

Rita Blitt

UMKC Interview 2009

When did you first realize your passion for art?

My earliest art memory is responding, at a very early age, to family letters from my grandfather by copying his floral line drawings and sending them to him. Sometimes I believe my dancing lines still echo his lines.

At age 10 and again at age 11, I won scholarships for Saturday classes at The Kansas City Art Institute. The KCAI teacher Miss Polk and also Ruth Ann Angstead, my 5th grade teacher at Troost School, invited me to their homes to encourage my creativity.

These childhood experiences filled me with the courage to say to myself, "Someday I will become an artist."



Rita at age 10

I see the MAIN THEMES of My Art and Life appearing in my childhood work:

A. Love of Family, Nature and Dedication

I always created a personal card for birthdays and anniversaries of immediate family members. At age 13, after winning a statewide Harry Doehla greeting card design contest, I took my portfolio to Hallmark Cards to apply for a job. I did not get past the reception desk.

Then, while gathering images for the 2000 book *Rita Blitt: The Passionate Gesture*, I found this card made at age 10 which revealed to me that the yellow ball I had been including in my work all these years is probably the sun, which I do revere.





Lunarblitt XVI, 1975, stainless steel, 7 feet, Oak Park Mall

Lunarblitt XVI, “my yellow ball sculpture” is my most seminal work. It led me to the discovery of the importance of my spontaneous lines to my creativity.

MAIN THEMES continued :

B. *Love of music, movement and empathy .*



Hallelujah, 1942, watercolor on paper,
18x11 inches, early evidence of
my interest in singing and dancing.

The little girl is rhythmically swaying and singing. I believe she is part of the series made at age 11 that grew out of my concern for the plight of the African Americans. These works also showed my admiration of the African-American spirit.



Working Man, 1943, pastel on paper.

As a child I puzzled over racial inequality and yearned to see freedom and equal rights for all.

Why did you decide to attend UMKC?

Irwin, my University of Illinois boyfriend, graduated and decided to settle in Kansas City, where we were planning to be married. That is when I enrolled in UMKC to finish working for my degree.



Rita and Irwin in college

What were your goals with your art upon graduation?

Did you suspect at that time you would touch so many lives all over the world?

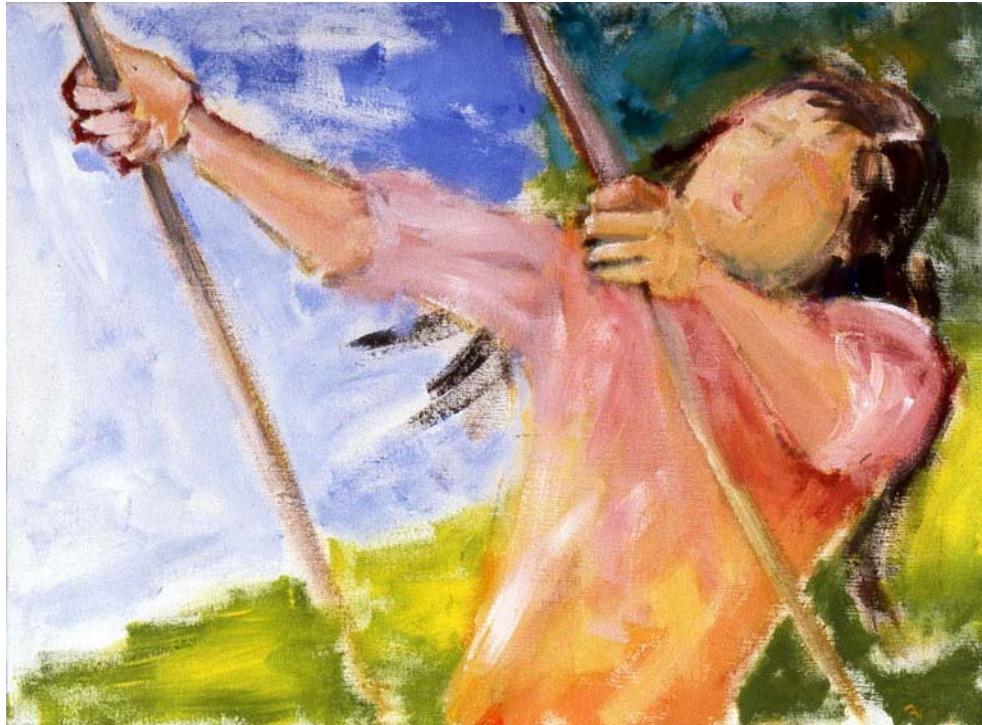
I really did not have a goal. I took it for granted that I would always create art. That was a natural part of my life.

