

**"The Art of Rita Blitt"**  
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Rita Blitt has been an artist for as long as she can remember. Since she was a child she has had a passion for creating art and for sharing it with others. She recalls her excited anticipation when teachers passed out fresh drawing paper in school, and these creative expectations endure today. Blitt channels her enthusiasm to others via drawings, paintings, and sculptures. Working from intuition as well as intelligence, her experience of making art is both physical and spiritual. She has had a calling and the strength to follow her path. Like novelist Willa Cather, Blitt has discovered that happiness is "to be dissolved into something complete and great," to become "part of something entire."

An important source of Blitt's enthusiasm for art was the influence of her grandfather, Isaac Sofnas, a Russian designer of flower embroidery patterns, who lived in New York City. According to Blitt, "My grandfather drew fanciful flowers on the letters he sent. From the time I was a toddler we exchanged drawings. Now I feel my lines continue his."

Blitt's father, Herman Copaken, a businessman and part-time inventor, embodied patient determination and self-motivation, which he passed on to his daughter. Blitt's mother, Dorothy Sofnas Copaken, devoted herself to Jewish humanitarian causes. She instilled in her three children an awareness of and caring for the world, which Blitt expresses through art.

"My Mom always said, 'Look at the beautiful trees,'" Rita remembers. "I loved drawing trees formed with multiple lines, each emanating from the roots and continuing up through the trunk to become branches and twigs. No line was added that did not grow from the roots. So my trees felt alive." This early connection to nature characterizes virtually all of her subsequent work.

When she was nine years old, Blitt received a scholarship for Saturday classes at the Kansas City Art Institute. Soon thereafter, she was forced to give up her other passion, tap dancing, because of a problem with her knees. "I may have stopped dancing physically," she admits, "but my being is still dancing."

Among her earliest surviving works are a watercolor and several pastels of African Americans that date from 1942, when Blitt was eleven. The watercolor exemplifies her interest in music and movement that becomes increasingly important later on. In this early work, a seemingly happy girl sings and sways. She dances to the music, whose sound is represented by notes leaping from her open mouth and whose rhythms are made visible in the folds of her skirt fabric. Her arms reach out to embrace the world. Intuitively, young Rita created a naive, conceptual artwork, referring to the visual arts, music, and dance. Considering the times, the pre-Civil Rights era when segregation and degradation of African Americans was prevalent, it is noteworthy that Blitt as a preteen painted empathetic portraits of African Americans. Her youthful awareness and opposition to segregation is indicative of the humanistic philosophy rooted in her heritage, which provides a recurrent theme in her work.

At age thirteen, Rita won first place in a statewide greeting card contest. During her teen years, she established a habit of self-reliance, the practice of following her intuition and allowing her heart, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, to vibrate "to that iron string."

Renowned regionalist artist Thomas Hart Benton was a controversial presence locally and nationally at the time Blitt was maturing. She often saw and studied with admiration his monumental painting *Achelous and Hercules* (1947), and inevitably Benton's flowing lines influenced her. Blitt, determined to be an artist in her own right, did not want to imitate the pictorial examples of historical precedents. Thus, she was also receptive to modernist trends from New York and Paris, which Benton rejected early in his career.

From 1948 through 1950, Rita attended the University of Illinois. In the life drawing class of John Raushenberger her lines became more spontaneous through the discipline of drawing quick figure poses. "The speed with which I learned to work prepared me for a life of gestural drawing," she acknowledges. At the university she first encountered the work of the Abstract Expressionists, including Benton's former student Jackson Pollock. "I wanted to like abstraction," she acknowledges, "but I couldn't allow myself to do so, until I discovered through my own experience in art that it was honest." Her cautious interest in the New York School was relatively enlightened, compared to the hostility of some, who felt that abstract painting might be a form of psychological warfare undermining the country from within.

Rita Copaken transferred to Kansas City University -- now the University of Missouri at Kansas City -- in the summer of 1950, majoring in art and minoring in education. On April 18, 1951, she married Irwin Blitt, her lifelong soulmate. She finished her degree that summer and began teaching kindergarten. From 1951 until 1955, Rita Blitt attended painting classes at the Kansas City Art Institute, where she studied with Wilbur Niewald, a disciple of Paul Cézanne. "Niewald taught me to see the beauty of shapes as they relate to one another," she recalls. "I'll never forget the moment I learned to experience this connection. I was driving down the street and suddenly became excited by the sight of randomly arranged shovels, brooms, and other items being hauled in the open truck in front of me. At first I was surprised at my elation. Later, I realized I was learning to see and appreciate beauty everywhere."

