

# daile '2004/2

## art

art**seria**

# Audrius V. Plioplys: Image as a metaphor of consciousness

Vaidilute Brazauskaite

The art works of the artist Audrius V. Plioplys, who is of Lithuanian descent and lives in Chicago, amazed and intrigued shocked many viewers during his individual art exhibits in the fall of 2004 at the "Akademija" gallery in Vilnius, and the Monkute-Marks Museum in Kedainiai. His works were also recently shown at the Tallinn Graphics Biennial. Although being knowledgeable of current Lithuanian art trends, I had previously become acquainted with this artist's work during an exhibit in 1995 at the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius.

He started his artistic career with paintings, and then moved to photography and installations. For the past 15 years he has been trying to combine two aspects of his life that are very important to him: that of a neurologist-neurobiologist, and visual artist. He does not consider his art to be digital or graphic art, but rather purely conceptual art. The visual arts are extremely important to him—after completing his medical studies, for three years he abandoned his work as a physician to concentrate full-time on his artistic creations. It was only later, when he realized his calling to be a physician and scientist, that he returned to the medical world.

Because Plioplys' artistic expressions are closely tied to neurology and neurobiology research of ongoing neuronal activity in the human brain, I think that, with this artist and physician, the fundamental concerns in his art would be better explained with the use of a dialogue, not by an art critic's monologue.

**V. B.** What is the philosophic basis of your art?

**A. V. P.** I have always considered my art to be conceptual in nature. I work with ideas, concepts, and philosophies and from these try to develop visual metaphors. I have been active in art for 30 years, and over this time, the visual presentations have changed, as have the underlying concepts, concerns. The theme of my current work started over 15 years ago when I decided to merge my work in neurobiology with art. Until then I had considered my scientific research (along with clinical neurology) to be separate and discrepant from my artistic concerns. I gradually realized that indeed there was no reason to maintain these as separate spheres—they could be blended together.

**V. B.** Is the relationship between visual art and neurobiology the basis for your art?

**A. V. P.** The sequences "Neurotheology" and "Thoughts from Under a Rock" deal with cerebral cortical neurons, their interactions, and the emergence of consciousness, thought, self-reflection, and philosophy. It is from the interactions between the extensive ramifications of over 100 billion neurons that our own essence emerges. Within these neuronal networks all of our memories are stored—including visual ones. In these sequences of art works, the underlying image is always a photographic one. However, the photograph is distorted, changed, and has become unrecognizable (except in a few cases where I have purposefully not extensively modified the image). If one were to look with a microscope at one's brain, one would not find any photographs—the visual memories have been modified, changed, and stored in a totally different format. Thus, my modifications of the original image are an analogy to this basic neurobiologic process.

To answer your question directly, the conceptual foundation of these art works rests in investigating the origins of our consciousness, our being, and ourselves as humans. All of this emerges from neuronal interactions. I am not at all interested in simply merging neurobiology and



Dr. Audrius V. Plioplys is one of the most accomplished US neurologists, working in the area of child neurology. He finished college and medical school at the University of Chicago, internship at the University of Wisconsin, and residency at the Mayo Clinic. For 8 years he has headed the Pediatric Long-Term Care Section of the American Medical Directors Association. He has published 51 medical research articles and many abstracts. He has presented his artistic and medical research results at Science and Culture symposiums, and at Lithuanian-American physician meetings.