Several years later, after becoming a full time mom, I was encouraged and given the confidence to take myself seriously as an artist by art historian Sidney Lawrence.

I then made a firm decision that “I owed it to myself to become the best artist I could become, always remembering to put family first.”

However, after making that decision, I struggled with guilt, feeling that perhaps it was too self indulgent of me to spend my life doing that which I loved, instead of following my mother’s example of volunteerism.

I consoled myself that it was okay for me to dedicate myself to creating art if I could ultimately give to others through my art. I wondered if I could.



I Became a Mother:

Connie Swinging, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

This painting was inspired by my daughter, Connie (Chela)

Partial Progress Report (hoping to give to others through my art):

1. Many people have said to me, “Your work makes me feel so good”.

2. My words “Kindness is Contagious. Catch it”, my Kindness sculpture, 1993 poster and resulting Kindness programs have touched people throughout the world.



Downloadable poster, www.ritablitt.com

How did the slogan “Kindness is Contagious, Catch It” come about? How did you connect that to the STOP Violence (Synergy banquet) program?

About 25 years ago, Beth Smith, a teacher for non-for-profits at UMKC, asked me to create something that could be sent all over the world to “help make the world a better place”. This request amazed, honored, overwhelmed and tickled me. How could I do such a thing? About five years later I was driving down the street, looking at bumper stickers and suddenly words came into my mind:

“Kindness is Contagious. Catch it.” (Beth always wanted me to add the words “and pass it on”.)

I immediately called Beth, told her my words and then called SuEllen Fried, founder of the Stop Violence Coalition, now under the auspices of Synergy. I gave SuEllen my words and said,

“ Make magic with them, I know you can.” I envisioned programs for children and adults all over the world.

The banquet program was started several years later by Barbara Unell, a Stop Violence board member.

3. In 1993, I gave a sculpture to Norway through their Ambassador to the UN to thank Norway for their part in bringing Israel and the PLO together for a first step toward peace.

Then, I sent a print, inspired by that sculpture , with a *Kindness* poster to every country in the UN.



I presented my sculpture to Norway's Ambassador to the United Nations . Looking on is my friend Olara Otunnu, former President of the Security Council and Director of the International Peace Academy .



Project Nishma Luncheon, Washington, D.C. 1993

Tom Smerling, Nishma , held my print as I presented it to the Israeli Minister of Housing . The print, inspired by my gift of sculpture to Norway, was also presented at the luncheon to a representative of the PLO.

4. My 6 minute “Caught in Paint” film has won numerous awards, was shown at the 2008 Cannes film festival in France by Motion Picture Magazine and has been chosen for over 130 film festivals.











5. My award winning sculpture at the Florence, Italy 2005 Biennale:



Inspiration, (Sensuously Stacked Steel) 1986-2005, stainless steel, 63 x 46 x 5 inches

6. My paintings and sculptures have been publicly installed and are in numerous private collections and museums in ten countries. Examples:



Stablitt 55, 1977, painted steel,
26 feet, 13 feet x 30 inches



Inspiration, 1987, painted steel,
26 feet x 18 feet x 18 inches



Spirit's delight, 1994, stainless steel,
12 feet x 5 feet x 16 inches



One, 1984, painted steel,
60 feet x 6 feet x 2 feet



I Do, 1990, painted aluminum, 77 x 44 x 12 inches



Separate But Together, 1990, steel, 77 x 60 x 3/8 inches



Seeking Truth, 1992, stainless steel, 8.5 x 7.5 x 4 feet



Freedom, Plaza Library, Kansas City, Missouri, 1993-2004,
stainless steel, 6 feet x 11 feet x 2 feet



L'Chaim – To Life, 2005, stainless steel, 9 x 17 feet (3 parts),
Lewis and Shirley White Theater, Overland Park, Kansas



