

Townsquare Mall Sculptress Carves Out Identity

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By Richard Heymann

She is a sculptress "with a connection."

Rita Blitt has designed and is in the process of building three sculptures at the Rockaway Townsquare Mall. Wearing faded blue jeans, she is virtually indistinguishable from the scores of workmen scurrying around the work site.

But her work is definitely different.

For example, she is fabricating a huge flag out of brass and stainless steel featuring 800 stars—each signed by a local school child. A second work being installed this week is a six-foot square sheet of acrylic (plastic) bent so three corners touch the ground. Water will flow over its gently sloping top.

Mrs. Blitt is also supervising the setting up of another all-steel sculpture: it looks like tow arches side by side with large, rounded cones piled on top. The openings at each arch are five feet wide and somewhat resemble the wooden-lattice work trellises found in a formal garden.

"They will function as real arches, too," Mrs. Blitt explained. "They are three feet deep and it will take at least two steps to walk through them. I like the idea that people will experience them from the outside and the inside, too."

The special "connection" between Rita Blitt and the Rockaway Townsquare project is evident by checking the name of the Kansas City developer of the project, which is set to open Aug. 11: Copaken, White & Blitt.

Irwin Blitt is a partner in the firm that is building the mall and is, of course, Rita's husband.

But she doesn't have to depend on this connection to find a place to show her works. The signature "Blitt" may be found at the bottom of canvases and sculptures in shows in three cities: New Haven, Conn., New York City, and Aspen, Colo., not to mention in numerous malls: Baltimore, Md.; Wichita, Kan.; Joliet, Ill.; Kansas City, Kan.; St. Joseph, Mo.; Bloomington, Ind., and others.

"I am a prolific artist," she said during an interview in a trailer on the job site this week. "I create a lot I can't share—just because there is a lot of it." She said she does her creative work during the days, leaving the evenings free for family life when her husband comes home.

"This week is unusual in that my career as an artist is separating me from my husband who is back at the company headquarters." She says she had no formal training in working with steel, but quickly adds, "I consult a structural engineer for advice on some projects."

The necessity for this is evident: the double-arched creation weighs an estimated 8,500 pounds and, because the public will be walking under it, it must be designed with safety in mind.

"I started working in the arts professionally in 1959," she said, "and began doing sculpture in 1966. I have had the pleasure of doing from one to four pieces for each of the malls my husband has built. At Rockaway Townsquare, there will be three when it opens and two more at the later phases are completed."

While her own creative endeavors are the spark for all her designs, she proudly points to her husband's role in a project. "Once I have completed a design, he looks it over. He may find that if it were built the way I designed it and located in the mall where he wanted it, the work would block the name of a store or something. You can't have that."

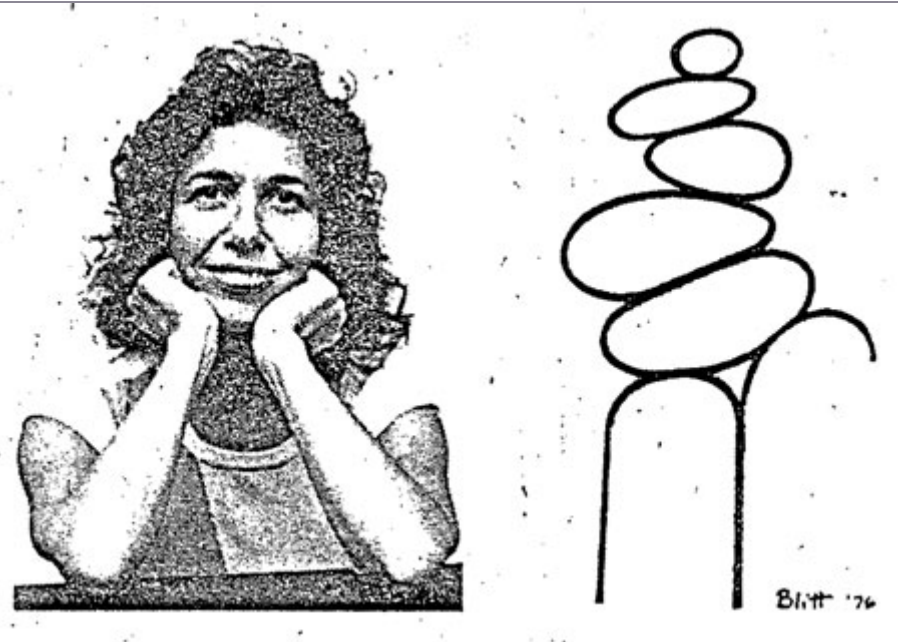
Working from her home and studio in Kansas City, she says she prefers to make small models of the large projects first. "I also prefer to have the works fabricated in Kansas and shipped to the site where they are assembled."

She does not "charge" her husband for the works, she said. "There is a sum set aside in the project for the sculpture, but that includes the fabrication, shipping charges, raw materials cost and final on-site work. I don't do this for the money. I do it because I love to. I get a lot of pleasure out of having the public experience my work."

Some of her work being shown in galleries is for sale, she indicated. "At this point in my career, a work might sell for \$500. It is hard to price a work of art. You charge a mixture of what the traffic will bear and what is appropriate for you at a certain stage of your career.

"I believe some of my things now priced \$500 are comparable to other works selling for \$5,000 and will be worth that someday," she said.

She looks forward to the unveiling of her latest sculpture to the public and to assessing the reaction. "I'm a little frightened," she said. "My husband says I'm excited. That's better. I'm excited."



Rita Blitt and an example of her sculpture.