#### Personalinės parodos

- 1978 Vašingtono menų projektas, JAV
- 1980 Dolly Fiterman galerija, Mineapolis, JAV  
Galerija, Čikaga, JAV
- 1982 Dolly Fiterman galerija, Mineapolis, JAV
- 1987 Tarptautinė SIETAR konferencija, Monrealis, Kanada  
Galerija, Stikney, Ilinojus, JAV
- 1995 Šiuolaikinio meno centras, Vilnius
- 1996 „Artemisia“ galerija, Čikaga, JAV
- 1997 ARC galerija, Čikaga, JAV  
„Mąstymas – Atmintis“, Šiaurės centrinis koledžas, Naperville, Ilinojus, JAV
- 1998 „Sąmoningumo apibrėžimas“ (instaliacija), Balzeco muziejus, Čikaga, JAV  
„Sąmoningumo apibrėžimas“ (instaliacija), Klivlendo valstijos universitetas, JAV
- 2000 „Neuroteologija: nuo Kristaus iki Čajalo“, Balzeco muziejus, Čikaga, JAV
- 2002 Oasis šiuolaikinio meno galerija, Marquette'as, Mičiganas, JAV  
Oregono universitetas, Eugene'as, JAV
- 2003 Tarptautinis chirurgijos mokslo muziejus, Čikaga, JAV  
„Mintys iš po akmens“, „FLATFILE Contemporary“, Čikaga, JAV
- 2004 „Mintys iš po akmens“, galerija „Akademija“, Vilnius  
„Mintys iš po akmens“, Janinos Monkutes-Marks galerija, Kėdainiai

#### Svarbesnės grupinės parodos

- 1995 „Atominiis amžius prasideda“, Bowling Green valstybinis universitetas, JAV
- 1996 „Čikagos fotografai“, galerija „Mongerson Wunderlich“, Čikaga, JAV  
„Atvykimai-išvykimai: Čikagos menininkai“, Čikagos kultūros centras, JAV  
„Mokslas ir technologija“, Šiaurės Virdžinijos koledžas, Annandalas, JAV  
„Medicinos menas“, Michael Reese ligoninė, Čikaga, JAV  
paroda Arizonos universitete, Tucsonas, Arizona, JAV  
„Superkoncentracija“, TBA parodų salės, Čikaga, JAV  
„Fotografai“, galerija „Mongerson Wunderlich“, Čikaga, JAV  
4-oji metinė paroda, galerija „Resurgam“, Baltimorė, JAV  
„Nacionalinis konkursas“, galerija „First Street“, Niujorkas, JAV

visual art—that would purely be manufacturing illustrations for a textbook, not creating art.

**V. B.** There is a distinct theologic or devotional theme in your work. You have even named one series “Neurotheology.” Why are you analyzing religious truths / revelations?

**A. V. P.** It is from the interaction between the elaborate ramifications of cerebral cortical neurons that memories are stored, from which thoughts emerge. It is from memory and thought that consciousness, philosophy and theology emerge.

I was raised as a Christian and went to primary and secondary Roman Catholic schools. The Catholic religious education was dogmatic, restrictive and I eventually decided, abhorrent. I rebelled and completely left the church when I was 16 years old. I felt that true religion, true spirituality, is contained in the creation that God has given us, and which surrounds us. There is much more spirituality to be found in a nuclear physics textbook (where the nature of God’s creation is being studied and appreciated) than in a Baltimore catechism. About six years ago, I decided to investigate the true teachings of Christ. Since Christianity has survived and thrived for two millennia there must be some substance to the words of Christ. Stripping away the centuries of misinterpretation and deception perpetrated by bishops and popes, I found that the true message of Christ is extremely powerful, extremely spiritual, and extremely revolutionary. The most authentic teachings of Christ are found in the Gospel of Thomas (a sentiment that is shared by many biblical scholars—but still a minority). That is why passages from the Gospel of Thomas appear in my recent sequences of art works.

Jesus said: “the Kingdom is within you and it is outside of you” (3).

Jesus said: “Pick up a rock, you will find me there” (77).

Jesus said: “If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel, but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvels” (29).

The words of Christ coincide with my own world outlook, and with the purpose of my art.

**V. B.** In your work, frequently emerge drawings of neurons made by the Spanish neurobiologist Santiago Ramon y Cajal (1843-1926). What method did Cajal use to draw neuronal structures?

**A. V. P.** Cajal applied the then, newly discovered, silver staining method of Camillo Golgi to the central nervous system. With this staining method he was the first to visualize the fine structure of neurons. Until Cajal’s discoveries, there was no understanding of the true structure of neurons, nor of their elaborate forms, nor of their extensive interconnections. Prior to Cajal the reticular theory of the nervous system was popular in which it was felt that each neuron was physically connected to another one in a vast tangled cytoplasmic network. Technically, Cajal used a camera lucida device—one eye on the microscope, the other on the paper onto which he drew the neuronal figures. For his accomplishments, Cajal received the Nobel Prize in 1906.