Nessie, 1978, painted steel, 16 feet. Rockaway, New Jersey
See www.ritablitt.com for downloadable book “*Nessie the Sculpture*”



Animals in Space?, 1965, acrylic on masonite, 48 x 144 inches,
Installed at Briarwood Elementary School, Prairie Village, Kansas



Magical Dreamland, 1994, acrylic on paper, 20 inches x 32 feet,
Lakewood Medical Center



Profound Awakening, 2005, oil/acrylic on canvas, 4 feet x 9 feet,
Kansas University Medical Center
This is one of 9 triptychs and 4 single paintings at the Heart Center

What was your first teaching experience?

Upon graduation from UMKC, I briefly taught kindergarten and nursery school. It was reported to me that the superintendent who first hired me said he had hired a teacher “with a kid personality”. I feel grateful that I have been able to hold on to “the child within me” for the sake of my art and life.

You are known for your strong love of family, strong religious faith and strong community support. Do those things inform on your art?

I love my family intensely and have great concern for all humanity. My art comes from deep within me. It speaks of love and caring, perhaps influenced by my Jewish roots.

My childhood was filled with concern for the suffering of the Jews in the Holocaust as my mother worked for the establishment of Israel as a National Jewish Homeland so that the victims of the Holocaust would have a place to live.



Mom, (Dorothy Copaken), 1964, acrylic on canvas,
24 x 20 inches

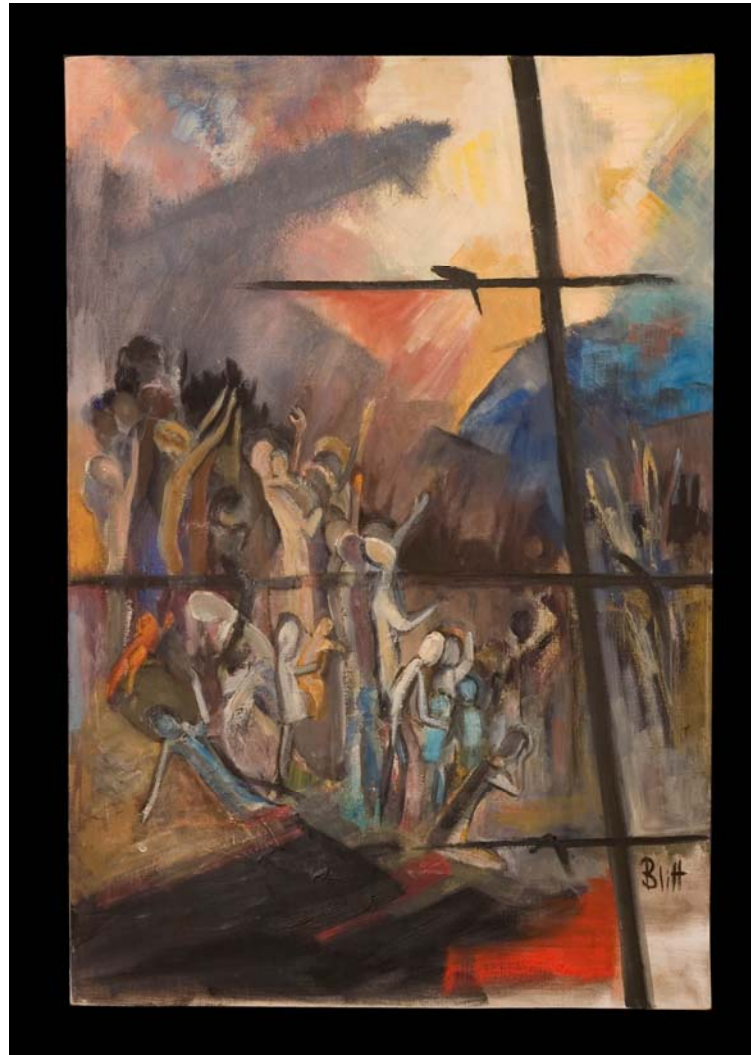
Examples of Holocaust related works:



