

A BLEND OF ART AND MEDICINE

In a week, when Audrius V. Plioplys returns to Chicago, the first thing he will do is mow his large, beautiful lawn. Then he will return to creating his art; although, by profession he is a pediatric neurologist.

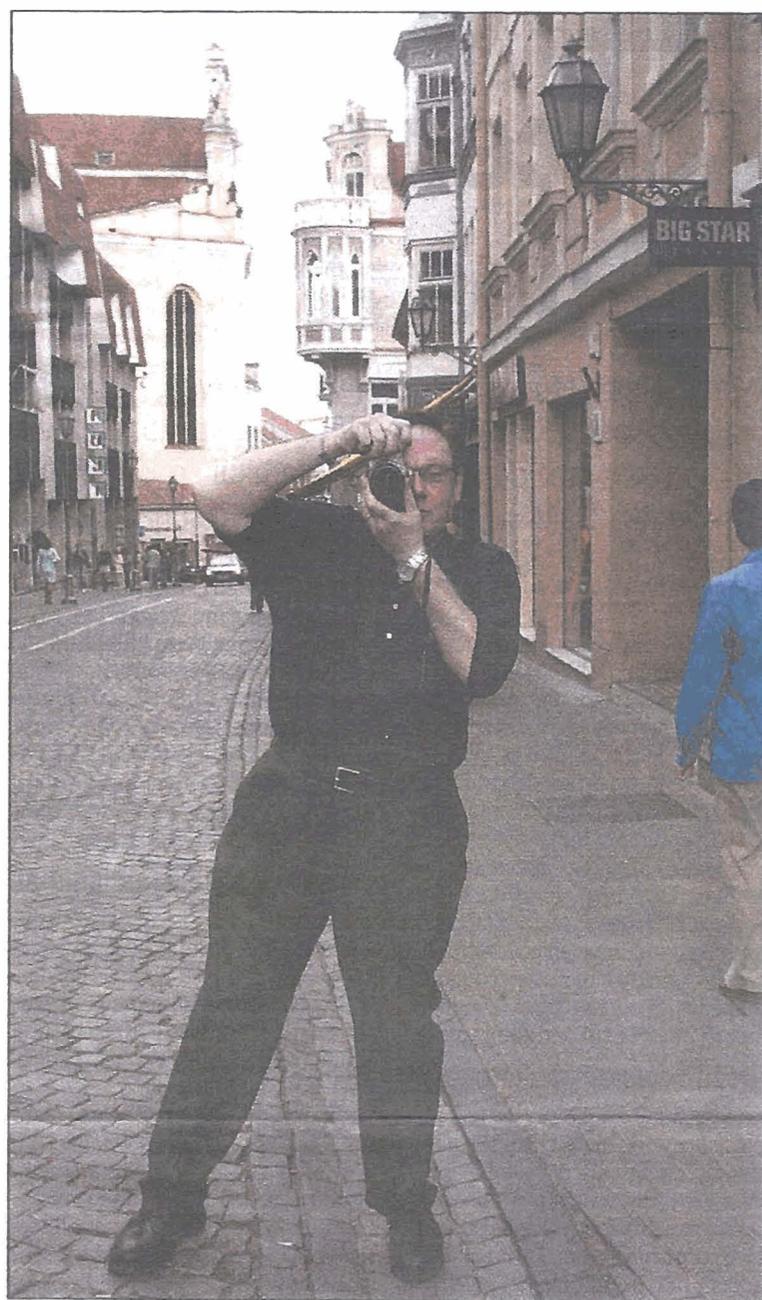
Written by Rasa Pakalkienė
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Translated from the original Lithuanian

Before our meeting, Audrius V. Plioplys had been wandering around the Old City of Vilnius with a camera hanging around his neck, trying to immortalize the sights that caught his eye. "Later, I'll use these photographs in my art," he explains, removing his camera from around his neck.