**V. B.** What does color mean to you? What colors are of the interest to you? Does color selection depend on intuition, although it appears that in your works there is a very purposeful selection of colors?

**A. V. P.** When I started conceptualizing the series of works entitled “Neurotheology”, I wanted to make a change in the visual presentation of my works. Until then, many of my pieces had little color; many were in black and white, as my early installation pieces. In keeping with most conceptual work, I had kept the visual element contained. With my decision to go to large scale prints on canvas, I decided that the conceptual content of a work is not dependent on a blanched presentation. A piece can be vividly colourful, and still maintain philosophic content. I decided upon using six colors: the three primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and the three secondary colors (orange, green, purple) which are

„Tobulybé egzilyje”, Baizeko muziejus, Čikaga, JAV

„Proto vizijos: tamsioji pusė”, galerija „Danforth”, Portlandas, JAV  
„Life-size”, galerija „N.A.M.E.”, Čikaga, JAV

1997 „Fotografija' 97”, galerija „Barrett House”  
„Menas ir mokslas”, galerija „Mariboe”,  
Peddie mokykla, Hightstownas

2000 „Čiurlioniui 125”, Amerikos lietuvių menų asociacija, Čikaga, JAV

2002 XIII metinė paroda-konkursas, Niujorkas, JAV  
„Photo Op 02”, Tūkstantmečio menų centras, Vašingtonas, JAV  
Tarptautinė paroda-konkursas „Photo Op 02”, Olimpinio komiteto menų festivalis, skirtas Solt Leik Sičio olimpiadai, Solt Leik Sitis, Juta, JAV

#### Apdovanojimai

1982 „Syndicat d’Initiative de la Ville de Nivelles”, Belgija. Prizas

„Syndicat d’Initiative de la Ville de Nivelles”, Belgija. Medalis

1995 Berklio meno centras, Kalifornija, JAV. Žiuri prizas

produced by mixing two of the primary colors. In going to works on canvas, I was actually returning to the very beginnings of my preoccupation with art. When I started my art career, I painted oil paintings on canvas, many of which still exist and are hanging in my home. Thus, I returned both to the display media (canvas) and the basic colors that I had used in oil painting. Also, the cerebral cortex has six layers—thus making a total of six colors appropriate. When the "Neurotheology" sequence was first displayed at the Balzekas Museum in Chicago, I had six parallel surfaces upon which to hang the pieces. Each of the colors had its own parallel surface, thus producing a further analogy to the six layers of the cerebral cortex. The exact color nuance that I chose was a purely personal, aesthetic choice.

**V. B.** Why does the Arctic fascinate you? At first glance it is apparent that the Arctic appears frequently in your works.

**A. V. P.** Yes, I very much enjoy the Arctic. The landscape of rock, ice and snow is desolate, yet extremely beautiful. In this totally inhospitable environment, life survives. Polar bears roam freely. The Inuit have survived for millennia. Using the available rocks, a shelter can be constructed (one of my outdoor pieces).

Perhaps my fascination with the Arctic comes from my childhood in Toronto. The High Arctic is geographically part of Canada, and is part of the spirit of being a Canadian.

**V. B.** To what category of art would you ascribe the outdoor installations that you have done? Photographs of these pieces are also frequently the basis of your art work.

**A. V. P.** The outdoor installation pieces that I have done, and photo documented, can be classified as "earth art." However, in all of these pieces, the underlying ideas, philosophies are of paramount importance. Thus, it would be more correct to categorize them as being conceptual in nature.

**V. B.** Viewers of your work were interested in how they were made. Many thought these were action paintings, others serigraphic prints. Why did you decide to use digital printing technology, which is removed from the tactile nature of painting?