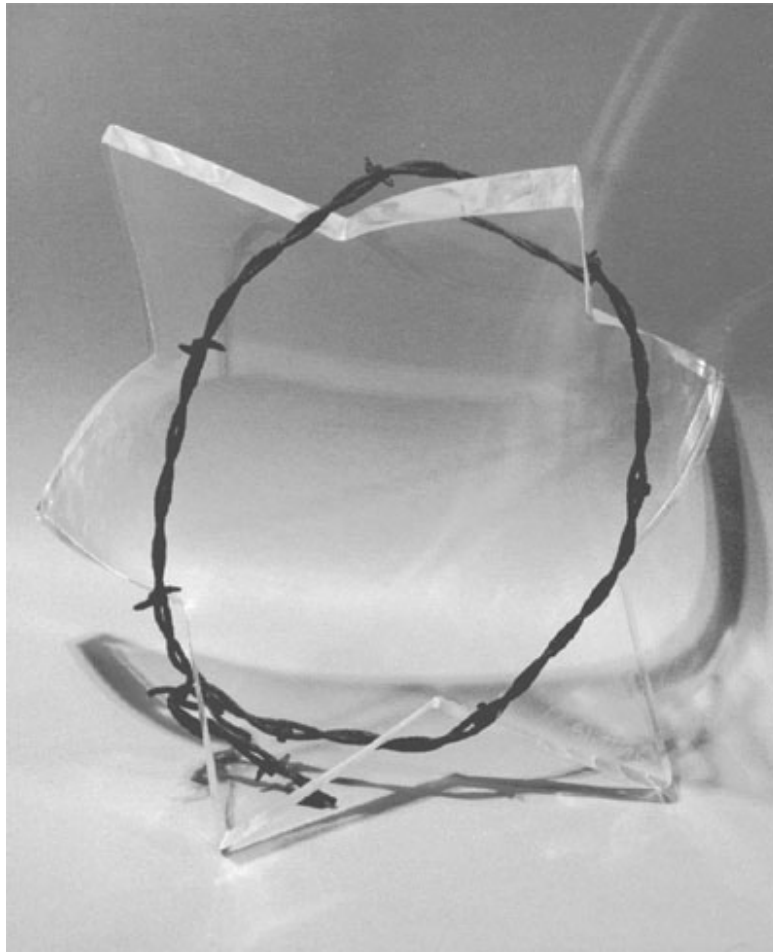
I Never Saw Another Butterfly,

1966, acrylic – tissue paper on masonite, 48x48 inches

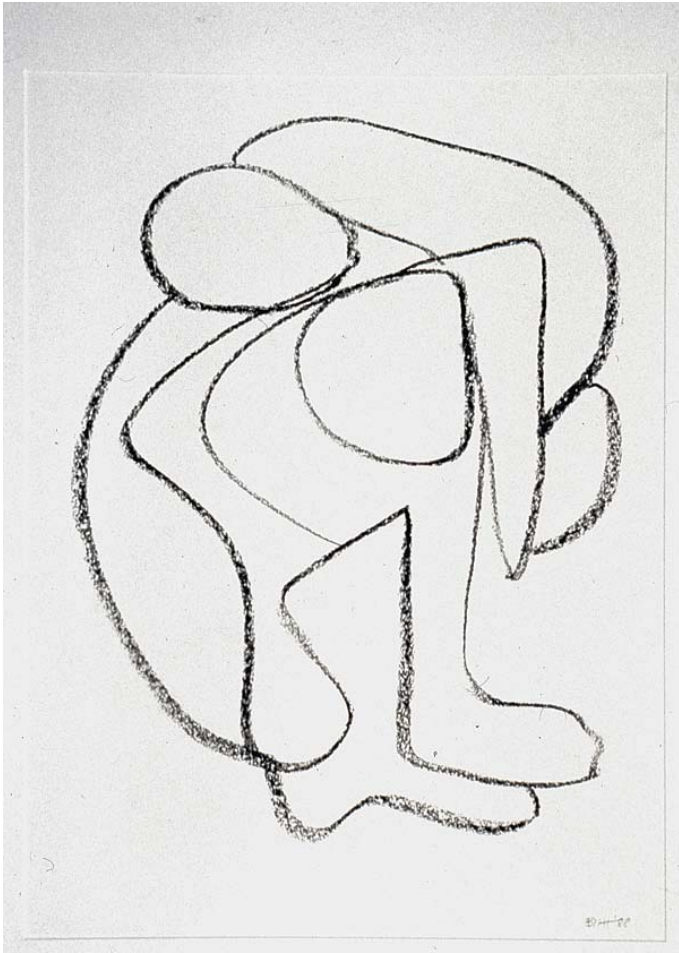
Painting inspired by book of *stories and poems by children in Terezin concentration Camp*



