Plioplys art exhibit soars in atrium

by Carol Flynn

At lunch recently at a local restaurant, Audrius Plioplys broke open a fortune cookie.

"You are capable, competent, creative and careful," its message read. "Prove it."

Plioplys has proven all that—and then some.

This Beverly resident is both an accomplished artist and neurologist-neuroscientist who has merged these two fields into a unique art approach. His art recently earned Plioplys and his wife, Sigita, a significant honor from the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge (SIFK) when the atrium at the institute was named for them.

The Sigita and Audrius V. Plioplys Atrium is an open space that soars from the ground floor to the third-floor ceiling of this repurposed 19th-century Hyde Park residence located at 5737 S. University Ave. The space is designed to house art installations and exhibits, and it is accessible from the entrance of the building.

SIFK, part of the University of Chicago, is currently hosting an exhibit by Plioplys called "Sybils: Cycle of Memories," which will run through June 21. SIFK is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is no charge for the exhibit.

A simplistic definition of neurology is that it is the branch of medicine that deals with the nervous system, a complex communication system that originates in the brain and carries messages throughout the body via cells known as neurons. The brain controls the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious processes of thinking, remembering, dreaming, emoting, etc.
The Sigita and Audrius V. Plioplys Atrium at the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge, University of Chicago, is an open space rising three stories with display areas for art installations. Several parts of Plioplys’ current exhibit, “Sybils: Cycle of Memories,” which will run through June 21, are shown in this picture. The light columns over the door, called Pillars of Writing,” will remain on permanent display after the exhibit closes. (photo by Joe Sterbenc)
In his artist statement, Plioplys defined his work as a metaphorical investigation of thinking and consciousness. He has approached the subject through large-scale paintings, prints, installations and light sculptures with LED systems.

The element that makes Plioplys’ art most unique, which makes the connection to neurology, is the inclusion of images of neuronal profiles and of MRI brain scans and electroencephalograms of Pliolplys’ brain activity. Through this technique, Plioplys connects the subjects of his art to self-awareness from which we can illuminate ourselves and others.

The current exhibit, an installation using several of his art forms, is mounted in the atrium that bears his name.

“Sybils: Cycle of Memories” includes three parts. First, three rotating “Whirling Memory” pieces consisting of 8-by-4-foot panels made from semi-transparent polycarbonate, a type of thermoplastic, hang from the ceiling. Printed images on the panels include pictures, words and brain-activity images.

The top panel of “Whirling Memories” includes images of and text from Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett.

“The existential works of Kafka and Becket influenced me more than any visual artist did,” said Plioplys.

The brain activity images were made while he was intentionally thinking about works of these authors, including Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot.”

Plioplys was also influenced by a visit to an exhibit about the art of Michelangelo. The other two panels include images of the sybils that Michelangelo included in his painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. A sybil is an oracle or prophetess who foretold prophesies through divine inspiration at holy sites in ancient Greece. The text on the panels comes from fabrications of oracles written in the Middle Ages.

Plioplys described these pieces.

“In a whirling state, the sybils are traversing time and space in generating their oracular insights. Their insights emerge from the vast web-work of neuronal processes. These sybils contemplate time and the source of our understandings on a cosmic scale.”
The three panels continuously revolve in the air, attached to motors in the ceiling.

“The rotations of the pieces reflect the cycling of our own memories,” said Plioplys. “In childhood, we start to amass experiences and memories, and we add to this storehouse as we grow and mature. Memories are always being recalled and modified. Memories are always changing, cycling, whirling.”

Sigita and Audrius Plioplys enjoy a moment in the atrium of the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge, University of Chicago, which was named in their honor. On the right is part of the exhibit “Sybils: Cycle of Memories” by Audrius Plioplys, which will run through June 21. (photo by Joe Sterbenc)

In a second-floor window that overlooks the atrium is mounted the second part, “Midwest Souls,” composed of Plioplys’ signature LED light columns. These consist of three layers of polycarbonate with images backed by LED lighting. In this series, they are paired in diptychs, with one section backed by white light and the other by changing colors.
The deepest layer includes the faces from cabinet photographs from the late 1800s that Plioplys collected through the years. The images stare out like phantoms through the changing colors, the other layers of writing and Plioplys's brain images.