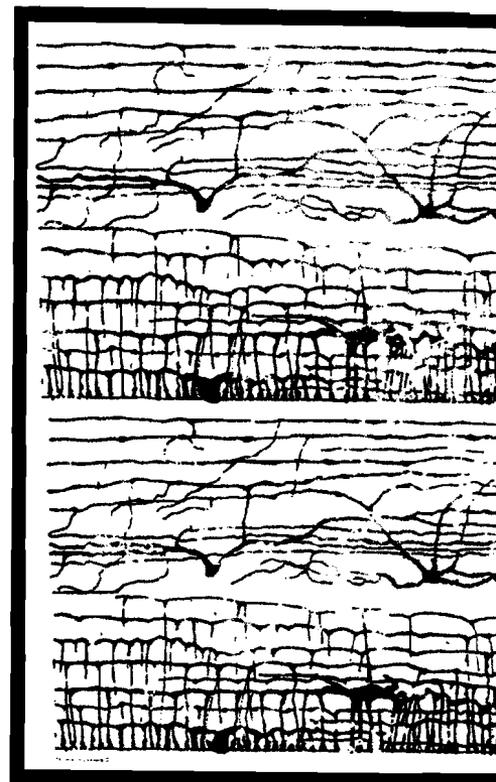
**A. V. P.** Technically the works are on canvas, printed using a Hewlett Packard 5500 plotter. Archival quality inks and canvas were used. Using the HP plotter, which only became available six months ago, I was able to increase the sizes of the individual pieces to 54 X 72 inches, and 54 X 144 inches.

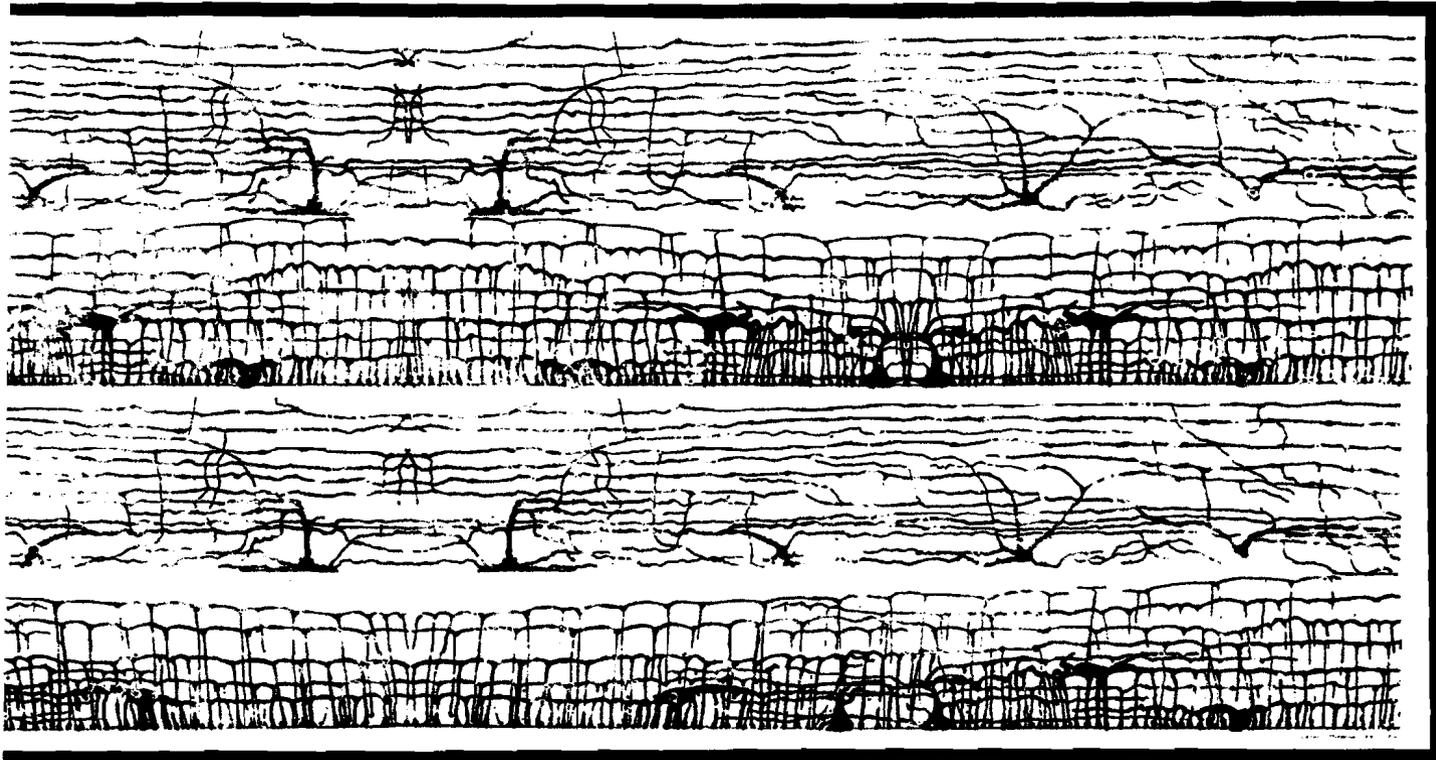
When I conceptualized the first sequence of works, "Neurotheology," in 1999, my intention was to have the works printed on canvas. The actual images were all processed by me using Adobe Photoshop. At that time there were no commercial printers available to do what I wanted. I sought out a print shop that manufactured billboards for outdoor display. The inks that were used would survive several years of direct sunlight exposure, along with rain, snow and tremendous temperature variations. Steve Grant agreed to print my first sequence using his commercial billboard sign printers. It was only two years later, in 2001, that Epson produced the 10,000 printer. I used this printer for the first sequence of "Thoughts from Under a Rock." Then, when the HP 5500 became available, I switched to using it because the size of the pieces could be increased, and the colors would be more vivid and more intense. Thus, historically speaking, I was the first person, anywhere, to use ink jet printers to produce large scale art works on canvas.