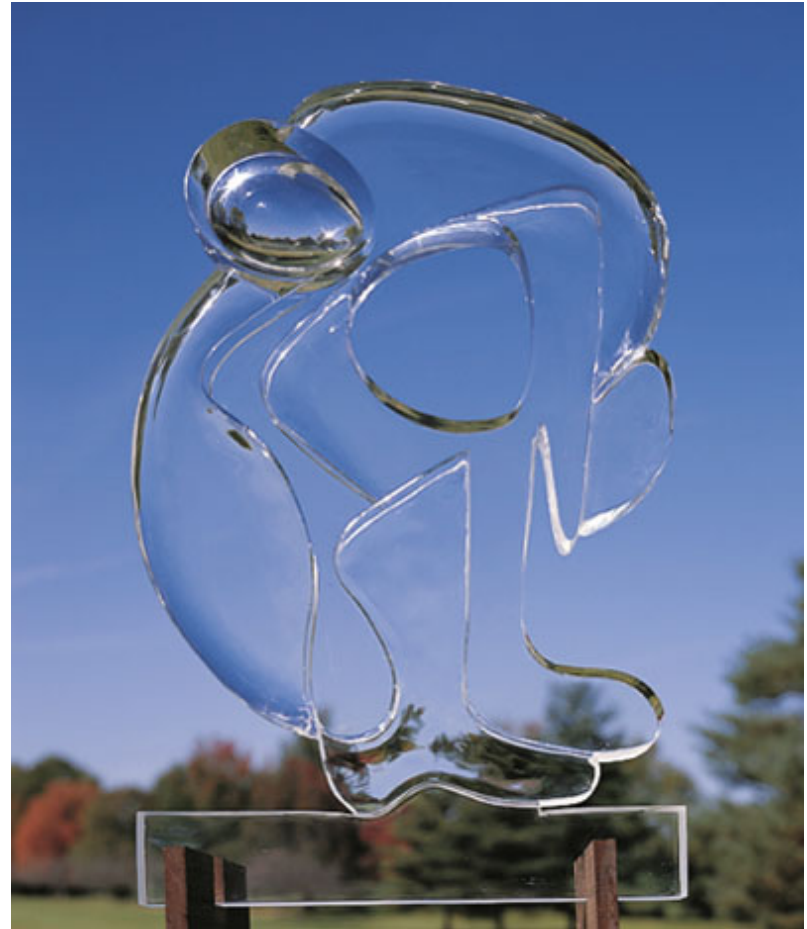
Exodus, 1960 oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches



Struggle For Survival, 1976, acrylic sheet/barbed wire, 10 x 9 x 7 inches,
Collection of Skirball Museum, Los Angeles



Inner Torment, 1988, conte on paper,
30 x 22 inches



Inner Torment, 1989, acrylic sheet,
31 x 22 x 3 inches

Describe “dancing on paper”.

When I draw, the lines flow from my hand or hands quickly, unselfconsciously moving with rhythm, energy and emotion.

Sometimes I am responding to music when I draw and sometimes I am just letting lines come from deep within me. You can see me painting with two hands in the film *Caught In Paint*.