In the late 1950s Blitt resumed painting after a two-year hiatus due to the birth of her daughter, Connie Diane (now Chela). She resolved to develop her artistic talents fully after art historian Sidney Lawrence challenged her.

"How often do you paint?" he asked. "Twice a week, when I have a baby-sitter," she answered.

"If you really care about being an artist, you'll work every day," Lawrence counseled.

"The fact that someone I respected believed in me gave me the confidence to commit my life to doing what I love," Blitt recalls. "It was then that I said, 'I owe it to myself to become the best artist I can become, always remembering to put family first.'"

Blitt's paintings during the 1950s and early 1960s demonstrate a mastery of her craft, convey the joy she experienced in creating, and contain seeds of her life's work. A mural for a pediatrician's office, a boat filled with animals dancing, singing, and playing instruments, depicts making music, as did so many Blitt paintings of this period. An untitled wintry landscape broadly painted in 1958 in an Impressionist manner depicts a traditional red barn in the background surrounded by barren trees and two horses. A black gate prominently drawn in the foreground plane bisects the composition; the strong geometric lines of the triangle effectively counterbalance the red barn. In 1960, the Johnson County, Kansas Mental Health Association commissioned *Touch, Reach and Grasp*. "Fulfilling this request for a

painting," says Blitt, "was the first of many opportunities I would have to give to others through my art."

*Sea Gulls and Ocean*, 1963, recognizing the similarity of the motion of sea gulls' flight and ocean breakers, introduces the bold, expressionistic brush stroke characteristic of Blitt's later work. Her figurative paintings, which have a kinship to the paintings of San Francisco Bay area artists David Park and Elmer Bischoff, attempt to capture the essence of the moment. When Blitt painted *Aspen Hillside*, 1966, she realized how important it was to her for areas of the canvas to be left unpainted.

Blitt felt satisfied, yet ready for a new challenge. "I was puzzled by the ease with which I created my paintings," she recalls. "'Where did they come from?' I wondered. I referred to my experience painting as 'spontaneous combustion.'" In addition, Blitt had become concerned that she was using nature and the human figure only as an excuse to paint. What she may not have fully recognized at that time was an emerging desire to be free of subject matter. Her singular venture into abstract painting in the early 1960s, *Animals in Space*, occurred when the Briarwood School in suburban Kansas City commissioned a mural. Inspired by Russia's Sputnik, the first orbiting satellite, and by colorful fish at the Chicago Aquarium, Blitt unselfconsciously allowed shapes to flow from her inner being, suggesting sculptural forms that would reappear in her work a decade later.

Blitt's life as a sculptor began in 1964, when architect Chris Ramos asked her to create suspended sculptures for East Hills Mall in St. Joseph, Missouri, where she was installing a tripartite mural, *Joys of Life*. At first she declined the architect's request. But then, after some hesitation, she realized she had nurtured a strong desire to make sculpture for many years and accepted the challenge. Blitt was soon experimenting with a variety of materials and finally selected a lightweight perforated sheet metal, which she cut into abstract forms and shaped by hand. The resulting untitled work, suspended from the ceiling, resembled a flock of birds. Each component moved in response to ambient air currents.

Excited by this experience, Blitt could not go back to painting on a flat surface, so she decided to combine painting and sculpture into one art form. After experimenting with papier-mâché and celastic, she covered thin sheets of metal with canvas, which she shaped and suspended from the ceiling. The dangling canvases twirled in space, frustrating her as she boldly painted with abstract expressionist brush strokes. She called these new creations "Paintings in Space" and, later, "Canvas in Space" and gave each a musical title such as *Allegro* or *Crescendo*.

