's purpose, because he wrote he intended to delete as executors longtime American friends who on news of his death were left seeking his final will in order to determine how their legal role may have changed regarding the curation and preservation of the mercurial artist's archive of drawings and copyrights.

"My being dead will only increase the frenzy around my art... Potentially," he wrote as the personification of his own famous Rex man with \$50 bills to burn, "there is art worth about €400,000 at current estimated value which will automatically double in value upon my death."

## 16

### REX HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

As an artist, Rex's vision of homomascuine men, prowling under the full moon of macho, still seems appropriate for humanist gender balance in a feminist-inclined era. Friendly with women and denigrating no gender, Rex was a champion of masculine-identified gender: a *suum quique* artist pursuing the romance of stoic American manhood in its hard-edged rebellion against the diktats of politics and religion and corporations. Like Brando in *The Wild One*, the establishment was his enemy. Watching that 1950s leather-biker movie, the teenage Rex came out as a rebel with a cause when Brando was asked, "What are you rebelling against?" and he sneered back: "Watcha got?"

"I've always felt," the swashbuckling artist of his own radioactive *Peter Pan* pirate series told me, "that pornography is a sword to lance society's boils." He went to his X-rated grave raging against the state of American civilization that like his mother, father, and gay mainstream culture had rejected him.

Rex offers agency and ecstasy to men who like men masculine. *Art is a harsh mistress*. Love Rex, or hate Rex, no one, fan or friend, is unmoved by Rex who, it pains me as a mindful eyewitness of

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nearly fifty years to say, depended on the kindness of strangers and then bit the hands that fed him. *Art asks everything of the artist*. Free from his autism, anger, Nazis, and the *Village Voice*, may the lonely Rex, the loneliest man of the solitary Rex men, rest in peace with his art ascendant, dot, dot, dot, for the ages. Let him live beyond his death. Think of him. Honor him. If need be, forgive him. *Art keeps the artist alive until all that is left of the artist is the art*. Look at a Rex drawing. Pour a glass of tea and sympathy and spill a drop for lost brothers.

—Original text written by Jack Fritscher including all interviews by and letters to and from him ©2024 Jack Fritscher

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*The Rex Video Gallery: Corrupt Beyond Innocence*, Palm Drive Video, Rex Drawings, Original Soundtrack, 65 minutes, 1992. Approved by Rex; directed and photographed by Jack Fritscher; edited and produced by Mark Hemry

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