

Local doctor, artist makes connections with neurons

by Pat Somers Cronin

It's hard to believe that the work of a Spanish neuropathologist who won the 1906 Nobel Prize is the reason for a current and fascinating art exhibit at Rockefeller Chapel on the University of Chicago campus, entitled "Neurotheology: From Christ to Cal."

Actually, the real reason is that Dr. Audrius V. Plioplys, a Beverly resident, pediatric neurologist and research neuroscientist, realized that the "landmark studies about the neuronal fine-structure of the human cerebral cortex" published over 100 years ago by Santiago Ramon y Cajal would finally allow him to combine

his medical knowledge with his passion for art.

According to Plioplys, Cajal "discovered the neuronal nature of the brain and defined it," and his reward was the

Nobel Prize in physiology and medicine. Plioplys' reward was superimposing (and aesthetically tweaking) Cajal's drawings of neurons in the human cerebral cortex on outdoor photographs he had already taken.

He then subtracted the background color that he had first added to reveal "deeper layers of underlying memory and underlying artwork." The result was emergent thoughts, emergent words and emergent the-

(See Plioplys page 17)



Audrius V. Plioplys

Plioplys

(Continued from page 6)

ology. This discovery was sheer paradise—and much hard work—for a doctor who had planned on being a nuclear physicist when he began his undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago. Two biology courses were required and strongly protested by Audrius—call him "Andy"—but he finally signed on for a general biology course.

As so often happens, the "very entertaining professor" led off the second quarter with a discussion of the central nervous system, and Plioplys, wondering "how the brain works and how nerve cells connect to one another to produce sensations, motor functions and dreams," changed his major to pre-med and headed to medical school to study neurology.

At this point, we have to go back, just briefly, to Plioplys' childhood in Toronto, Canada, where he was born to immigrant parents from Lithuania. They kept planning to return; but somehow it never happened, and Andy was raised "in a totally Lithuanian household, where life outside was to be shunned.

"When I started attending school, I did not speak a word of English. I vividly remember that first day of school, the total sense of bewilderment and the flood of tears that I produced.

"My childhood was one of

displacement. I lived and went to school in Toronto, but in my house, I was in another country, in another time period. I belonged to neither place. Not being attached to a location provided the opportunity for abstract thought to grow and develop. Perhaps it is not surprising that I have interests in theoretical pursuits such as physics, neurobiology and conceptual art."

He had been introduced to painting by a elementary school friend, a talent he would always treasure and continue to develop.

The family came to Chicago when Plioplys was a teenager, and he attended St. Rita High School, graduating in 1968 as class valedictorian. From there, it was on to the University of Chicago where he finished medical school in 1975. He then did an internal medicine internship at the University of Wisconsin.

By living frugally, "as a church mouse," he said, he could now afford to revel in his art and to, in fact, wonder if medicine was the right choice after all. He moved to Washington, D.C., for three years, with many side trips to New York for visits to favorite museums and art galleries.

By then, funds were really low, and he signed on at the Mayo Clinic for residency training in neurology, then served as a staff neurologist and neuroscientist at the University of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children in Ontario, Canada. His art "evolved into a total concentration on visual investigations of the thought

process, and upon moving back to Chicago 16 years ago, I further elaborated these visual and photographic metaphors."

His scientific work continues today as he tries "to understand how the brain is formed and how it functions, particularly in cognitive realms, at the level of the cerebral cortex. I have tried to find causes and cures for cognitive disorders, from learning disabilities and autism in children, to Alzheimer's disease in the elderly."

Chicago Tribune reporter Jon Anderson, in a sprightly article headlined "Matters of mind make great subject for artist doctor," visited Plioplys' "castlelike home in a wooded glen" where the doctor "retreats to his second-floor studio to ponder some of mankind's oldest questions. What is thinking? What is memory? And what do they look like?" He also found out that the doctor enjoys "gardening, restoring vintage cars, racing Porsches, coin collecting, gathering Civil War mementos and searching for 200-million-year-old fossils in rural Illinois."

On a personal note, I can add that the doctor relishes cutting his own large lawn, since he lives around the corner from me with his lovely wife, Sigita, a child psychiatrist, and two daughters, Milda and Ausrine, who is a freshman at St. Ignatius College Prep.

Finally, I cannot resist a quote from my cheerful neighbor, as reported in a Lithuanian paper.

"Lithuania is the country of



Viewers study Dr. Audrius V. Plioplys' large-format (48-by 60-inches) color digital images on canvases: Theological Thoughts on left, and Thoughts of Demons on right.

origin of my parents, in whose culture I was raised. Canada is the country of my birth, the orderly, polite and peaceful nature of which is part of my soul. America is the country in which I work and live, the country that provides the greatest opportunities for those who are willing to work and assert themselves. All of these countries are truly dear to me. I am a part of all of them, and they are a part of me."

A quote taken from the Gospel of Thomas and used in the "Neurotheology" exhibit catalogue reinforces the spiritual content of Plioplys' work: "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."

The exhibit continues at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, 5850 S. Woodlawn Ave., until Oct. 28, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. For information, call (773) 702-2100.

Also until Oct. 28, "Thinking and the Thought Process: A 25-Year Retrospective Art Exhibit" continues at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, 6500 S. Pulaski Road. Call (773) 582-6500 for information.

A third exhibit on Mark Shale's third and fourth floors, 900 N. Michigan Ave., also continues until Oct. 28.

Inside:
Education
Today

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REVIEW

October 18, 2006

1905-2005
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