Although the experience of creating sculpture truly liberated Blitt from subject matter, she produced another "Canvas in Space" series of suspended flag sculptures inspired by the beauty of the American flag flying in the wind. One work from this series, now in the collection of the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts, was created in response to the President's assassination. "I gouged, burned, and stabbed into celastic Kennedy's 'Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,'" said Blitt. Although some of these flag sculptures possess an iconographic resonance with paintings by Jasper Johns from the same period, Blitt had not yet seen Johns's flag works when she created hers. In 1976, Blitt returned to flag imagery to celebrate the United States Bicentennial, creating a hanging sculpture, measuring 20 x 10 1/2 feet, out of 1,748 pieces of acrylic. *Flag: 1976*, an official bicentennial project of the State of Kansas, is on permanent view at Oak Park Mall in Overland Park, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri. A color reproduction of this project was included in a time capsule buried in the yard of the

courthouse in Olathe, Kansas. This sculpture was the inspiration for a seven-minute film, *Flag*, 1976, contrasting the sawing, cutting, heating, and shaping of Blitt's acrylic flag with the sewing of the original American flag by Betsy Ross.

In 1977, a 20-foot stainless steel and brass American flag was suspended from the ceiling of the Rockaway Town Square Mall. For this project, Blitt spoke with students in six neighboring schools and invited them to engrave their names on the stars. A plaque near the sculpture shows which star each child signed. One star was buried in a time capsule. In 1978, Blitt's works related to the American flag (sculptures, drawings, torn paper collages, and a painting) were assembled for a one-person exhibition at the Tumbling Waters Museum in Montgomery, Alabama.

After scheduling her first New York gallery exhibition for the spring of 1969 to show "Canvas in Space" works, Blitt had a change of heart. "I began to think the sculptures should be painted with smooth, blended surfaces instead of the gestural strokes I enjoyed making. Also, upset with the lack of perfection of my glued and sewn canvas edges, I decided I had to find a new material for my sculpture or cancel my exhibit."

Searching for a new medium to express her evolving artistic vision, Blitt happened upon a book about acrylic. "The period that followed, " Blitt wrote in 1970, "was filled with exhausting research and experimentation and ended in a rocky romance. I fell in love with acrylic sheeting, often referred to as Lucite or Plexiglas, and rarely used in sculpture at that time. Acrylic, the answer to my problems, was abundant with new ones. I loved it for gracefully responding to my touch when heated and for performing magic with light and shadow, but I despised it for cracking and becoming scratched as I worked. Acrylic demanded skills entirely foreign to me and a precision contrary to my nature. It fought me, frustrated and injured me. But what a thrill...to bend the heated acrylic and suddenly discover the magic moment to stop, let it cool, and be preserved for eternity. To see light play upon the shaped surface! What a challenge working with a material that required spontaneous decisions -- each accident an opportunity for a new discovery."

For her show at the Spectrum Gallery in New York City in 1969, Blitt completed a body of acrylic sculptures, most of them suspended from the ceiling, which she named "Orblitts," uniting the shape of some of the sculptures and the path of their movement in space with her surname. Unbeknownst to Blitt, at the same time she was exploring the potential of acrylic, a group of light and space artists in Los Angeles, such as Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, and Peter Alexander were also employing this material for otherworldly, three-dimensional works, emphasizing light, reflectivity, transparency, and space.

In making *Orblitt I*, 1968, Blitt ordered two identical discs of clear acrylic nearly two feet in diameter and heated them in an oven to make them pliable. As she shaped the first disc, it began to cool and she inadvertently exceeded the stress limits of acrylic tearing open the center of the disc. Surprised by the beauty of the torn edge, she returned the cooled disc to the oven to further soften the material so that she could continue tearing it. She repeated this newly discovered technique with the second disc. To complete the sculpture, Blitt suspended the discs vertically parallel to one another, the shaped edges turning outward from the center. In these paired discs the artist perceived a dialectic of creativity and destruction: the beauty of plastic, its transparency and reflectivity contrasting with the violent results engendered by heat and manipulation. In this seminal work the simplicity and serenity of the circle contrasts with the irregularity of the torn openings, implying that pain is an inevitable companion of joy.