“I purchased these cabinet photographs at flea markets while we lived in Minnesota. Going to the photography studio was a special occasion for these people. The names of the people were not included on the photos. But, they all had lives, families; they had jobs; they participated in society,” said Plioplys. “I am trying to cycle these nameless people back into memory. If someone remembers you after you pass, in a sense you are immortal. By using my own neuronal patterns and networks, I am trying to give these individuals a degree of immortality.”

The third part of the exhibit is “Pillars of Thought,” nine free-standing LED color-changing light columns. Each stands independent and unique, like the human experience.

The “Dreamscape” series deals with the origins of dreaming, fantasy and creativity. The “Pillars of Writing” include portraits and writings from those who inspired Plioplys. In addition to Kafka and Beckett, Sigmund Freud is included.

When the exhibit ends, “Pillars of Writing” will remain in the atrium on permanent display. This generous donation led SIFK to dedicate the space to the Audrius and Sigita Plioplys.

SIFK was founded in 2015 at the University of Chicago to offer a multi-disciplinary approach to study the complex factors involved in how knowledge is formed and becomes legitimatized. Through its explorations, SIFK aims to provide scholars and leaders throughout the world with insights and resources to deal with contemporary issues.

SIFK activities include conferences, workshops, a journal, grants for scholars, visiting faculty and university courses. Central to all of this is open exchange among leading thinkers. For example, a panel discussion in February featuring an atheist philosopher, a theologian and a religious scholar focused on the function, meaning and future of faith and religion. Another workshop covered the use and abuse of genetics.

“The artwork of Audrius Plioplys is a wonderful addition to our collection,” said Macol Cerda, SIFK executive director. “The themes that he explores in his art fit in perfectly with the mission of SIFK.”
More information on SIFK can be found at its website.

The art of Plioplys almost didn’t evolve to include the connection to neurology.

Plioplys was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1951. He became interested in art when the parents of a childhood acquaintance enrolled their son in a summer art program to keep him out of trouble. Plioplys was intrigued by watching the other boy paint.

The Plioplys Family moved to Chicago and settled in Marquette Park. Audrius attended St. Rita High School and earned his medical degree from the University of Chicago in 1975. However, his passion for art continued to grow. He never took formal courses but began painting while in medical school.

Considering art and medicine as two separate fields and wondering if he had made a mistake by studying medicine instead of art, Plioplys abandoned his medical career and moved to the east coast to pursue a career as an artist. He achieved critical acclaim for his installation art exhibits.

After a few years, however, he began to feel he was not making full use of his education and talents. He thought of the gospel parable that led to the proverb to not hide your light under a bushel.

“I started to feel guilty that I was not using my education in neurology to help people. I realized I had to return to medicine. And I had to find a way to combine art and neurology,” said Plioplys.

He completed residencies at the Mayo Clinic and in Toronto, and he embarked upon a career in adult and child neurology that included clinical practice, research, teaching and writing. Alzheimer’s disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, autism and severe pediatric neurologic disabilities were areas of expertise.

He found a way to merge neurology and art through the incorporation of neural profiles and studies of brain activity.

While attending a conference in Lithuania, the land of his ancestors, he met his wife. Sigita Plioplys, M.D., is listed on the website of Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago as head of the pediatric neuropsychiatry program, child and adolescent psychiatry and associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.
The couple settled in Beverly and raised two daughters. Audrius retired from clinical practice in 2009. Today, he creates art full-time in his studio in their home in North Beverly, enjoying the Dan Ryan Woods right across the street.

His art has been exhibited and added to collections internationally. In Chicago, his art is on permanent display at the Blue Man Group, Illinois Institute of Technology, University of Chicago, Blackstone Hotel, Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, Brookfield Zoo and the Beverly Arts Center. His paintings are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

As the career of Audrius Plioplys shows, once in a while, a fortune cookie message can actually be relevant.

More information on the artist can be found at plioplys.com.