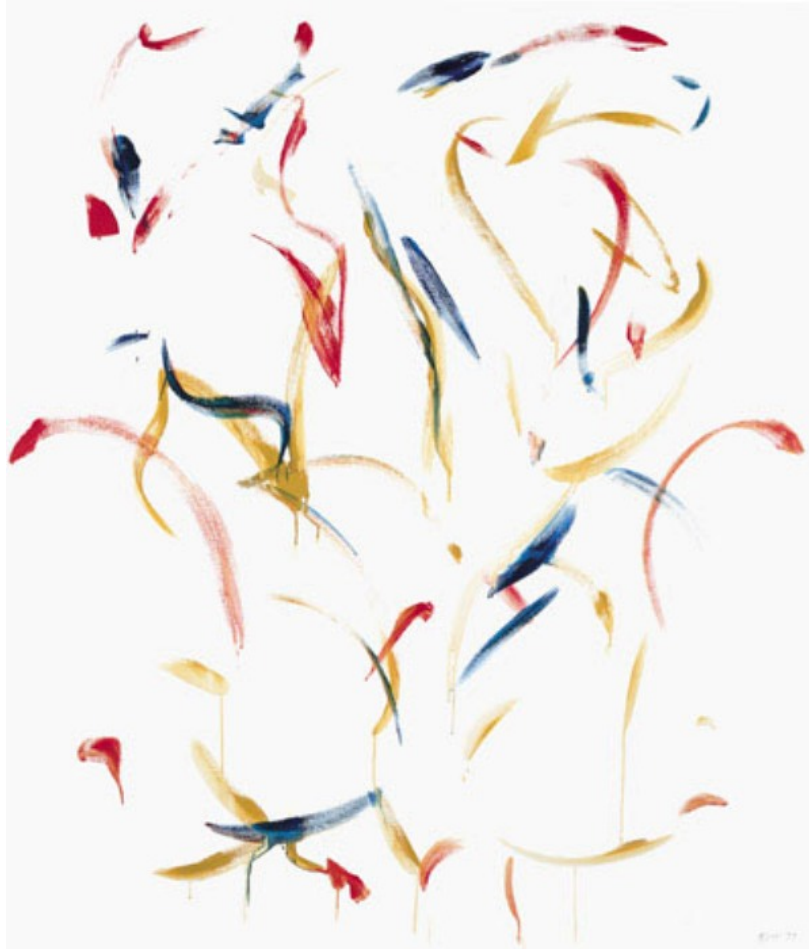


In the 70s, when I first began drawing with two hands, I was quite shocked and had no intention of continuing this practice. However, in time, I not only realized that I needed both hands to feel honest and whole, but I also realized that I was becoming a more centered person as a result of drawing with two hands. Early on in this venture, trying to figure out why I was drawing with two hands, I wrote “I feel like I am dancing on paper”. Indeed, I realize more and more how true that is. I am dancing!

I believe that drawing with two hands , using both sides of your brain, is as valuable as aerobic exercise for both sides of your body.

I have discovered that I have internal music and can “paint my dance” without music.

Sometimes I am responding to the music within me.



Inner Music, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 6 x 5 feet,
Collection of John and Grace Obetz

In my *Dancing Hands Workshop* I have found that everyone can have the pleasure of “dancing” on paper.

When I work with dancers in improvising movement and extending their dance onto paper they thank me for giving them this sense of freedom.



After The Ballet series, 1997, acrylic on paper, 30x22 inches,
Women's Center, Brandeis University



Greece Series, 2004, ink on paper, 8 x 10 inches

Are there any mediums you would still like to try?

The only medium that I occasionally think about is clay.

Why is it important to you to teach/mentor?

I get excited about my art and life discoveries and enjoy sharing them in hope of inspiring others .

Why is it important to you to give back?

I like to give and share whenever and wherever I can. I don't consciously think of "giving back".

Quick Bites:

What is your favorite UMKC memory?

Being in art classes with teachers Henry Scott and Tommy Thomas.

Is there a significant person who has made a big impact on your life?

Yes! Irwin Blitt, my dear husband. In the early years, whenever I became frustrated and had questions relating to my art, he said “get to work, and you will find the answers”. So, I did. Also Irwin, “my critic”, said “People have to be as creative in viewing your work as you do in making it.”



What drives you to succeed?

I've never been concerned with "success". I just enjoy creating and doing my best in whatever I do.

What is your biggest personal and/or professional accomplishment?

Sharing life with Irwin, Chela and Dorianna.

Thinking of and offering the words *"Kindness is Contagious, Catch it!"*



Daughter Chela with our granddaughter
Dorianna



Dorianna at age 17 months



Rita and granddaughter Dorianna at Rita's Retrospective Exhibition at Hudgens Center for the Arts, Duluth, Georgia, 2006 standing in front of Rita's painting, *Celebrating (the birth of) Dorianna*, 1996-97, acrylic/oil on canvas, 70 x 188 inches

Tell something about yourself that few people know.

