NEUROLOGIST MIXES MEDICINE AND ART

PICTURE HIS THOUGHTS

Thinking about thinking is what occupies Dr. Andy Piopleys, a child neurologist at Sick Children's Hospital, and at play. He's a doctor and a medical researcher and an artist, and your thought, often after meeting him, is that he could be a rocket scientist too if he chose. Except it's exploring inner space that has captured Piopleys' mind.

Every kind of thought sets Piopleys to thinking some more: not just the bear thoughts that aren't thought at all. How does the brain work? Wherein are clues to suggest new relations to learning problems?

Piopleys is a child neurologist at Sick Children's Hospital, treating kids whose thought processes are affected by retardation, Down's Syndrome, epilepsy. This accounts for a third of his working hours.

Another two-thirds of his time is spent as a researcher at Surrey Place Centre, exploring the theory that the effects of Down's Syndrome might be eased someday by medication that would normalize the brain cells.

Visual exploration

And then there's Piopleys' third life as an artist. At other times it has pushed him right out of medicine, but, for the moment at least, the three streams of his life are flowing in co-existent consciousness. He squeezes in his art by rising at 5 a.m.

"What I'm doing now I see as a new kind of art," Piopleys, 36, says enthusiastically, "in which I'm encompassing the basic thinking. I'm doing in my clinical world and in research.

"What strikes me as important is the whole process of what I'm thinking. One day I said to myself, 'Maybe I can take this concept and turn my art into a visual expression of what thinking is.' I'm very excited about this. To my knowledge, no one has addressed the thought process in art.

On his Surrey Place office walls are clues suggesting a mind rarefied thinking takes him. For instance, there's a snapshot of Marilyn Monroe's tombstone. "Well, I was doing L.A., and I thought this was one of the things one should see," he says. Another photograph is of a landscape by the friend who first got Piopleys interested in art.

"I hung out with this fellow a lot before my family moved from Toronto to Chicago when I was 11," he explains. "He went on to sell this painting to a new friend of mine, and I really got into painting until I was in medical school at the University of Chicago.

Once Piopleys was in med school, "art grew into an obsession. I painted nights and weekends, and by the time I finished med school it'd become a problem. It came down to deciding whether to abandon medicine, though I'd been accepted for a residency that was a really good opportunity."

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Half of the roomers at The Edge called themselves artists and half were on medication. It was a perfect fit for the 24-year-old Piopleys, who was so lonely and disillusioned he twice decided to quit in his first six months. In the second six months, though,

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Thinking in Green

It goes without saying, perhaps, that landscapes are red in the maw of the young doctor's art. "I've taken a number of canvasesI would like to paint a landscape," he says. He did, however, once travel to Elmersere Island, hundreds of miles north of the Arctic Circle, and arrange seven stones in a line so each sat at the end of the shadow of the other. Another stone, he photographed it, titling the work "Stone Line." Other comments of Piopleys' work include "blessed with a splendid imagination" (Chicago Sun-Times); "Piopleys has the look of an artist" (Minneapolis Tribune); and "his work caused a fire in my imagination" (Minneapolis Institute of Art).

Piopleys is delighted with the reception of his one-man show that opened at Chicago's Galerija on the American Thanksgiving. Here, 24 canvases present Piopleys' latest thoughts on thinking. One is titled "My Personal Method of Thinking in Green: superimposed on a multi-colored splashes of green are the words "over and over and over," filling the entire canvas. Another, smaller splatch of red, with the message "There was a man who said, 'Eureka! I've reached a decision.'"

But Piopleys reserves the right to identify what is real art and what isn't. "You want to see some real art," he says, opening a door to an anteroom with a wall abrace with crayoned pictures by Piopleys, 5, and Audrius, 3. "Now, look at the title on that one by Audrius. "Spring." Can you imagine, a child's title of a concept like that?"

And off Andy Piopleys went, feasting on an entirely new and delicious chain of thought.