

AUDRIUS V. PLIOPLYS
at Artemisia Gallery, through
February 24

By Fred Camper

WANDERING THOUGHTS

Audrius V. Plioplys's 29 photos at Artemisia, taken at locales from Rome to the Canadian Arctic, are well made, often sensuously colorful, but not especially distinguished. The simple texts applied with transfer type to their edges identify the locations and offer simple commentary, but alone they aren't enough to make the work interesting either. What I liked about this exhibit was the cumulative effect of the far-flung locales and wide-ranging texts, which play off each other—and, as one circles the exhibit's single room clockwise, tell a kind of story.



photography

THOUGHTS OF PROTECTION FROM
THE NATIVES IN PARADISE

READER

Plioplys has grouped the photos, in clockwise order, into four sections: "Submission of Thought," "Supremacy of Thought," "Suspension of Thought," and "Implementation of Thought." By beginning almost all his labels with the word "thoughts," he presents the photos less as simulacra of reality than as metaphors. Most of the photos in the first two groups show human-made structures, toward which the texts frequently express a critical or ironic attitude. An elegant Colorado church that's now a tourist attraction is labeled *Thoughts of Religious Piety: Tourist Profiteering*. A barbed-wire fence amid tropical flowers in the resort area of Ocho Rios, Jamaica, is marked *Thoughts of Protection From the Natives in Paradise*.

The first two sections suggest a world whose structures are overambitious impositions on the land, a world that's lost touch with or has misappropriated its past and is walling itself off from the present. We often observe things displaced in space and time, futile attempts by the people who've built the structures, or by Plioplys, to recapture something forever lost. A lushly appointed bar in Ocho Rios is labeled *Thoughts of Havana Indulgence*, referring to the tourist trade of pre-Castro Cuba. The site of the former boom town of Lulu City, Colorado, now an empty field, is marked *Thoughts of Bygone Settlers: Away From Here, the Ghosts Are Coming!* Here Plioplys seems to be ordering tourists away, asking that the past be honored not with monu-

ments but by leaving it alone. His sympathies seem to lie with Native Americans and with nature: *Thoughts of a Native American Sanctuary* describes a few rocks amid a forest, the site of a former quarry whose stone was used for peace pipes. *Thoughts of Animal Dens* alludes to a part of the Roman Colosseum, a decaying wall whose cavities look perfect for animals. *Benito Mussolini's Ambitious Thoughts*, by contrast, is the label for an absurdly grand building facade the dictator built because "he wanted to have a show of force in architecture in Rome," Plioplys told me. A spectacular but not particularly mushroomy cloud formation called *Thoughts of Atomic Armageddon* seems to represent the hypertrophy of the structures in the nearby pictures, suggesting that this is where hubris can lead.

The third section, "Suspension of Thought," is devoted mostly to peaceful natural settings. The modest Ocho Rios house in *Thoughts of a Tropical Paradise* almost seems a part of the surrounding forest; a perfectly balanced composition showing a Colorado mountain lake is called *Thoughts of Japanese Tranquillity*. These works, not that interesting in themselves, help underline Plioplys's attitudes toward civilization and nature, which are made clearer in the final group. In "Implementation of Thought" he records earth-art installations he's made, many of them in the Canadian Arctic. *Thoughts of Stone Displacements Ellesmere Is. to Victoria Is.* shows a small heap of stones on the ground, stones he carried by plane from one island to another. *Thoughts of Hommage to the Sun* shows a shallow arc, part of a circle he created by walking in barren, pebble-covered land. These are of a

very different order than Mussolini's monument or even the Ocho Rios bar: modest, not much different from their surroundings, they'll presumably vanish with time. For *Thoughts of a Stone Time-line*, Plioplys set seven stones in a row and photographed them on the summer solstice; their shadows form a single line, and that perfect alignment creates a harmony notably lacking in the images of the grander structures. In the context of photos like this one such structures look strangely out of place, made to the wrong scale, alienated.

It was in fact only when I saw the works not as individual images but as a whole that the exhibit moved me. The labels become a kind of inventory of ways of thinking about images. *Thoughts of Majestic Splendor* over an image of mountains adds little more than a standard sentiment, while *Thoughts of Narcotic Wealth* over a hillside house provides us with information not otherwise apparent—that this is the home of a drug lord. *Thoughts of a Mass Execution: 50 Hanged* over a close-up of grass takes us back in time; this was shot at the Minnesota site of a notorious mass slaughter of Indians. These shifts in labels—from those that inform about the present to those that refer to the past to those that see visual forms as metaphors to those that offer ironic social comment—are initially confusing but add up to a kind of catalog of ways of seeing and thinking. Each form of thought is presented as necessarily incomplete, and we come to understand that such labels are almost interchangeable: for some, the drug lord's home may represent "majestic splendor," and the grass we see at the Minnesota site may not be the only now-benign setting for past

murders. Plioplys asks the viewer become an active interrogator of everything he sees.

If the show reveals an artist trying to come to terms with the many possible relations between imagery and the mind, perhaps one reason is that Plioplys is a neurologist. Born in Toronto in 1951, he moved to Chicago as a child and attended college and medical school at the University of Chicago. After his internship, unsure about pursuing medicine, he was a full-time artist for three years before completing his residency. Plioplys continues to make art while living and practicing in Chicago, specializing mostly in child neurology—"My interest has always been cognitive problems." He's worked with autistic and Down's syndrome children, and for the past 12 years has been "working on actively integrating these two aspects of my life—the medical work and the art work."

Just as many of the photos describe spatial and temporal dislocations, so the exhibit as a whole is profoundly disorienting. One never feels at home with an image or with a particular way of looking at it; images become concepts rather than copies of reality, deconstructions of seeing rather than documents of the world. Viewing the show, I felt like a wanderer in a continually confusing world, given only rare moments of clarity, as when the shadows of some stones momentarily line up.

Perhaps another aspect of Plioplys's biography accounts for this profound sense of dislocation. His Lithuanian father and mother, hating the Russian rule they lived under at the beginning of World War II, fled the Red Army's advance at war's end and eventually emigrated to Canada.

"When I was growing up my parents had the very strong idea that they were going to be moving back to Lithuania," Plioplys says, "that the Allied troops would not let Eastern Europe stay in Russian hands forever. So there was no attempt to teach me English in Toronto because we were going to be moving back anyway. On the first day of kindergarten I didn't know a word of English; I remember how traumatic it was going there and not understanding anything, feeling isolated." His parents' cure: "As soon as they realized I was having problems in school they bought a TV set and put me in front of it. I think I learned most of my English from Howdy Dooday."

Perhaps the odd, varied, sometimes absurd relationship between TV images and words partly accounts for the shifts in Plioplys's photos. But the strangely authoritative hold the text has over the images, as well as the shifting uses he makes of language, may also carry traces of his early linguistic confusion. More generally, Plioplys recalls a childhood feeling of dislocation: "You don't really belong in Lithuania because you never were there, but at the same time you don't really belong here either because at home they speak Lithuanian and talk about Lithuania all the time."

The strength of this show lies in the way its motifs converge into a powerful depiction of displacement. The texts dislocate the photos, making their subjects conceptual, metaphorical; the photos range widely over space and time; and the ways that language shifts suggest unstable mental processes as well. The viewer is prevented from ever feeling at home anywhere—not in the photos' locations, not in the text, not even in a single group of images.