Orblitt I, now in the collection of Charles Price, former Ambassador to the United Kingdom, and Mrs. Price, is emblematic of many of the artist's works. It represents an answer to a particular esthetic challenge and at the same time proposes a solution for what some viewers may perceive as a moral dilemma. This beautiful sculpture, with light reflecting from its surfaces, is moved gently by air currents but, due to the jagged holes in its center, may be understood as threatening, possibly suggesting sociocultural conflicts at the time of the sculpture's fabrication in 1968. While engaged solely in esthetic experimentation and testing the limits of a new material, Blitt created a potent visualization of a turbulent year. In 1973, prior to creating the Oak Park Mall sculptures, Blitt, inspired by a Pablo Picasso exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, briefly experimented with found objects. These sculptures display an exceptional visual sophistication and sensitivity. The most notable among them is *Dance of Destiny*, 1973, a canvas-wrapped ladder, cut and welded to form a pyramid. A primitive broom is placed at the top, while a highly reflective orb hangs from the bottom of the broom in the center of the ladder. Shaped strips of acrylic climb the sides. Three days after completing this work, the *New York Times* printed in its book review section a reproduction of a French print from 1844 that bore a remarkable resemblance to Blitt's new sculpture. This startling coincidence increased her appreciation of serendipity and intuition and fueled her spiritual quest.

Blitt's awareness of her creative nature expanded further via *Lunarblitt XVI*, a reductive work the artist calls her "yellow ball sculpture." This elegant, playful work consists of three components: a polished stainless steel post supporting a concave stainless steel arc with a brushed bottom and highly polished top, supporting a bright yellow aluminum sphere. The sphere appears to be temporarily resting and about to roll up and down the arc. Like an enormous child's toy, this sculpture embodies exuberance and precariousness, engaging and holding the viewer's attention. This work dates from 1975, measures 6 x 5 x 2 feet, and is permanently installed at Oak Park Mall. The artist recognizes *Lunarblitt XVI* as a pivotal work because it increased her understanding of the origins and evolution of her vision. "When I first walked up to my yellow ball sculpture," she remembers, "I said to myself, 'This feels more like me than anything I have ever created.' It had come from a two-inch doodle! It made me realize the doodles I had been discarding all my life were the essence of me." Inspired by this insight and by having read that Alexander Calder started each day producing drawings, Blitt began inscribing her spontaneous lines on 24 x 18-inch drawing pads, instead of backs of envelopes and margins of printed matter. "Quickly marking one page after another, I repeated the same gesture over and over unknowingly simplifying until it felt finished," she said. "My drawings usually came out in a series -- each one becoming more refined than the last. One series ended with a straight line. Another series seemed to have to end with a blank piece of paper. All of this was unselfconscious. I just kept doing what I felt I needed to do. Suddenly, in 1977, I took a conté crayon in each hand and began drawing with two hands at once. At first shocked -- and somewhat embarrassed -- I ultimately knew I had to continue working with both hands in order to feel honest, to feel whole. I felt like I was dancing on paper."

Blitt found that her practice of simultaneous imagery, an activity also discovered by Cubists and Dadaists, in which both hands create at once, eliminates the conscious side of art production. Like the automatic drawing and painting of Dada and Surrealist artists, Blitt uses this reflex-like technique for tapping her unconscious.

For Blitt, practice is as necessary as inspiration. Whatever profound insights might develop from within, and whatever outside influences act on her from the environment and history, this artist, through disciplined exercise, aims to get to the essence of what is true. "I learned

to eliminate all that seemed superfluous," she admits. Her spontaneous line, made with either one hand or two at once proves to be the key to all her works made since 1975.

