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RITA BLITT, Sculptress

“Connections: Dancing with Their Minds”



CONNECTIONS:

Dancing with Their Minds

Phyllis Westover

"We are at our human finest, dancing with our minds, when we have more than two choices."

Lewis Thomas
The Medusa and the Snail

In the 1930's a boy and a girl grew up near each other in a Kansas City, Missouri, neighborhood. At night, the boy's father, an optician and banjo player, read him to sleep with Greek myths. At age three, the girl began exchanging letter drawings with her grandfather, a New York designer of embroidery flowers. At age nine and again at ten, the girl won scholarships to study Saturdays at the Kansas City Art Institute. The "big boy down the street" became an Eagle Scout. He was absorbed in high school. Then he went to the community college. He thought he might become an engineer. At thirteen, the girl's father drove her to Hallmark's headquarters where, portfolio tucked under arm, she tried to apply for a job as a greeting card designer—she already had nine years of experience making cards for her family and had won the Harry Doehla Greeting Card Contest at age twelve. She thought she might become a commercial artist.

Instead of an engineer, Dr. Othello Dale Smith became a pathologist and life-long learner in the arts and sciences. He mastered color photography; learned classical guitar and paper making; became a potter and sculptor; raised orchids; flew his own plane; studied opera, history, astronomy, comparative religion and cultural myths as illuminated through Jungian psychology and the words of Joseph Campbell; he was a close reader of literature—especially James Joyce. As a lover of music and seemingly every aspect of the humanities, the term "Renaissance man" frequently came to rest on this man of exceptional zest and knowledge.

Instead of a commercial artist, Rita Blitt became a fine artist of international reputation. Her paintings, drawings and sculpture are exhibited in parks, malls, public buildings, museums and galleries in the United States and foreign countries. As a lover of music, dance, literature and art forms of many cultures, Blitt's interests heighten her passionate concern for world peace and celebrating the common vibrant cord in life. *Joie de vivre* leaps from her work on paper and canvass and in wood,

acrylic and metal.

What is the "habit of mind" of the Rita Blitts and Dale Smiths that embraces life with joy and rigor, sparkling creativity in many forms—experimenting, absorbing, dancing on the edge of "what if"?

In talking with Dr. Betty Barker Smith, I asked her what through her marriage with Smith she may have observed as the source of his many highly developed interests and skills.

"The earliest source of Dale's love of music and myths—the most enduring interests all his life—surely was his father," she told me. "But there was another important person. During World War II, Dale was a bomber pilot in the Army Air Corps. His navigator had gone to St. John's College in Maryland which has an outstanding curriculum in the classics. Their conversations were a great intellectual stimulus to Dale.

"After the war," Barker Smith continued, "Dale went to medical school at the University of Kansas. His first general practice was in Hill City, Kansas. Later he did a residency in pathology at Menorah Hospital in Kansas City and received a fellowship to study pathology at Hammersmith Hospital in London. He returned to teach pathology at KU and then went on to establish the Pathology Department at Baptist Hospital in Kansas City where he stayed until his retirement."

"He did all this professionally while steeping himself in the arts and humanities?" I asked.

"Yes, but not all at once. Dale had a rich background of interests and over time different interests were drawn forward to become highly focused foreground. When Dale was forty-six, he was into guitar. He and his physician friend Bill Mundy, studied classical guitar with Walter Fritschy from the University of Missouri in Kansas City Conservatory of Music. Both Dale and Bill were instrumental in developing further interest in classical guitar in Kansas City."

I asked Dr. Mundy about this "guitar period."

"Learning to play the classical guitar is hard enough," Mundy said, "but Smitty even *built* his own guitar! And it sounded good!

"To honor Walter Fritschy," Mundy told me, "Smitty and I began bringing to Kansas City distinguished classical guitarists—Christopher Parkening, Jorge Morel and others—for concerts at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. With the money we raised, we established at the Conservatory the Fritschy Guitar Archives of guitar music.

"Smitty," Mundy noted, "had a voracious appetite for knowledge. He soaked it up like a sponge—it was the energy that charged his batteries. He lived for learning, doing and teaching."

Lifetime friend of Smith's, Dr. Walter Gunn, also recalls the guitar period: "Dale showed me his guitar. It looked letter perfect by my standards, but Dale wasn't satisfied—said the frets weren't right so he took it apart and did it all over again."

