

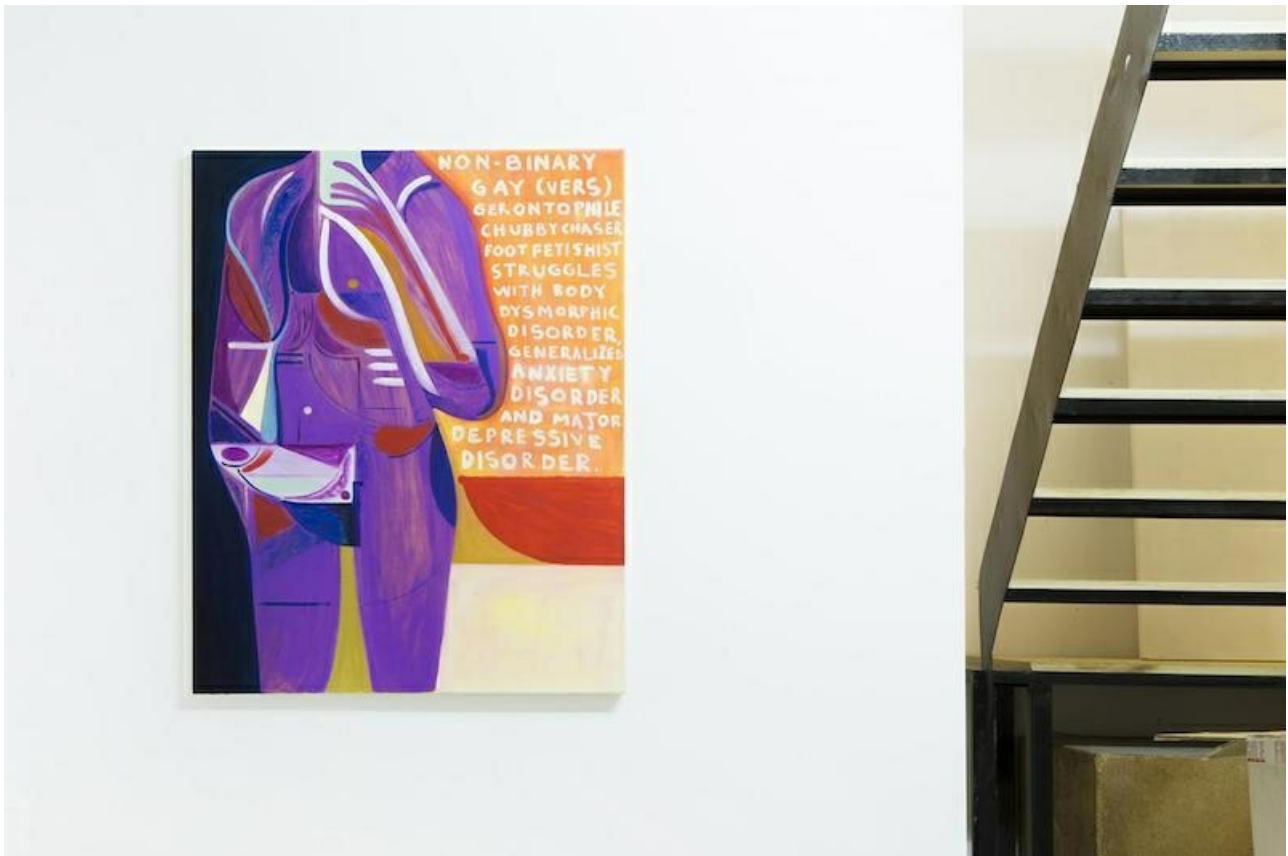
On not apologizing for your work

Visual artist Antonakis discusses the fear of leaving unfinished work behind, the necessity of ritual, and overcoming guilt around your creativity.

May 19, 2023 -

As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 2182 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#), [Beginnings](#), [Multi-tasking](#).



tonyc35, oil on canvas (80 x 100 cm), 2021

What is your creative practice? What is it that you do?

I'm a painter. I'm working with other mediums as well, photography, ceramics, video, but I consider those to be materials for painting. Writing is also part of my practice as a painter but I would also love to be considered a writer at some point.

You write on your paintings sometimes, that's what you just meant, right?