From 1964 through the time of this writing, Blitt fabricated and sited over forty acrylic, wood, steel, bronze, and aluminum public sculptures in Arizona, California, Colorado, Kansas, Illinois, Florida, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Singapore, and Japan. These sculptures, often heroic in scale, place her in the company of such internationally renowned artists as Louise Nevelson, Beverly Pepper, Alexander Calder, George Rickey, and Mark DiSuvero. "Because I make drawings purely for the love of drawing, before ever considering them as possible sources for three-dimensional works of art," she acknowledges, "I have the satisfaction of knowing that my monumental sculptures -- my 'drawings in space' -- have come from very special moments." One, meticulously transcribed from a right-handed linear improvisation rendered in 1976, is a steel sculpture, 60 feet tall, weighing 4 1/2 tons. Installed in 1984 outside suburban Kansas City's Renaissance office complex, it resembles a candle and the Hindu-Arabic numeral "1." It could also be an effective symbol for the monotheistic beliefs shared by Jews, Christians, and Moslems. However, to Blitt, it speaks of two uniting to make one. Nighttime illumination enhances its authority and mystery. Blitt's 1978 abstract steel sculpture named Nessie, sited at Rockaway Town Square, Rockaway, New Jersey, stands 16 feet tall and, like Blitt's other three-dimensional works, suggests organic life. A construction worker named it "Nessie" after the prehistoric monster that is reputed to inhabit the waters of Loch Ness in Scotland. Its warm hue enhances the form's visual presence. In 1982, this sculpture inspired a children's book entitled Nessie the Sculpture. Blitt's text and drawings inform readers that public sculptures are the realization of an artist's vision and require the collaboration of craftspeople, technicians, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers. To complement the narrative, Blitt designed an easy-to-assemble, two-part, punch-out image of Nessie on the cover of the book so children could construct and erect a sculpture themselves. Among the other Blitt sculptures installed in and around Rockaway Town Square Mall is Stablitt 55. Painted a brilliant yellow, this 26-foot-tall spirited sculpture welcomes patrons at the entrance. It is composed of six separate units piled one on top of the other, each a variation on the circle, one of Blitt's characteristic forms.

Another group of Blitt sculptures is handsomely installed at Bannister Mall in Kansas City, Missouri. Together, fabricated from laminated oak in 1980, effectively communicates ascension. Dancing, a monumental steel figure, measuring 26 x 10 x 5 feet, originated as a 5 x 7-inch drawing. Its yellow hue reinforces the assertive form of the flowing, androgynous figure. This sculpture suggests seduction, joy, and praise. Like many of Blitt's metal and wood sculptures, Dancing has also been fabricated in bronze. Twenty-six-foot-high Trio is fabricated in steel and painted white. Although the three components are clearly abstract forms, it suggests many different images to viewers, such as angels, dancers, nuns, flowers, and the Three Graces. Wishing Tree is also permanently sited at the Bannister Mall. From the branches of this 11-foot-tall-steel structure hang chains of mirrored acrylic discs, each four inches in diameter, on which high school seniors, to whom Blitt lectured, inscribed their names while making a silent wish.

Although the creation of sculpture dominated the seventies and eighties, the practice of drawing continued almost daily as a source of joy and ultimately a fountainhead for sculpture patterns. In 1980, Blitt realized for several years she had been so engrossed in pure black line that she had stopped using color. In response, she forced herself to add color to some of her drawings. She soon became hooked on color again. At first these drawings were lighthearted, perhaps under the influence of Joan Miró and Paul Klee, whom Blitt admired, but the pastels soon took a more serious tone. Placing both hands at the bottom of a 30 x 22

inch sheet of paper, she moved her pencils to opposite sides of the sheet, allowing her hands to meet again at the top center forming a simple slightly pointed oval. When color was added to this magical form, it called forth the imagery of Mark Rothko. The oval seemed to temporarily satisfy the artist's search and consumed her for several years.

For many years Blitt yearned to incorporate sound with her sculptures and in 1980, with the help of percussionist/composer Dr. Michael Udow, she attached harmonically toned metal rods to a 6-foot stainless-steel sculpture entitled *My Friend*. This sculpture becomes a percussive instrument when the metal bars are plucked and set in motion. At a concert in 1984, Blitt heard the music of the Mexican avant-garde composer Mario Lavista. "I was deeply moved by his music and his use of the Chinese poet Li Po's words to introduce it," Blitt recalls, "and I ran backstage to propose a collaboration." This encounter resulted in one of Blitt's most original works, *Orblitt*, 1984. Using an oval drawing pattern and fabricated from laminated purple heartwood, this inverted womb-like form rests on a three-foot tall brass cylinder containing speakers. Electronic sensors and components are hidden nearby. Viewers unknowingly turn on Lavista's music as they approach the sculpture. Another experimental sculpture from this period is *Throne of Serenity*, a chair containing an audiocassette player, which is activated when the seat is occupied.

