

Audrius V. Plioplys on the blurring line between art and neurology

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Cosmic Consciousness, a newly commissioned installation by artist and neurologist/neuroscientist Audrius V. Plioplys, MD'75, is on display in [Rockefeller Chapel through Tuesday, February 19](#). Below, Plioplys generously answers questions about the large-scale installation, his art practice, and the relationship between the arts and sciences.

How did this particular exhibition come about?

[Back in 2006] I got an invitation from Rockefeller to put up a sequence of pieces called [Neurotheology](#). These were large-scale pieces. Most of them were 5' x 6' and there were also a couple that were 5' x 12'. So people knew me from then, and because of my exhibit at Rockefeller I became acquainted with Sunday services there. And then independently, I'd gotten this crazy idea in my mind of "well, these are big, so maybe I should just really go big, make something much, much bigger." If you do something crazy like that, you've got to be able to put it somewhere. You'd like to be able to show it to somebody, at least once, somewhere. [Laughs.] So you need a gigantic space to do it. So I thought, that's going to fit absolutely in the east transept [of Rockefeller chapel].

You graduated from the University of Chicago in 1975, as a medical student. When did you make the transition into art making, and how did it come about?

Well, I grew up in Toronto, Canada, and the seeds for painting art [were] implanted in me by a childhood friend of mine. I would come over to his house and watch him start with a blank canvas, and slowly work on it, and build it up, and before you knew it, you had a beautiful landscape. I just couldn't get over it, how you could make something so beautiful from nothing. It was much, much later, when I was in medical school at the University [of Chicago] and had all this spare time [laughs] that I started painting. And during those four years, my passion for painting art became just bigger and bigger and bigger. It overtook me completely.

You did finish your M.D., though?

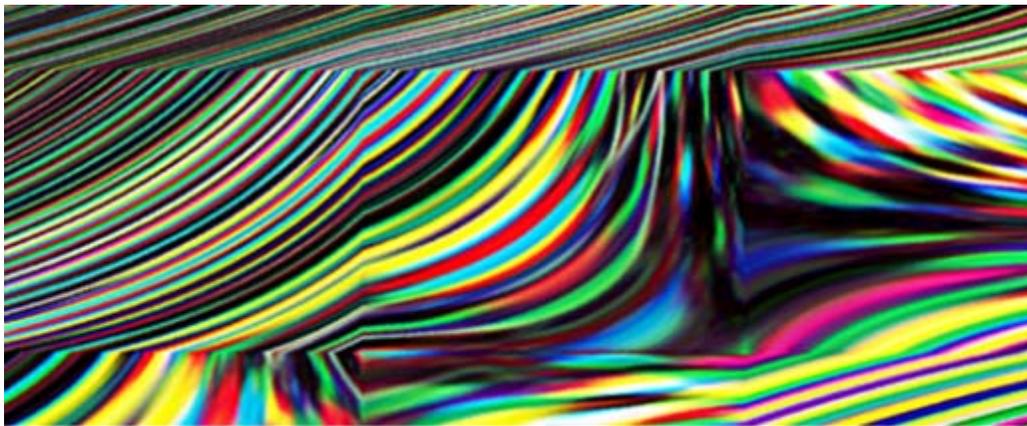
Yes, and I listened to the people who were sensible, and I spent one year [at my internship]. My salary, I know, for the year was \$10,000. I saved every penny that I could, and then I dropped out of medicine entirely for three years. I went to Washington, D.C., did art, had lots of exhibits,

write-ups, some sales. But then after three years, two things happened: one thing, my money ran out, so I had to deal with the practicality of life. And secondly, I really started feeling guilty, because I had gone to medical school at the University—not so much for medicine, but specifically for neurology, for how the brain works, how the mind works. And I really started to feel guilty. I've got this knowledge, I've had this experience, and I'm sitting here not using any of it.

Did you go back to medicine exclusively for a while?

I told myself, "I've made a fundamental error here." And the error is that I thought neurology and art are two different worlds. That's the error I made, because they are combinable. All of my art is dealing with some aspect of thinking, what thinking is, what consciousness is. What is it that makes us human beings in reality?

We have a hundred billion neurons, trillions of synaptic interconnections, and out of the mass of these cells is a cognitive human being, self-aware, responsible, knowledgeable, and able to communicate and help each other out. How does that happen? That's what I've been addressing in my artwork. I kind of look at my art as a neurobiology research lab, but in the world of an artist's studio as opposed to a laboratory situation.



Subito Forzando (2011) by Audrius V. Plioplys
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