Two professions

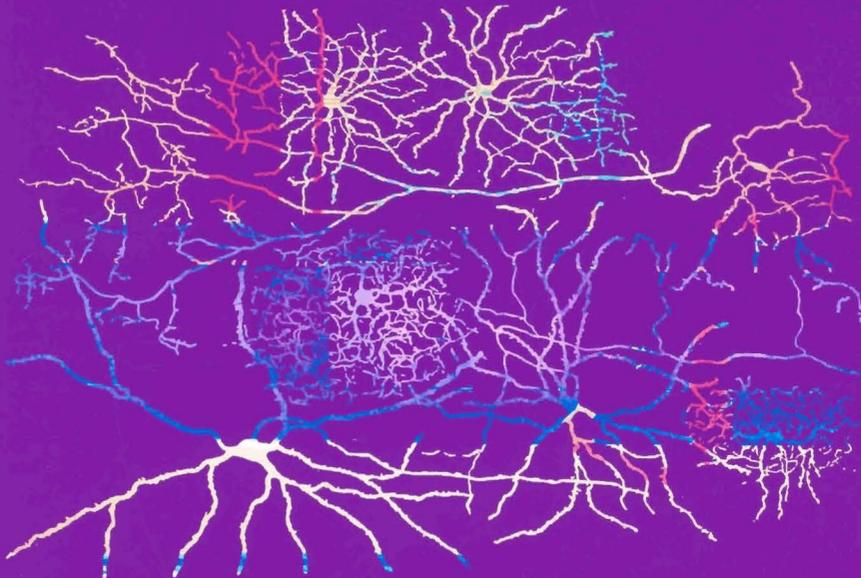
Plioplys invited me to see his work at the Academy Gallery. It is the first time that this Lithuanian-American has had an individual exhibit in Vilnius. Eight years ago Plioplys had participated in a group show at the Contemporary Center for the Arts.



Po Vilniaus senamiestį - su fotoaparatu.

In the Old Town of Vilnius,
with a camera.

One of the works in the
Academy Gallery art exhibit:
"A Walk in Solitude II", 2004,
archival digital print on
canvas, 54 x 72 inches.



“From the complicated structures of neurons, thoughts, words, and creativity emerge,” Plioplys says. Based on these words it becomes clear to me that he is trained in medicine. Although later, he made sure to emphasize that he is an artist first and then a doctor.

Art work consists of several layers

Photography constitutes the underlying layer of Plioplys' work. He likes to walk around with a camera in his hands. “My photographs have been in shows across the United States,” Plioplys says. Later the artist decided to transform his photographs. On top of the photographs he layered drawings that showed how a person's neurons branch outwards, leaving only a hint of the photograph beneath the drawings. He painted the backgrounds in bright colors. “Why did I make it so that you couldn't recognize the photograph? Because we have images in our heads that we remember, but if you looked for them under a microscope you wouldn't find them—the images have been entirely transformed,” the neurologist explains.

At a crossroad: art or medicine?

Plioplys has been attracted to art for a very long time. At first he painted in oils, but then became interested in sculpture and in installations. More than thirty years ago Plioplys began his studies in medicine at the University of Chicago. While studying medicine the desire to paint did not go away, it only became stronger. As a young man, Plioplys began doubting his choice of profession. He wondered what kind of a doctor he would make if he were always thinking about art?

Plioplys completed his internship in Madison, Wisconsin. “I was like a church mouse,” Plioplys recalls, “I was living on nothing and still trying to paint.” After completing his residency, Plioplys gave up medicine for three years. He went to live in Washington DC and immersed himself in art. “I often visited New York. I would visit art galleries and museums. Sometimes I stayed over with the artist Kazimieras Žoromskis; he also would come and stay with me,” Plioplys reminisces. His carefree artist's life ended when Plioplys used up the last of his savings. Plioplys then sent a letter to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota where he had worked as a student. The Department of Neurology was not interested in what Plioplys had been doing over the past three years, they simply hired him.

