THE COVER
'In the Beginning,' one of the haunting abstract works of Mayo pediatric neurology resident-artist Audrius Plioplys. For more on Doctor Plioplys and his art, turn to page 29.
Photograph: Peter Burnett

THE MAYO ALUMNUS

OCTOBER 1980
What the photo above shows is a black venetian blind mounted against another just like it, and illuminated from within. The effect is not banal, but mysterious and somehow prescient, as though Plioplys had turned nostalgia around and made it into an emotion regarding the future, not the past. Sound obscure? There's no convenient way to describe these experimental, strange black works .... 

GRISE FIORD, Northwest Territories: North America's most northerly city, 700 miles beyond the Arctic Circle, home of some 75 to 85 people, Eskimos.

A small plane lands and emits a white man, helped by a woman, his wife. Behind dark glasses the man is young and blind. The Eskimos who live at Grise Fiord approach, pulled by curiosity. What has impelled a blind man to visit their village?

It is June, 1980, the end of winter at Grise Fiord. The stranger is Mayo Clinic resident Audrius — Andy — Plioplys. The pediatric neurologist is not here to "give" as a physician but to receive as an artist. A 200-mile trip by snowmobile and sled over the frozen ocean has blinded him temporarily, his eyes seared by the glare of sunlight on ice. The cloud cover's protection has been an illusion.

Symbolically, the situation might have sprung from Plioplys' own arcane imagination.

"I'm interested in constraints, barriers, entrapments, things that limit the individual," says Doctor Plioplys. "And passages — transitions from one point to another point."

Item: An exhibition of Plioplys' works at the Dolly Fiterman Art Gallery, Minneapolis, included six "small erased drawings" in which a pencilled word — "Structure," "Control," "Constraints," "Through," "Rationality," "Meaning" — is condensed into the center of a page of drawing paper, the letters herded together into a small space and then ... erased. "Control" or "Structure" or "Rationality" is faintly legible: the ghost of a word.

Item: The same exhibition, at Fiterman's featured several "large maze drawings" collectively titled "Walkways and Courtyards of the City." Closely examined, these pencilled geometric mazes turn out to be closed systems. Every apparent route is a cul de sac, à la Sartre's No Exit.

"The uninterrupted controlled line gives way to its destined turns, closing in on, creating and preserving an impenetrable 'spaced-in core,'" explains the neurologist's wife, Geri Critchley. "The continuous line, purposefully driven to find itself by coming back upon itself, borders yet never crosses the inner inaccessible walkway."

At Grise Fiord, as his eyes heal, Doctor Plioplys observes and photographs the remains of a mythic world. White tracks in the white snow lead to a hole in the ice — a seal's breathing place betrays the seal to the hunter: No Exit. Atmospheric conditions pro-
duce a "whiteout:" all sense of direction disappears — not just north and south, but up and down — as the line of demarcation between sky and land, far and near, dissolves into uniform white: a cosmic "erased drawing."

The arctic landscape turns out to be a metaphor for the doctor's philosophical and artistic preoccupations. Appropriately, Grise Fiord is on an island.

A chronic appreciation of the absurd

Audrius Plioplys has not always been an artist, nor is there an artistic tradition in his family. Born in Toronto in 1951, he grew up in a Lithuanian-speaking home, learning English in elementary school. After graduating valedictorian from a high school in Chicago, he attended the University of Chicago and stayed on to earn his M.D. in June of 1975. A self-taught artist, he started painting in medical school in his spare time, then went on to complete his internship at the University of Wisconsin Hospitals, Madison.

"During my internship I often went running," Doctor Plioplys told a writer from The Washington Star in 1978. "One sunny day near the end of that year, I stopped and looked at the sky and the clouds. I said to myself, 'What did I do here other than be a smart aleck, when what I really wanted to do was express myself in a personal manner?'"

Visiting with him in his Rochester apartment, it's difficult to imagine Doctor Plioplys as a smart aleck. Soft-spoken, seemingly introverted, he lives with his wife in the upper stories of a handsome old house across the Zumbro River from the Rochester Art Center. The walls exhibit primitive paintings by untaught and anonymous Minnesota painters.

"These are all from flea markets and garage sales," he remarks. "I think of it as salvaging art."

