

BRAINIAC

Dr. Audrius V. Plioplys: The Art of Consciousness

“I’m always thinking about consciousness and where it arises from,” says neurologist and neuroscientist Audrius V. Plioplys, M.D.—of his art. “I think of my art studio as a neurobiology research lab for investigating concepts and questions.” (A neuroscientist conducts laboratory research, while a neurologist diagnoses and treats people.) Dr. Plioplys first became interested in art growing up in Toronto, Canada. “I had a childhood friend who was always getting into trouble, until his parents enrolled him in an art class,” Dr. Plioplys recalls. It was at this friend’s house that Dr. Plioplys first watched an empty canvas transformed into “something beautiful.” But it would be years before he would attempt to do the same thing himself—not until medical school. “Because, you know, medical students have a lot of free time,” he jokes.

As a high school student in the 1960s, Dr. Plioplys was captivated by the elegance and interconnectedness of the universe and dreamed of studying physics. But as he began his undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago, he was “forced” to take two biology courses to complete his major. When his professor began a lecture on the brain and the nervous system, Dr. Plioplys was spellbound. “I realized that these neurons are actually us. We as human beings—our thinking, our consciousness—all come from this. By the end of that course, I knew that I had to go into neurology,” he recalls.

Dr. Plioplys entered medical school at the University of Chicago, but he found himself spending more and more time painting. “I was in a quandary as to whether I should continue doing medicine or whether I should just do art.” In 1976, after completing his medical



Mirror Neurons, 10 x 13 feet, 2012

internship, Dr. Plioplys decided to leave medicine entirely to focus on his art.

After three years creating and showing art in Washington, D.C., however, Dr. Plioplys had a nagging sense of guilt over not using his knowledge of medicine to help others. Up until that time, he believed he had to choose either neurology or art. “Then, I realized I was making a fundamental error. That’s when I decided to return to neurology, and I also realized I needed to change my ideas of art to make my art compatible with neuroscience.”

As a neurologist and member of the American Academy of Neurology (AAN), Dr. Plioplys has focused mainly on cognitive disorders, including autism, attention-deficit disorder, learning disabilities, and Alzheimer’s disease.

In the past 35 years, Dr. Plioplys has been a notable presence in both art and neurology. He has had 34 individual art exhibits and published 73 clinical articles—on topics such as autism and Rett syndrome, Alzheimer’s disease and Down syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, and life expectancy in neurologic disorders. Dr. Plioplys has donated several art pieces to be displayed in the new AAN headquarters in Minneapolis, and his artwork was the first to appear on the cover of *Neurology*, the world’s most highly cited neurology medical journal.

For more information on Dr. Plioplys and his work, visit plioplys.com. Watch a video interview with Dr. Plioplys on Neuro. RAPT, a bi-weekly educational science web series, here: neurorapt.com/neuroscience-merges-with-art —Olga Rukovets