“But I did not give up my art,” Plioplys says, “I built installations—from lamps, windows, doors, mirrors; I had exhibits. I began taking photographs.” Plioplys doesn't hide the fact that making art constitutes a pure financial loss. He earns his living from medicine.

Accommodation

“Still, it was hard to blend art with medicine,” Plioplys admits. “I had to find some sort of a solution. Then I thought of something—I could use my expertise in neurobiology as part of my art.” That is how the first art works arose, as though they had evolved from his background in neurobiologic research.

Two and a half days a week Plioplys works in several small hospitals caring for children with cerebral palsy. “My job is special. I take care of children with severe cerebral palsy. They are very sick and they cannot walk.” He devotes the remainder of his time to his art. Seven years ago Plioplys closed his neurobiologic laboratory—he wanted to have more time for his art. “Besides that, my wife and children need my attention,” Plioplys explains. His family members are supportive of his deep commitment to art.

“Over the past two years I have had very many exhibits. My work is shown in art galleries,” Plioplys explains. “These works that are here in Vilnius were recently exhibited at

the University of Wisconsin art gallery. I took them down and sent them straight to Lithuania. Currently my work is also being shown in downtown Chicago.”

At the computer

It is a long road from the initial idea to the finished work in an exhibit. Over the past four years Plioplys has created eighteen pieces. Most of them are being shown in the Academy Gallery in Vilnius, while a few have traveled to the triennial in Tallinn.

“All of these pieces were created using a computer,” Plioplys explains, “I spent a lot of time on them. I think for a long time; experiment; until the work starts to take shape. Frequently, while preparing for an exhibit, I do not leave the computer for twenty hours. I sleep only three or four hours and spend the rest of the time on my art. When I finish a picture and when I am satisfied with it, I bring it to my friend Eugenijus Krukovskis. He has a large printing studio and makes his living in advertising; he prints my work.”

Sometimes Plioplys manages to sell one or two pieces, but he could not live from that. Plioplys has friends in many different professions—not just physicians or artists. I asked whether his physician colleagues are interested in his art and Plioplys answered, “Not really. Maybe they’re jealous.”

His wife is from Lithuania

“I brought my work to Lithuania because it is my parents’ homeland, and besides, my wife, Sigita, is from Lithuania,” Plioplys explains. He laughs and reminisces how, many years ago, when he visited Lithuania he met an attractive young doctor. Eventually, he married her and brought her to live in America. Now his wife, Sigita, works in Chicago as a child psychiatrist.

They are raising two daughters—Milda and Aušrinė. Milda is studying at the University of Wisconsin, while Aušrinė is in the seventh grade. Aušrinė likes art. Plioplys noticed on several occasions that she was drawing on the computer, so he installed the programs that he uses himself into her computer.

At home they only speak Lithuanian

Plioplys’ parents left Lithuania during World War II. Audrius was born in Canada. “I am an immigrant because we moved from Canada to the US,” Plioplys said. He speaks Lithuanian perfectly, even though he lives far from Lithuania. “I didn’t know English as a child. When I started elementary school, I didn’t understand anything. That first day was tragic,” Plioplys laughs. “Then my father bought a television set and sat me down to watch cartoons in English. At home I spoke only Lithuanian with my parents. Now I speak only Lithuanian with my wife and daughters.”

Enjoys mowing the lawn

“You need a roof over your head; you need to earn money for food, for clothing,” Plioplys says, explaining why he has not given up medicine altogether. The Lithuanian-American is being modest. He earns enough not just for a poor little roof over his head—he has a beautiful home in Chicago. “My wife enjoys interior decorating and taking care of the gardens. We have a large lot of land,” Plioplys says. He used to enjoy playing tennis and squash. But in recent years he has had to give up sports because of his health. Though, occasionally he will ride his bicycle. These days his biggest pleasure is mowing his large lawn. “By the time I get home to Chicago, over these past two weeks, the grass will have grown catastrophically,” Plioplys laughs.