

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL OF DRAWING, PAINTING & SCULPTURE

STEPHEN ANTONAKOS DRAWINGS: GEOMETRY AND SPACE

NOVEMBER 2, 2023 — JANUARY 7, 2024

OPENING RECEPTION: THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2023, 6-8PM



Stephen Antonakos, *Untitled Drawing (#2)*, October 1, 2010
Multi-color pencil and colored pencil on vellum, 21 x 18 inches.
Photo by Jeffrey Sturges, NYC.

New York Studio School is pleased to present *Stephen Antonakos Drawings: Geometry and Space*, curated by Karen Wilkin in collaboration with the Stephen Antonakos Studio. The opening reception will take place on November 2 from 6 to 8pm.

An engaged New Yorker, with deep roots in Greek culture and religion, Stephen Antonakos defined his art as “real things in real spaces in the here and now.” He is best known for his neon panels, large installations, and public works worldwide, including his 1990 *Neons for the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station*, the glowing outlines and geometric shapes defining the building, visible from the West Side Highway in Manhattan. Despite his working with a remarkable range of materials, at scales ranging from the intimate to the monumental, drawing was his most enduring, varied, and productive practice. People close to him have quipped, “Stephen was born with a pencil in his hand.” Sometimes that pencil was a straightforward stick of graphite. At other times, it was a literally multifaceted gathering of colors that allowed for complex, often surprising orchestrations of hues as both plane and line. Sometimes, Antonakos found ways of creating boundaries and the paths of trajectories with edges and folds. At still other times, he discovered drawing gestures in found elements. Throughout, he expanded our conception of what a drawing could be.

Just as we experience Antonakos’s geometric neon forms in relation to their architectural and spatial sites in his public works, we also experience his colored pencil geometries in relation to the flat rectangles of paper or vellum on which they are drawn. Whatever the medium or the material, the geometric forms are in conversation with each other and with their location. Placement is crucial. The space between elements is as important as the elements themselves and, on many occasions, perhaps even more important. We are always acutely aware of interval, of the tension across the surface.

The many directions Antonakos explored over nearly six decades are echoed in the variety and sheer number of his works on paper — from early machine-stitched lines on canvas, to formal compositions with colored pencils, to experiments with collaging, cutting, folding, and crumpling. Some drawings are constructed with planes of uninflected hues made in various ways, while others seem to test how spare a line can be and still compel our attention. Antonakos’s drawings reveal the essence of his work. It can be argued that they constitute the most personal and fundamental aspect of his artmaking.

The variety of his approaches is impressive, yet no matter how wide-ranging and diverse his approach may be, the result is always recognizably “Antonakos.” Whatever the medium or scale of the work, it is distinguished by an underlying sense of geometric purity, like a classical archetype. Words such as disciplined, pure, severe, and elegant come to mind, but so do playful and high-spirited.

Berlin art historian Daniel Marzona called Antonakos’s drawings, “. . . the spiritual center of this many-layered oeuvre, which in my opinion touches upon a universal harmony, like the work of Mondrian, it cannot be written about — as Wittgenstein put it: it *shows* itself.” The word-defying, eloquent, and often surprising economy of Antonakos’s drawings also reminds us of the painter and critic Walter Darby Bannard’s trenchant observation “Art is not ‘about.’ Art is.” At a time when art is often supposed to be “about” all kinds of issues, from sociology to international politics and a lot in between, Antonakos’s rejection of the irrelevant is more resonant than ever.

Karen Wilkin, New York, October 2023

On **Wednesday, November 8** at 6:30pm, NYSS will present a panel discussion on Antonakos’s work with David Ebony, Sergio Pardo López, and Karen Wilkin, moderated by Kara Carmack. **David Ebony** is a contributing editor of *Art in America* and is the author of numerous artist monographs, including the recent *Stephen Antonakos: Neon and Geometry* (2023, Rizzoli). Ebony frequently contributes to *artnet News*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *Lacanian Ink*, among other publications. **Sergio Pardo López** is an arts administrator, curator, and architect based in New York City. He currently is the Director of the Percent for Art Program at the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs and an Adjunct Professor at New York University. Curator and critic **Karen Wilkin** has organized museum exhibitions of drawings by Anthony Caro, Jules Olitski, Helen Frankenthaler, David Smith, Stuart Davis, and Hans Hofmann and has published monographs on their work. At NYSS, she has curated similar shows showcasing paper works by Jack Bush, George Grosz, Alberto Giacometti, Stanley Lewis, James Castle, David Humphrey, Medrie MacPhee, Susanna Heller, Karlis Rekevics, and Graham Nickson. **Kara Carmack** is the Assistant Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at NYSS. She received her PhD from the University of Texas at Austin and specializes in modern and contemporary art.

A concurrent exhibition, *Stephen Antonakos: Neon and Geometry*, is on view at Bookstein Projects, 39 East 78th Street, Suite 420, through December 15, 2023, featuring highlights from the new Rizzoli monograph.

Stephen Antonakos (1926, Laconia, Greece – 2013, New York) established his first studio in Manhattan’s fur district soon after returning from World War II. The early two- and three-dimensional works he made indicate a readiness for and openness to various materials and a love of color. In the mid-1950s he “discovered” neon’s intense color, flexibility, and visibility from great distances. He used it in geometric forms in relation to their architectural sites — first on bases, then as linear placements in specific corners or on walls, canvases, or wood panels; then as neon walls, rooms, and enormous outdoor installations; and, by the late 1970s, in large-scale outdoor and indoor permanent public works. His exhibitions in the United States and abroad typically included contemporaneous drawings.

Here, as in the neon works, placement and the activation of space are definitive. Through the early 1970s, the drawings were often ideas for neon works. By 1973, the drawings are real things in real spaces themselves — open geometries of colored pencil on paper on single sheets or in series. Then came the torn and cut paper collages. Through the 1980s and 1990s he made dense, intense drawings in which his characteristic hatching motion with single-color and four-color pencils fills both form and ground. White space returned in the 1990s, sometimes with airy soft interactions with space. In the early years of the new century, there was a concentration on declarative ovals, blocks, and circles on white grounds, and then a series of delicate vellum sheets covered with single-color hatching and then cut, cut out, folded, layered, or crumpled. Sky-blue or white unmarked sheets came next — clearly not images, but objects in frames. From 2010, there are the sheets with delicate solid or linear geometries sharing the space with gentle, floating areas of four-color hatchings.

Antonakos’s constant immersion in drawings through the decades ran parallel to his innovative work with neon and with his conceptual series of packages, time-based travel collages, contemplative chapels, prints, artist’s books, silver and white reliefs, and the late gold works. He felt that a work is animated by the presence of the viewer — by their awareness.

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