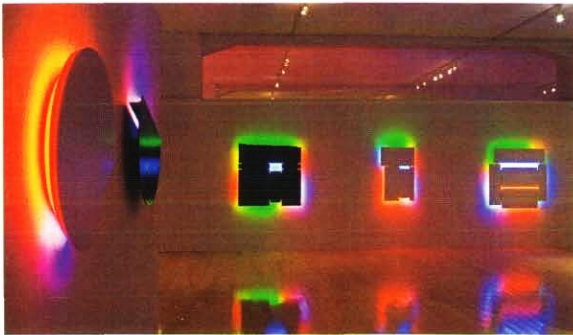


# Art in America

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## ALLENTOWN STEPHEN ANTONAKOS ALLENTOWN ART MUSEUM



ONE OF STEPHEN ANTONAKOS'S earliest memories is of a small whitewashed chapel in Agios Nikolaos, the southern Greek village of his birth. Antonakos moved to New York in 1930 at age four and still lives and works there, but the azure sky, intense sunlight and deep shadows of his native landscape inform his work to this day. A 50-year survey at the Allentown Art Museum, "Stephen Antonakos: A Retrospective" (a modified version of an exhibition at the Benaki Museum in Athens), brings indoor neon works together with drawings and models of the large-scale public light installations for which he is best known; many viewers will be happily surprised by the selection of less familiar early collages and assemblages also on view. Concurrent fall shows at two New York galleries featured both early and recent work.

Around 1960, Antonakos began to make extensive use of found objects, sometimes adhering painted canvas to the surface of an item to produce what he called a "sewlage." He also made a series of altered pillows, among them an *Untitled Pillow* (1963) that is paved with nails in the manner of a Yombe fetish. In the freestanding *Four Landscapes* (late 1950s), wooden disks are juxtaposed with dowels, metal, light bulbs and paint in a slightly anthropomorphic form that also suggests an Orthodox iconostasis, or portable icon and stand.

But a fascination with the illuminated commercial signage of the urban landscape soon prevailed. A turning point came with the targetlike construction *White Light* (1962). On a painted wood base again studded with nails, concentric rings of hot red neon surround a square, fur-lined central aperture, inside which sits a white incandescent bulb. A series of conceptually oriented works appeared in the mid-'70s, including *Time Box Project*, a set of four small boxes that Antonakos distributed among his friends Richard Artschwager, Daniel Buren, Sol LeWitt and Robert Ryman in 1974 and '75, along with the instruction to put something inside them but tell no one; he promised to open the containers in 2000. As displayed in the retrospective, each disgorges a signature work by its recipient. By this time, Antonakos had already produced such autonomous works as *Blue Inside Corner Neon* (1971),



ABOVE, STEPHEN ANTONAKOS'S CORNER MEDITATION CHAPEL, 2008, AND, LEFT, EXHIBITION VIEW, BOTH AT THE BENAKI MUSEUM, ATHENS.

an 8-foot-tall, lozenge-shaped cobalt-blue neon tube that appears to be suspended in a corner. Recalling an Artschwager "blip," it addresses both human scale and its immediate architectural environment (the electrical power source, buried in the wall, is visually erased). *Incomplete Circle* (1975) consists of two congruent arcs of red neon; *Blue Neon Incomplete Square* (1975), included in Antonakos's recent show at David Krut Projects, comes only an inch or so from closure. Outdoors at Jim Kempner Fine Arts, Antonakos installed *13' Red Incomplete Square* (2008), striking through two existing square openings in the steel walls that frame the gallery's courtyard and bathing it in a green and red glow.

Drawings, an important aspect of Antonakos's practice, are given generous representation at Allentown. The five graphite and colored-pencil drawings that make up *Incomplete Circle* (1975) are particularly compelling, demonstrating the kind of painterly engagement with the properties of color in light that can also be seen in his sculpture. The extended "Spring Series" (2006) of folded, crumpled and collaged sheets of brightly colored paper, some with round and square cutouts, explores similar issues.

A devout man, Antonakos continues to refer to icons in his work. *Saint Nicholas* (1989), for example, a 2½-foot-high wood panel, is covered in gold leaf and partially enclosed by a characteristically incomplete frame; it appears to float on a field of blue neon. Closest in spirit to the religious observances of the artist's childhood are the several chapels he has designed, represented by models in the Allentown exhibition. Antonakos also constructed a project for the show, the temporary *Corner Meditation Chapel* (2008), a roughly 12-foot-square space that is bathed in blue, the color of the Peloponnesian sky.

—Edward Leffingwell

THE SHOW IS ON VIEW IN ALLENTOWN THROUGH JAN. 11, 2009. ANTONAKOS'S "DARKNESS AND LIGHT" CAN BE SEEN AT THE SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN IN ATLANTA (DEC. 11, 2008-FEB. 15, 2009).