Although the doctor's manner is reserved, symptoms of playfulness flicker about his mouth and eyes. Diagnosis: a chronic appreciation of the absurd. This is the man who, last quarter, spent some of his spare time in the EEG lab making electroencephalograms of his own thoughts. The studies exist in his portfolio as a series of slides: "Thinking of the Meaning of Art," "Thinking of Michelangelo," "Thinking of Raphael," "Thinking No Thoughts (Detail)." They chart the rise and fall of profound but secretive laughter.

To find "an original Plioplys" in the house by the river, one must take the stairs to the sparsely furnished attic room which serves as a studio. Even here there is little to see; most of the works are in transit between the University of Minnesota's Tweed Museum of Art in Duluth — a show called "Minnesota Energy" — and the Fiterman Gallery in downtown Minneapolis. In a corner under a sheet are some of the "mirrored books" which have not been included in the Fiterman show.

The mirrored books begin as the black book covers familiar to every graduate student who had a thesis bound. Inside, where the text should be, mirrors or pieces of mirrors are cut and arranged in patterns that resonate with meaning in the context of their titles: "Book of Sympathy" consists of a pair of mirrors cracked concentrically; "Book of Entrapment" has a clear, whole mirror on one side and a progression of vertical reflecting segments on the "facing page." "Book of Six Concealed Mirrors" is black with the mirrors' backs to the hypothetical reader. Visually, the mirrored books convey a certain elegance as well as wit. Like the erased drawings and the maze...
drawings, they are primarily conceptual.

Citing Dostoevsky, Kafka and Beckett, Doctor Plioplys concedes that the influences on his art have been more philosophic and literary than "artistic." Although he began dabbling in art as a painter, he soon switched to mixed-media sculpture using materials he found in the streets and alleys of Washington, D.C., where he lived for three years following his internship. ("It's a rich and therefore wasteful city," he says.)

In Washington Doctor Plioplys devoted his entire time to studies in art history and studio work. He began to make a name for himself in juried and group exhibitions, notably the "Copy-Art D.C." show in which experimentation with the artistic potential of photocopying machines was the inspiring impulse.

One of the books which appeared in both the "Copy-Art" exhibition and the Dolly Fiterman Art Gallery is Doctor Plioply's "Book of Meaning." This delightful yet eerie creation begins again with a pair of black book covers, only this time there really are paper pages to be thumbed through. The word "meaning" appears in bold print on page one.
Whether he’s expressing himself in broken mirrors or a series of related photographs, the preoccupations persist: constraints, barriers, limitations . . .

Copied and recopied on succeeding pages, the image of the word gradually dissolves, presumably into meaninglessness. Variations on this theme result in the "Book of Faith," in which "faith" grows faint and disappears; the "Book of Destiny," in which the word slides letter by letter off the successive pages; and the "Book of Mythology," in which the word "myth" dissolves into a sequence of dots even as lines begin to encroach on it from the left margin, as a sort of frame. In "Myth," the most interesting of the photocopied books, the word image recedes into the depths of an illusory third dimension.

Although he has experimented with a variety of media, from paint to flashing lights to piles of stone, certain themes recur throughout the doctor’s work. Whether he’s expressing himself in broken mirrors or a series of related photographs, the preoccupations persist: constraints, barriers, limitations . . . and the individual’s often futile, often illusory, efforts to achieve transcendence.

While his art is not overtly political, it seems more than coincidental that the artist who particularly interests Plioplys is the late Lithuanian genius, Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis. Active between 1903 and 1910, Ciurlionis has been called the father of abstract art.

In Washington Doctor Plioply's study of Ciurlionis resulted in public lectures and a series of articles — including several written in Lithuanian. Some of these have been reprinted in the Soviet Union, the nation which absorbed Lithuania in the summer of 1940.
Plioplys’ shattered mirrors reflect his view of a fragmented world.
The artist's 'Box of Partial Entrapment' is an open-ended nightmare of jagged fragments.
Finally, when Duluth’s Tweed Museum opened its exhibition, “Minnesota Energy,” in July, one of the curators was asked why he chose the artists he did. Stewart Turnquist’s response conveys the excitement which Andy Plioplys inspires: “Why did I select these artists? Because their work caused a fire in my mind.”

— R. A. KLEIN

Editor’s note: Some of the artistic results of Doctor Plioplys’ two weeks in the Arctic will be displayed in Chicago at the Galerija, 744 North Wells, from October 24 to November 15.

In his ‘Book of Meaning,’ the word ‘meaning’ grows fainter on each successive photocopy . . . an implied criticism of standardization and duplication in society.