"Did Dale have that kind of tenacity about everything?" I asked Gunn.



Dr. O. Dale Smith

—Betty Barker Smith

"Yes, I remember some years ago, Dale called me at 5:00 one evening and said he needed thirty minutes of help if I were free. He wanted to get his new telescope out of the box and set it up. By 8:00 p.m. Dale had it all assembled, working and was studying the moon and Saturn. Then he mounted his camera on the telescope, took pictures, ran in to develop the film in his dark room—and this was colored film before it was that easy to develop—and by 9:00 p.m. had 8" x 10" prints of the moon and Saturn. That was Dale!"

I asked Gunn where he thought Smith's energy and fascination with trying things out came from.

"Maybe his father," Gunn said. "With the outbreak of World War II his father took a job with Pratt and Whitney—the makers of very effective engines for military aircraft. He had a workshop at home and was precision in action. We liked to watch him work. His father also was a 'ham' radio operator and had a lot of interests. Dale and I used to play together—our backyards adjoined. I was three years older than Dale, but that never made any difference—except that later I was able to give Dale his first plane ride and flying lesson."

"Tell me about that."

"I'd already embarked on a career in flying and had access to a two-place training plane. Dale was eighteen and had just signed up for the Army Air Corps. We spent all day flying to Wichita—at 100 mph. Fifty feet in the air, I gave Dale the controls. We practiced six landings in Lawrence and one in Emporia where we stopped for fuel.

"The next year, Dale made Captain and became a squadron leader of B17s in the Eighth Air Force. One mission, his plane and co-pilot were pretty badly shot up. The co-pilot struggled a half-hour with his injuries before dying. While working to get the plane back, Dale tried to help the co-pilot and keep him from the controls. Dale received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

"Dale was a humanitarian with great concern for others. Frequently, he was a counselor for his friends."

Throughout his life Smith took courses at Kansas City area colleges and universities. He was elected to the Charter Board of Trustees of Johnson County Community College in 1967 and served on the College's Board eight years. He is recognized as a guiding power in the College's conceptual foundation.

"When Dale retired part-time in 1986," Barker Smith told me, "he studied pottery at Johnson County Community College and began throwing pots and experimenting with glazes. Within a year, we had a kiln in our garage, and Dale had some outstanding pieces. In 1988, a friend got him interested in wood sculpture, and Dale set up a workshop in our basement. Again, he produced some impressive work, but arthritis was hurting his hands, so he had to give up both pottery and sculpture. In 1990, he began studying the art of paper-making."

"Was Dale fully retired then?"

"Yes, and in 1991 we bought the Baldwin City property. Dale wanted to be away from the lights of the city so he could return to his study of astronomy which had been an interest since 1971—and we both liked the stimulation of being near Baker University where I was serving on the Board of Trustees. Dale incorporated an observatory into his design of our new home, as well as

a studio for art work. It was a rich time for Dale when, in addition to his new pursuits in architecture and landscaping, he could enjoy past interests.

"For a ten year period Dale followed Joseph Campbell," Barker Smith told me, "absorbing all his books and tapes, studying with him at Esalen Institute, and attending Campbell's talks in Kansas City sponsored by the Friends of Jung on whose board Dale later served."

It was following a lecture by Joseph Campbell in the mid-eighties that Rita Blitt and Dale Smith became acquainted. I talked with Blitt about her acquaintance with Smith.

"When we were young," Blitt told me, "seven years was too big a difference in age to be really friends. Dale was always 'the big boy down the street.' But as adults we discovered so many common interests—mythology, care of the earth and, of course, the arts and music. Dale and Betty enjoyed having concerts at their home for friends, just as my husband, Irwin, and I did. Following a concert at their house, we saw Dale's sculpture and pottery, and I was impressed with his innate ability.

"But what struck me most of all was Dale's creative energy—his courage and desire to create! Since the '70s. I've become more and more impressed with the need adults have to create. And here was Dale doing just that in so many ways! He wasn't afraid of making a 'mistake.' He truly wanted to know what would happen if you tried this or that, and he was so exhilarated!"

"Tell me about your background and experience with creating," I asked Blitt.

