

NEUROLOGIST MIXES MEDICINE AND ART

PICTURE HIS THOUGHTS

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

Every kind of thought sets Plioplys to thinking some more: thoughts that soar, thoughts that are crippled, thoughts that aren't thoughts at all. How does the brain work? Wherein are clues to suggest new responses to learning problems?

Plioplys 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 a 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 Plioplys' third life as an artist. At other times it has pushed him right out of medicine, but, for the moment at least, the two 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," Plioplys, 36, says enthusiastically, "in which I'm encompassing the basic things I'm doing in my clinical world and in research.

"What strikes me as important is the whole idea of what constitutes thinking. One day I said to myself, 'Maybe I can take this concept and turn my art into a visual exploration 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 where his less 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 to see," he says. Another photograph is of a landscape by the friend who first got Plioplys 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 relative of mine, while I didn't really get into painting until I was in medical school at the University of Chicago."

Once Plioplys 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."

Dan
PROUDFOOT



But dropping medicine to move to Washington, D.C., and fulltime work as an artist bothered him not at all. Neurologist colleagues told him they understood, but wasn't he really giving up a great deal? Psychiatry professors "told me I was nuts, they were surprisingly dogmatic about it. I don't really care what anyone thinks, I won't mow my lawn—and I had to do what I'd decided to do."

He gave art two years, then went into residency at the Mayo Clinic for another two years, and the pattern was set. Both medicine and art would continue to fire Plioplys. The idea of thoughts as art first sparked at the Mayo. "It took quite a while, but I convinced them to wire me up for electroencephalogram (brain wave) tests, and then deliberately thought of about 20 different things in sequence, so the EEG results were in effect pictures of thoughts: Of Michaelangelo, of the meaning of art, of no thoughts at all."

Thinking in Green

It goes without saying, perhaps, that landscapes are not the stuff of the young doctor's art. "I've not done a single canvas that would look like anything ever done by the Group of Seven," he says.

He did, however, once travel to Ellesmere 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 previous one. Then he photographed it, titling the work "Stone Line." Critical comments of Plioplys' work include "blessed with a splendid imagination" (*Chicago Sun-Times*); "Plioplys has the power" (*Minneapolis Tribune*); and "his work caused a fire in my mind" (curator, Minneapolis Institute of Art).

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

But Plioplys 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 ablaze with crayoned pictures by Hillary Plioplys, 5, and Audrius, 3. "Now, look at the title on this one by Audrius: Sun, Summer and Winter. Can you imagine, a three-year-old thinking of a title like that. What would make a three-year-old think of a concept like that?"

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



DR. ANDY PLIOPLYS, a child neurologist at Sick Children's Hospital, poses with one of his art pieces.

His then girlfriend, now wife, Geri Critchley, suggested he persist through the year's residency—and then quit. So Plioplys moved to Madison, Wis., and a rooming house named "The Lodge At The Edge," while he worked at the University of Wisconsin Hospital.

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 Plioplys, who was so lonely and disillusioned he twice decided to quit in his first six months. In the second six months, though, he bloomed.