Because Blitt is so fulfilled by drawing spontaneously, she enjoys encouraging others to also let their hands dance on paper. In achieving the goal of sharing her unique method, Blitt collaborated with Pentacle Productions in the early 1980s on a 25-minute film, *dancing hands: Visual Arts of Rita Blitt* (now marketed as *Creating Drawing and Sculpture with Rita Blitt*), chronicling 20 years of her work. Philip Yenawine, former Director of Education at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, commented: "With quiet control *dancing hands* unfolds the development of Blitt's art, the camera gently playing with her delight in materials and forms in space. The film provides extraordinary insight into an artist's processes." Blitt uses this film in workshops where she has participants draw accompanied by classical music. Blitt asks her students to follow three basic rules: 1) Pretend you are the only person in the room; 2) Work quickly, letting the lines flow, drawing with one or two hands at once; and 3) Let the lines come from deep within you, feeling each line while you work. Workshop participants are amazed by their results.

Perhaps Blitt's most well-known image is her 1984 watercolor *Kindness is Contagious. Catch It!*, a lyrical abstraction in which a yellow orb floats above fluid blue, red, and violet strokes. In the early 1980s Beth Smith, a friend and activist, challenged Blitt to create something "we can send all over the world to make it a better place." "I was honored by this request" said Blitt. "It felt impossible to fulfill, but I very much wanted to do it. Years later, as I drove down the street reading bumper stickers, the words 'Kindness is contagious. Catch It!' popped into my head." Today more than 5,000 posters incorporating Blitt's words and image have been sent all over the world. These words have also generated an international kindness program sponsored by the Kansas City-based Stop Violence Coalition. In 1998, Blitt transformed her watercolor into a 6-foot-tall sculpture, which is installed at Hilton Tokyo Bay in Shiba, Japan.

Desiring to create works for the wall but not wanting to leave sculpture, in 1986 Blitt combined acrylic gel and paste, and with two hands at once made thick gestural lines on masonite. Some of these relief paintings received color, while others were left white. Blitt produced a much admired group of works in this manner, one of which is in the Albrecht-Kemper Museum Collection, St. Joseph, Missouri.

Blitt's 1986 earth-hugging, 7-foot bronze sculpture, *Love*, is located near the entrance to a building in the Renaissance office complex. Despite its reductive shape, it is a powerful visualization of tenderness between two entities. This work calls forth Renaissance paintings of the Madonna and Child as well as modern works by Käthe Kollwitz and Henry Moore. Like frames from a motion picture, reflections of this piece in ground-floor windows suggest a quality of momentarily arrested movement, a prime characteristic of all Blitt's sculptures. Among Blitt's many monumental sculptures, *Inspiration* may be the best known. It is masterfully sited adjacent to the Hillcrest Bank Building on the outskirts of Kansas City. Dating from 1987, this monumental steel sculpture is 26 feet high and 18 feet wide. Four open, hard-edged, curvilinear parts resemble the head, upper torso, abdomen and legs of a dancing woman. She is a full-bodied figure with a distant kinship to the Venus of Willendorf (ca. 25,000-20,000 B.C.E.). Viewed laterally, the sculpture resembles an austere, vertical totem that retains power and majesty. The black facade of the Bank Building, designed by Steve Abend, reflects the surrounding environment, including Blitt's sculpture, which at times appears to be dancing in front of heaps of cumulus clouds. Part of the magic of this sculpture is the way its curves and reductive physical unity harmonize with and balance the architecture's uncompromising rectilinearity and variety of materials.

Blitt presented a 20-inch wood version of *Inspiration* to the government of Norway in 1994 to thank them for bringing together representatives of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization for negotiations that led to a first step toward peace. She also created a lithographic print related to the sculpture in honor of Norway and sent it to all 183 member nations of the United Nations and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The city of Leawood, Kansas, gave a small bronze version of *Inspiration* to I-Lan, its sister city in Taiwan. A 9-foot-tall *Inspiration* will soon be installed at Brandeis University in front of the Women's Research Center.