I do that. I mostly use quotes that I collect from TV shows, articles or songs. Sometimes I use my own writing in my paintings. Then I also write separately from my practice as a painter. I used to have a column about TV, I was writing my own essays, and my own texts about my works. So, now I think I'm a painter with the ambitions of also becoming a writer. If that makes sense.

Yeah, that makes total sense. What is one of your earliest memories of being creative?

Well, I have three. I don't know if you want me to share all three or just one. I have a dramatic one.

Okay, let's go with the dramatic one.

So, I was in the kindergarten and we had this old, widowed teacher always dressed in all black. She was from a different era. She had also been my mom's kindergarten teacher, so imagine how ancient she was. So, it was Orthodox Easter and I had gotten this mega box of Carioca markers. The box had like 20 different shades of purple and pink and yellow. It was like a rainbow, but a very good rainbow. I was obsessed with markers. I really hated color pencils. We had to use color pencils at kindergarten so I took my jumbo box of markers with me and took them out when we were given the assignment to color in a photocopy of an egg, bunny, and Jesus Christ or something like that. Just color them in, that was the task of the day. I used all 100 of my Carioca markers and I didn't leave even a sliver of a white spot on the paper. It looked like a hippie T-shirt in early '90s California.

Batik.

Exactly, batik. And I was mega excited. I used them all. What I made was magnificent because I didn't just go over the lines, I painted the whole thing. So I'm going to the teacher mega happy, a tiny bit guilty in the back of my head because I knew that I wasn't supposed to use markers but I'm like, "There's no way she's going to say something to me because this is magnificent." When she saw my drawing she slapped me.

Oh, my god.

Nowadays, that would be a legal issue in Greece. I mean, my mom made a lot of fuss about it. But, back then, because I'm 1,000 years old, it was like, "Yeah, yeah, she slapped him, so what."

Thank god she didn't scar you from ever wanting to draw again!

Well, I feel a bit guilty when I become very creative, maybe she has something to do with that.

What do you mean you feel guilty when you're very creative?

Only in the last couple of years when I really hit rock bottom, when the pandemic started. I was isolated and freaking out and I saw life as we know it ending for me and everybody else and I didn't feel hopeful anymore. That's when I allowed myself to be very free, to do whatever I want. I remember I was continuously listening to *Ultraviolence* by Lana del Rey, and it wasn't one of her most popular albums. I was listening thinking, "This is beyond. This is her best work." My friend told me, "Yeah, she said it's the only album she did without caring what anyone thought about it." And I remember that because I wasn't giving a shit about anything either at that time because I was hopeless, depressed, scared, alone. I felt the pandemic was the end of the world.



You tore down their stone houses, oil on canvas (60 x 80 cm), 2021

Recently I was with friends at an artist residency in Kythnos and I was painting outside. It was full of wasps, and I'm allergic to wasps but I still continued painting. I was feeling so happy and free and I could do whatever I wanted, and there was nothing in my head, nothing like career or money or anything. And currently, I don't feel guilty about being completely free in my work. Of course, I have structure, of course, I have a path that I want to go towards. I have a show in March, I'm working on specific things, but I feel less guilty about being completely free in myself. And that wasn't the case for me for decades.

So do you think the pandemic and the fear it triggered in you turned out to be quite healing because it got you into that space of not giving a fuck?

I think so because I'm in a very good place right now and it's also related to my brother's passing which is the most horrible thing I've ever experienced. When he died I said, "You know what? I don't really give a shit about whatever happens around me." I stopped feeling I had to apologize for my work and then the pandemic started and I gave even less of a shit. And then maybe it comes with age. I mean, I'm 45 years old now.

What was this guilt you were feeling? Was it about not doing anything "important" in society or...?

No, no. I used to think that to be a professional painter I have to have limits. I lost a lot of time thinking that, being careful and afraid to show who I really am.



Lullaby for babies and old men, oil on linen (100 x 120 cm), 2023

Were you limiting yourself because you were thinking you have to make sellable work?

Not even that, because I have a gallery and I was selling work. No, not even that—I wish it was that, I could justify it somehow. It was the same way that socially you choose to say some things and not other things because

somebody might get offended. But you know deep down that's not right, like it's against what you believe. In high school I was like, "What will people think of me if I wear this jumper?"

It's very clear that television shows, porn, and movies influence your work. So, let's say you watch a lot of TV and then there's a show that triggers your interest. What is the creative process behind that interest being channeled into a painting?