I was contacted by Texas Art Educators Association for a pair of my shoes to use in an Art Education exhibition. I had been the keynote speaker at their 2007 convention.

I gave them my working shoes full of splashed paint on which I painted the following words:

One shoe – “The courage to be free and spontaneous!!, Rita Blitt ‘09. Happy Creating.”

The other shoe – “Who cared about drips of paint when I was enjoying painting”.



What do you hope that people will take to heart when they reflect upon your legacy?

1 Your kindnesses will affect others and make them kinder human beings and hopefully their kindnesses will spread from one person to another.

2 Everyone can create. The process of doing it is what is important.
Creating is courageous.

Words of wisdom for students following in your footsteps?

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" and to ask for help.

Be honest and true to yourself.

Enjoy.

Your personal mantra?

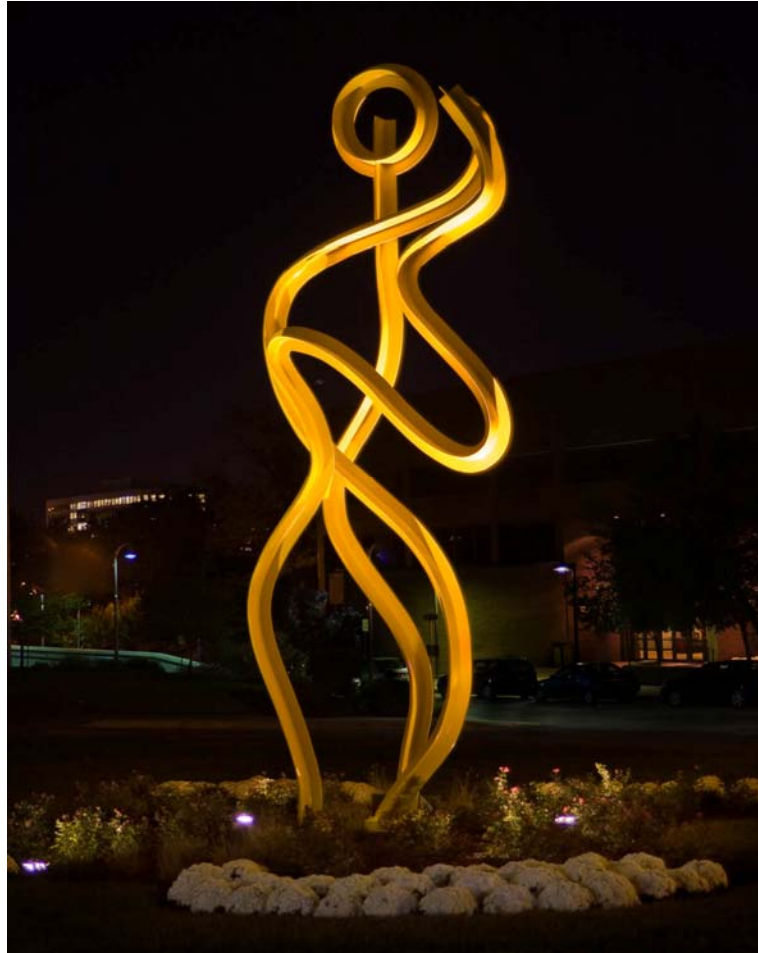
Have the courage to create and to live honestly.

How did UMKC impact your life's journey?

At UMKC, I acquired a teaching certificate, allowing me to teach young children while creating art in my spare time.

I am happy to know that my works will live on with the students of UMKC in a nourishing environment of knowledge, ideas and creativity. I am honored to be a part of this institution.

UMKC Collection
(in part)



Dancing, 1980, painted steel, 26 feet x 10 feet x 5 feet



Romeo and Juliet, 2003, 13 feet each



Summer Dance I, 2002, oil on canvas, 4 feet x 9 feet



Summer Dance II, 2002, oil on canvas, 4 feet x 9 feet



Adagio I, II, and III, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches each



Rita Blitt at Soka University, Blitt exhibition reception September 2009.