In 1989, responding to a new sense of freedom provided by enlarged studio space, Blitt allowed her lines to fly off and back onto the paper, leaving connecting lines of paint on the tables where she worked. Challenged to make sculpture from these drawings, even though there was not an obvious form to extract, Blitt began to cut along curving lines which divided the 30 x 22-inch paper into two to four shapes that could be reunited into a rectangle. Blitt made sculptures from these shapes, allowing the viewer to participate creatively in the infinite rearrangement of parts. Later, Blitt began making sculpture by having the parts of the rectangle welded together in various relationships, often repeating some shapes and eliminating others. She called this her *Black Box Series*. For her two-, three- and four-part sculptures inspired by this series, Blitt used several different materials, including wood, aluminum, bronze, stainless and corten steel. Sculptures such as *Fleeting Passion* or *True Love?* (National Museum of Singapore), *Separate But Together* (Aspen Institute, Aspen, Colorado), and *Black Box VI* (Albrecht Kemper Museum, St. Joseph, Missouri) epitomize her ability to successfully play with line and form, unity and variety, geometrical stasis and lyrical movement. In response to Blitt's 1991 solo exhibition at The National Museum of Singapore, Straits Times art critic T.K. Sabapathy wrote, "If Paul Klee dreamt of taking a line for a walk, then Rita Blitt realizes that dream palpably and in the most exhilarating way...The line, however, is not Blitt's only interest. In a number of works collectively referred to as the *Black Box Series*, she immerses herself in pure sculptural preoccupations, namely spatial relationships. *Separate but Together* exemplifies both the fragility and the need for continuing relationships. One leaves this exhibition with satisfaction in having entered a world in which ideas and means have been integrated in expressions which are illuminating and elegant."

In 1990, Blitt knew she had entered an exceptionally strong period of painting when she



realized that her eyes were closing as she painted. She refers to these deeply felt works as her Chi Series. With the free flow of paint, she was able to express the inner forces of life. "I was able to say what I never would have with my eyes open," states Blitt. David Knaus, a screenwriter and longtime friend, has described her Chi paintings in the following manner: "With a paint brush in each hand, she releases powerful thrusts of energy reminiscent of the mystery and power of ocean waves as they strike the rocks on the beach and then dissipate into the air."

During a 1993 voyage Blitt made to Iceland, 17-foot waves rocked the ship from side to side, making many passengers ill. Blitt, however, was energized by the power and motion of the water surging. "I turned my paper to a horizontal position and let the turbulence guide my hand," she recounts. These drawings are the source for her Icelandic sculpture series. From her nonstop practice of drawing since 1976 with conté crayons, ink, and paint, Blitt has developed an especially acute sense of rhythm, space, and intuitive composition. Her dancing lines, Tachist calligraphic signs, which resemble the markings of Cy Twombly, have led to exciting artistic collaborations, most notably with the 1995 performances with the St. Joseph Ballet of Santa Ana, California, and in a program using cutting-edge technology commissioned for the 1996 Olympics, with the Parsons Dance Company and Georgia Institute of Technology in conjunction with the Atlanta Ballet.

Over the years, having filled numerous books with drawings in response to music at concerts, in the summer of 1995 Blitt began making 5 x 6-foot oil-on-canvas paintings while listening to cassettes in her studio. She also turned off the music and created paintings to her own "inner music." While doing these paintings, Blitt realized that in addition to drawing black lines with two hands she could also successfully apply color with two hands. She feels that the natural coordination of body movement allows this to successfully happen.

Before traveling to California for the birth of her granddaughter in December 1995, Blitt painted a canvas measuring 7 feet high by 18 feet wide called Messages to an Unborn Child. Infused with energy and ecstasy following her granddaughter Dorianna's birth in May 1996, she began a series of heroically-scaled canvases, which project universality. Her lyrical gestures, reinforced by a love for the works of Henri Matisse, convey a sense of muscular energy. Pastel washes of thinned oils proclaim a feeling of rapture. According to Bazelel Narkiss, professor of Art History at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, "Blitt's recent art, minimal as it may be, is a swivel, taking you up and around -- a dance, elating and enchanting. The rhythm of her brush strokes seems almost traditional Japanese, but it is not conventional, it is free and emotional."

Returning to these paintings a year later and intimidated by the success of the black lines, Blitt agonized over adding color. Then one night at a concert she noticed blue everywhere in the audience. She exclaimed to herself, "That's it! Blue is the solution!" The next morning she awakened early to a gloriously colored sky. Shortly afterward, Blitt happily added color to her paintings.

Rita Blitt has produced artworks of extraordinary economy and sublime beauty. They emphatically ratify and illustrate the truth of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's reductivist aphorism, "Less is more." Composed for the most part of a very few intense gestural marks, they successfully concentrate the artist's intelligence, feeling, energy, and memory of life history and creative practice into cohesive statements that aid viewers in gaining an insight into the wonders of their own experiences and expectations.