

AUDRIUS PLIOPLYS' NEUROTHEOLOGY

Written by Jurgita Pociūtė

Kultūros Barai (Cultural Terrain), Vilnius, Lithuania, November 2003

Translated from the original Lithuanian

Audrius Plioplys is a neurologist by profession; an artist by calling. He is a pediatric neurologist and a researcher, working on childhood autism and learning disabilities. He is also researching the causes of Alzheimer's disease and developing new methods of treatment. An equally important part of his life is his art. The Plioplys household looks like a gallery because the walls are covered in his amazing, surprising, art works. Hidden away in his studio, the artist ponders questions that have intrigued humanity for ages—What is thought? What is memory? How do you illustrate thought and consciousness? In his art works he attempts to negate the reasoning of antiquity—the premise that the soul and the body are two separate entities. It is fascinating that the artist himself has “posed” for some of his compositions—while thinking about Vermeer, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt's work, or about art in general, he has recorded electroencephalograms of his own brain. Art for Plioplys is not a hobby that he indulges during his free time, but a passion, a passion for which he was willing to sacrifice his career as a doctor.

The path that this neurologist and artist took in life is interesting and full of remarkable occurrences and unusual coincidences. Plioplys was planning to become a nuclear physicist. But the biology courses, which were required for the physics degree program at the University of Chicago, were fated to change the course of his life. Ironically, Plioplys tried very hard to avoid taking them, although in the end he consented to a course in general biology. The intriguing and immensely interesting biology classes, especially those about the central nervous system, excited Plioplys as a student. He was interested in everything neurologic—how the brain works, how nerve cells connect to one another and how they produce impulses for sensation, for movement, even for dreams. So the physics student changed his major to medicine and decided to study neurology.

Plioplys' passion for art reached back to an even earlier time in his schooling when a friend of his was taking art classes and showed him one of his paintings. That Toronto elementary school memory never left him—while studying medicine Plioplys began painting seriously. This recreational activity soon consumed him completely. When he graduated from the University of Chicago, Plioplys could not decide whether he should continue with his residency or dedicate all his time and energy to art. In the end, he completed his internship at the University of Wisconsin Hospitals and saved enough money to make his artistic ambitions a reality. In order to pursue his art, he refused a number of professional opportunities, including offers to continue his residency training in neurology, in psychiatry, and in internal medicine. He left medicine entirely for three years. Eventually his conscience started to bother him: all of his studies in neurology and clinical experience that he had accumulated would go to waste. He returned to neurology. It was then that he decided to balance art, research, and medical practice. Plioplys continued his graduate studies at the Mayo Clinic.

Meanwhile, in his art he began concentrating more and more on the origins of thought and consciousness.

Through his unusual artwork, the artist's goal is to have viewers contemplate their own thinking, and the origin of their own thoughts and their mind's activity. To the untrained eye some of his compositions may seem like strange, interwoven spider webs. Thinking and thoughts are expressed in wavering lines that leap unexpectedly upwards to sudden narrow points, corresponding to the moments when new ideas are comprehended. When asked if he believes in life after death, Plioplys replies, "It would not be so bad." He is convinced that art can explain many unusual and mysterious phenomena by providing a visual form. Critics agree on one aspect of Plioplys art—that his compositions, especially those with a concentration of information presented in an elegant, graceful way, cause a "fire" in the viewer's consciousness.

The artist's main goal is to investigate how consciousness—thoughts, memory—emerge using art as a medium. He produces meaningful visual metaphors using unexpected central nervous system structure and functioning research results. His creative methods have changed and evolved over time. Plioplys has experimented with many methods—light systems, reflections in mirrors, and more recently photography. Using a photographic base he developed his current project "Neurotheology." By using his own photographs of certain key images, and processing them through Adobe Photoshop, the artist was able to superimpose "nerve drawings" on top of them. That is how these metaphorical images of thought and the process of thinking came into existence. For example, the "Thoughtful Sphinx," an abstract work, shows the gaze of the legendary sphinx. "Neurotheology" elaborates the concept that religious thought is an emergent property of central nervous system activity, arising from the interactions of cerebral cortical neurons. For this project the artist used drawings, made by the famous neuropathologist Santiago Ramon y Cajal, over a hundred years ago. It is interesting that Plioplys was working on this project at the beginning of a new millennium, in the year 2000. Christian themes and Cajal's drawings were not chosen randomly. In his compositions Plioplys shows the link between the functioning of the nervous system and the origins of religious thought. The process of sorting out long-forgotten old photographs, images, and memories, unexpectedly evokes thoughts about religion.

Plioplys' photography was exhibited in the Olympic Arts Festival, organized by the Olympic Committee during the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. Plioplys' works are being shown at Flatfile Contemporary art gallery in Chicago. He is planning to continue creating "neurologic" art, to study the activity of the central nervous system, to search for visual metaphorical links, and to formulate the most unexpected hypotheses. Plioplys views his art seriously and responsibly. This demands as much time, energy, and commitment as his medical research and his work with patients. Audrius Plioplys is happy that over the past fifteen years he has managed to successfully balance his calling as an artist, his professional life as a neurologist, and his responsibilities towards his family.