It's a very specific process. Well, so I'm watching a TV show, like an episode, and I'm on my couch and I see a living room or a bedroom in the TV show or hear a quote I find interesting and I will take a screenshot. Usually, I do that, and then write down some notes. And sometimes I forget about it and go back again, if it's a random thing that I just discovered. But if I have a show, like when I did the Introducing Silver show in 2011, that was all about stalking Silver from 90210—not the actress, thank god.

I started with this process, taking pictures, taking notes of her quotes, her clothes. I even bought some of her clothes from the show's actual costume designer. And I get as deep as I can, like I recreated her room in an installation in Glasgow. I made my apartment look like hers. I tattooed her name on my chest as she did the same for her boyfriend on the show. There's no line between where am I as an actual person or as the artist. I get so into it that I lose a bit of control. And that's the liminal space I really love being in.

That's the sweet spot. You become obsessed.

Yeah. And then I somehow make the work, thank god, and then I sell it.



Local guy I, oil on linen, (80 x 100 cm), 2022

It's amazing that you're so creative and productive when watching television.

I wish I had more time to watch more.

Do you ever abandon work?

I can't. It's impossible. I used to throw things away but then I listened to my friend Rallou Panagiotou's advice. She's an amazing artist and she's known me for almost 30 years and she said: "Do not throw away anything!" Now I hide things and will return to them.

You just put them aside and then you'll feel called to do them at some point?

Yeah. But I can't leave them for ages because I have OCD, and I need everything to be organized and everything to be finished. I'm afraid of dying and leaving unfinished stuff behind. I'm afraid a curator will put something unfinished of mine in a museum and I'll have to come back as a vampire and kill everyone.

You'd haunt the museum?

I'd definitely haunt the museum director.

You've had a bunch of solo shows. How do you come up with the topic of a slow show? Do you do it in dialogue with your gallerist?

Since I have a very specific path and some specific ambitions when it comes to work—I'm not talking about career and money right now, obviously, I'm talking about the actual work, what I want to make... I have a lot in my bucket list of things I want to make. Of course, media keeps evolving so my ideas keep evolving and increasing, too. I have an approximate plan of what I'm going to do. I think I know the topics of my next five solo shows.

You really plan ahead. Or you just have a lot of ideas?

I have an idea about what I'm going towards because I know what I'm interested in and there's no changing my mind. Things might be added, but things usually don't get removed. Pop culture, media, reality shows, porn industry, TV, in general, YouTube, all this new stuff that I want to recreate and...I don't know, make people pay attention to them in a different way, I guess. People do pay attention but I want people to see media as something extremely elegant and important. That's my goal and that's reflected in my shows.



Billy, mixed media, (84 x 116 cm), 2022

Are there practices you do to get yourself into the mindset of being creative?

I have very specific rituals. Everything must be in its places before I leave the studio at the end of the day. I cannot start working the next morning if things aren't in their place. Everything, everything, everything, everything. And I need music. Sometimes I listen to one track only on repeat for the duration of one whole painting or one whole day. I can work for ten hours just listening to one track and then eventually I'll want to vomit and I'll never listen to the track again.

It helps you concentrate?

Yeah. But when I have to draw very thin lines, when it's very difficult I need complete silence.

Do you turn off your phone when you're in your studio painting?

Airplane mode. Yeah.

Oh, wow. My image of you is like you rushing through the streets of Athens constantly talking on the phone.

No, no, no, no. Not when I'm painting. If I kept my phone on in the studio then I'd be better off just getting married to a rich doctor and staying home all day talking on the phone. Airplane mode. It's the only way.

Antonakis Recommends:

Any theatrical play directed by the extraordinary Aris Biniaris. He is a magician. In my opinion, Greek theatre became even more rich because he exists and works.

Mulholland Drive (2001), a classic film by David Lynch. Everyone on the planet should watch at least 10 times. I watched it even more often than that.

The White Lotus: Season 2. When I watched season 1 I couldn't imagine how could be even possible to get a second season out of this and also to be that great! Mike White is just Mega.

Whenever you feel a bit depressed just check *Bonjour Tristesse*, the film by Otto Preminger (1958) or the actual novel by Françoise Sagan (1954). It helps.

My two favorite magazines in the whole world, Flaneur and Sofa are siblings! Get all issues, subscribe etc. It makes sense!

Name

Antonakis

Vocation

visual artist

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Dimitris Kokkinogenis