

# CANVAS **REBEL**



## Meet Audrius Plioplys

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We caught up with the brilliant and insightful Audrius Plioplys a few weeks ago and have shared our conversation below.

**Audrius, thanks for joining us, excited to have you contributing your stories and insights. Earning a full time living from one's creative career can be incredibly difficult. Have you been able to do so and if so, can you share some of the key parts of your journey and any important advice or lessons that might help creatives who haven't been able to yet?**

In an overarching sense, I have been able to make a very good living from my creative work — but this requires considerable explanation.

While in medical school at the University of Chicago, the desire to paint, to create visual art, gradually overtook my soul. By the time I graduated, I felt that I had made a mistake — I should not have gone into neurology, rather I should have been an artist. My friends convinced me to at least finish my medical internship at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, which I did. Then, I quit the world of medicine completely. I moved to the east coast, established a studio. And my art career was launched!



This career started off extremely well. A solo exhibit in the first year, with positive write-ups in the major newspapers. A one year's length exhibit at the Smithsonian American Museum of Art in Washington, DC, and even sales started to take place! Ivan Karp, the discoverer of Jasper Johns, James Rosenquist and Andy Warhol told me that my art work was "Elegant .... impressive .... very beautiful .... I've never seen any artwork like this before".

(By the way, in the world of art I was self-taught. The reason for this makes for another story.)

However, over time a sense of guilt started nagging at me. I had accumulated all of this information about neurology and was not using any of it to help others. I was doing what Jesus said no one does — you do not cover a burning candle with a bushel basket. That was what I was doing.

It was then that I realized that I was making a fundamental error. I thought that I had to choose either medicine or art. I was wrong. I could do both, blend both of them together.

After three years of full-time commitment to art, I returned to neurology at the Mayo Clinic and transformed my art into investigations of thinking and consciousness.



I had two simultaneous careers — art and neurology/neurobiology. One was an outlet for creative, artistic expression, and the other one paid the bills. Both were very successful and supported each other. Artistic creativity supported and enhanced my work as a physician, and as a researcher. Neurobiology research raised existential questions that I investigated in my artworks. One career reinforced the other.

Upon finishing their education, most artists try to make a living from their art. Extremely few are able to do so. I would estimate less than 1%. There are the fortunate ones who can have gainful employment, such as teaching art at university levels, that enhances their own creativity. However, the vast majority pretend to have a creative job, such as design, where their creative abilities are drained to satisfy the needs of a company. When you allow your own creativity to be abused in this way, you have no personal creativity left — and you can no longer create art.

I refused to let this happen to me. I kept my art pure, all the time. Never was it subject to commercial interests, demands. All of my art has flowed from my soul, with the full force of my own creativity.



I strongly recommend all artists, when they start their education, make sure they prepare for a career in a money-making occupation which is completely independent of artistic creativity, and keep their art personal and free.

**Audrius, love having you share your insights with us. Before we ask you more questions, maybe you can take a moment to introduce yourself to our readers who might have missed our earlier conversations?**



For over 40 years I have been both a professional artist and a neurologist-neuroscientist. I have been artistically exploring the origins of thinking, thought, and consciousness. Where does awareness come from? How is it that we are cognizant of ourselves and of those near us? What is it that makes us human?

I went to college at the University of Chicago as a physics major. I wanted to understand the fundamental structure of nature. While in college I became fascinated by neurobiology—how is it that a collection of 100 billion cells gives rise to a cognizant human being? My career shifted into neurology-neurobiology. A further shift took place with the incorporation of art into my neuroscientific explorations.

Artistic approaches have included large scale paintings, prints on paper, site-specific installations, and light sculptures with LED light systems. The underlying images are of my own previous art works. I transform them into exotic forms, just as our memories transform visual impulses into vast neuronal web-works. Multiple layers are assembled, modified and blended. Cerebral cortical neuronal drawings,

superimposed and subtracted from the surrounding color, reveal deeper layers of thoughts and memories. My own MRI brain scans and electroencephalograms (brain waves) are interweaved. From neuronal complexity words, thoughts, and consciousness emerge. Further information can be found at [www.Plioplys.com](http://www.Plioplys.com).



My most recent explorations are large-scale, 100% pure silk scarves, 140 x 140 cm (55 x 55 in). The mulberry silk used is of the highest quality and printing techniques are state of the art. These scarves are heavy, durable, and warm. These silk works of art, just as all my previous pieces, have multiple overlapping, interweaving layers of content, meaning and visual elements. The complexity of their design matches the complexity of our own thought processes. But with these, I am taking art off gallery and museum walls and making it available for the general public to use and enjoy. Further information can be found at [www.SilkNeuroArt.com](http://www.SilkNeuroArt.com).