I disagree that my works do not have a tactile aspect to them. The canvas itself produces a texture to the surface.

**V. B.** Thank you very much for your detailed answers, which will help viewers better understand your art work.

(Interview was translated from the original Lithuanian.)





Audrius V. Plioplys. *Neuronų simfonija*. 2004. skaitmeninė spauda, archyviniai dažai, drobė, 137,2x366

## **Audrius V. Plioplys: Visual Metaphors for the Mind**

by Vaidilutė Brazauskaitė

The appearance of Audrius V. Plioplys, Chicago based Lithuanian artist, at the Tallinn Print Triennial and his personal exhibition in Lithuania this autumn was refreshing for the regional art scene. For almost fifteen years, Plioplys has been working to connect two important for his career fields: neurobiology-neurology and visual arts. As an artist, he has explored different mediums, painting, photography, installation and land art. The work he showed in Lithuania represents large-scale digital images (in Adobe Photoshop) printed on canvas. According to the artist, he was the first to use ink-jet printer for large scale art work. Whatever the medium, Plioplys has always been a conceptual artist: his works are visual metaphors that emerge based on his analysis of ideas, concepts and philosophy. The two realms of his activity (earlier, he had perceived them as conflicting) are reconnected through his research into human consciousness, thoughts and human nature in general. These processes, in scientific perspective, are determined by the interaction of the myriads of neurons in the human brain. In some of his works, the artist has transformed the natural photographic images, covering them by different colour layers, in a way analogous to neurobiological processes that transform visual memories for storage in the human brain. In his *Neurotheology* series Plioplys has used six colours (many of his earlier works were not in colour, including installations), which is consistent with the fact that human cortex has six layers. However, his art is not an illustration of medical textbooks, but a vehicle to contemplate the processes of thinking and cognition.

Having lived in Toronto in his childhood, he has developed a fondness to the austere Arctic landscape. The multiple live forms existing in this hostile environment are a frequent motive of his art. Theology is another motif, in a paradoxical way relating to the artist's Catholic upbringing. Repulsed with dogmatic Catholic education as a young adult, Plioplys has rediscovered the power of Christ's message for himself as a mature scientist and artist.