Artistically, I am fully self-taught. The seed of art was planted by a childhood friend in Toronto. During medical school at the University of Chicago, I started painting, and the passion for art grew uncontrollably. After internship, I left medicine entirely, to create art full-time. Three years later, after many exhibits and positive critical reviews, I started to feel guilty that I was not helping others with my knowledge of neurology. I realized that I must return to medicine, and at the same time, merge my art with neuro-scientific investigations.

I have had over 50 individual art exhibits and participated in over 100 group shows. In Chicago, my art is on permanent display at the Blue Man Group, Illinois Institute of Technology, University of Chicago, Blackstone Hotel, Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, Brookfield Zoo, and Beverly Arts Center. In Minneapolis, eight pieces, including large scale ones, are on permanent display at the American Academy of Neurology, which opened recently. My paintings are in many museum collections internationally including the Art Institute and the Museum of Contemporary Art, both in Chicago. A suite of my art books are displayed in a modern art museum near Marseilles, France. My installation piece, *Mirror Neurons*, graces the cover of the Oxford University Press book, Consciousness and the Social Brain. Most recently, the University of Chicago requested that I donate four of my light columns for permanent display. In thanks the University honored me by naming the three-story entrance way of the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge, where these pieces are displayed, after me.

In recognition of my work organizing the year-long Hope and Spirit program, a commemoration of the 20 million victims of Stalin's atrocities, I was designated Man of the Year for 2012 by the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago. The previous year's recipient was the US senator from Illinois, Mr. Richard Durbin.

My neurologic investigations concentrated on cognitive disorders, from autism in children, to Alzheimer's disease in the elderly. I have published 79 neurology articles and received \$2.8 million in research grants. For twenty years, I worked to improve the care provided to severely disabled cerebral palsied children and reported the world's best survival rates. I pioneered the use of vest-therapy to prevent pneumonias in children with cerebral palsy, a technique that is now in use in all pediatric medical centers across North America. I retired from neurology twelve years ago, and am, again, engaged in art full-time.

### **Let's talk about resilience next – do you have a story you can share with us?**

When I decided to leave medicine and pursue art full-time, I thought that I should do this in a traditional, education-oriented way. During my final year of medical school (1974) I arranged for medical internship interviews at many locations across the northern US and Canada, from the east coast to the west coast. When visiting all of these cities, I sought out the primary art university and simply walked in to see what was being taught. I did not set up any interviews or formal visits. I just wanted to see what was currently being taught. I was shocked by what I saw.





At every art university the studio spaces were crammed with students painting abstract expressionistic paintings! The same over and over, coast to coast, US and Canada! Abstract expressionism was dogma–religion!

At that time, conceptual art was developing, and I considered my own art to be a branch of this new genre. But that was not what art universities were teaching. I was not going to prostitute myself at the altar of the current artistic fad. No. I decided to study art intensively myself, and to develop my own line of inquiry, on my own terms. I realized that the only way I could be true to my inner creative soul was to stay far away from the current societal dogma. Most regrettably, I strongly suspect that if you were to visit art universities now, you would also see much the same coast to coast. Institutions do not change. The need for dogma does not change.

Staying away from art universities kept my art pure and true to my soul. However, there have been significant downsides. Being independent opened up doors that otherwise would have been closed. But, not graduating with a respectable MFA has limited my exhibit and sales opportunities considerably–possibly massively. Staying within the system provides an automatic network of recognition and support, even though it limits, or destroys, your own creative potential.

Ivan Karp, the discoverer of Jasper Johns, James Rosenquist and Andy Warhol, told me that my art was “elegant ... impressive ... very beautiful ... extremely original ... I’ve never seen any artwork like this before.” But, my art was too much out of the mainstream for Ivan Karp to show it.

In retrospect, would I have done things with my art career differently? Absolutely not. I would strongly recommend that any serious creative artist, who cherishes his or her own expressivity, stay away from art universities. Learn art on your own. Perfect your art on your own. Show your art on your own terms. Be independent. But make sure to have a second career that will pay the bills.

**Is there something you think non-creatives will struggle to understand about your journey as a creative? Maybe you can provide some insight – you never know who might benefit from the enlightenment.**

Most non-creatives look upon my art as a form of relaxation, as a hobby. That is totally incorrect.

When I am creating art, there is absolutely nothing relaxing about it. It is work. It is hard work. And it takes many, many hours.

Art and artistic creativity are an innate part of my soul that needs to be expressed. It cannot be controlled. It cannot be stifled. But to express it appropriately, effectively, is very difficult and takes much effort, much work.

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