"I've been experimenting with spontaneous, free-form drawing as long as I can remember," Blitt told me, "but certain people have been important in encouraging me at crucial points. My fifth grade teacher encouraged me to write, and then I had a wonderful time creating stories and poems which I illustrated. I'm sure it was because of this teacher that during the time I was teaching nursery and kindergarten children, I involved them in many creative activities."

"Did you teach long?"

"No, just in the early years of Irwin's and my marriage. After high school I went first to the University of Illinois and then completed my Bachelor's degree from Kansas City University, the forerunner of the University of Missouri at Kansas City. Then while attending the Kansas City Art Institute part-time, I taught. But following the birth of our daughter in 1955, I was very focused at home. I didn't do any work or create again until my daughter was two, and then I returned to my

own art work. In the late '50s, I made the conscious decision to become the best artist I could become.

"It was easy to become discouraged professionally in those early years. I remember in the '60s Irwin looked me straight in the eye and said, 'You can do it.' My husband and daughter have always been important to my art work. Not only have they encouraged me, they've helped me manipulate materials, set up exhibits and always they make me feel it's O.K. that I do my work as an artist."

"Did you begin your professional work with your black and white line drawings?"

"No, at the Kansas City Art Institute I was working in oils and having some very rewarding experiences with painting—which is interesting, since after years of being away from painting, I've just this summer begun to paint again, and I'm loving it!"

"What happened in between?"

"In the 60s I was painting murals for a shopping mall in St. Joseph when the architect asked me to do a three dimensional piece to work around a particular design problem. I'd been very drawn to do sculpture. On the way home I bought clothesline wire to begin experimenting immediately.

"In my early sculptural work, I wrapped canvass around metal forms and painted the canvass. Then I experimented with new materials—plexiglass, acrylic, metals, wood—and had to learn whole new ways of creating."

"When did you begin your line drawings and ribbon sculptures?"

"Both began as doodle designs in the '70s. I had been in the habit of doodling while talking on the telephone. One of these small doodles became a design for a sculpture. Then in 1975, I made an important discovery that changed my way of creating. While standing beside what I call 'my yellow ball sculpture' in Oak Park Mall, I felt such a special affinity with it, and I thought, 'This sculpture came from a tiny doodle. My doodles must be the essence of me!' From that time on, I stopped doodling. Instead, I bought large drawing pads on which drawings poured out. Everything I have done from that point on comes from spontaneous drawing. It is my way of knowing that the work I put out in the world is honest and comes from deep within me—or through me."

"Tell me more about that process. What do you see as the source of your drawings?"

"Originally, my grandfather's embroidery designs inspired me, but certainly nature—trees, movement of water, flags in the wind—and always dance and music.

When I was young, I tap danced, but I had to give it up when I was ten due to bad knees. Now I feel when I draw or paint that I am dancing to music on paper."

"Is music and dance related to your using two hands to draw and paint?"

"Perhaps. The first time I did it was in 1977. I was drawing to music in New York. I just reached for another crayon and began using two hands. I thought I've got to have two hands to feel whole. Using two hands was also a way of echoing shapes. Creating my black and white line paintings requires my becoming very centered. Often, I work with my eyes closed."

Photographer Nancy Bundt writes of her experience photographing Rita Blitt in an afternoon of collaboration between the art of photography and the art of painting:

"I felt I was watching a Zen Master at work. She concentrated, seemed to meditate, and then, suddenly a painting was created. It was swift. Like one sudden wind. I could hardly get one shot done in one painting. I took out the smaller camera with a motor drive that could shoot 6 frames per second. Only then did I get many shots of one painting being created. It seemed to happen in another time frame. Separate from normal reality. Photography can take you there, too. It was like dancing to the same music with different steps."

Blitt writes of this experience, "I was shocked that at the end of the afternoon of producing an entire new body of work while Nancy photographed, I felt totally exhilarated, whereas I had begun the process feeling exhausted."

In reflecting on her experience with creating, Blitt says, "In the '60s, painting for me was like spontaneous combustion. I was very puzzled about where the energy and creative impulse came from in me. Now I totally accept that the unknown is working through me, and I am content to let it be a mystery. I accept the magic and beauty and wonder of life without trying to figure it all out. I've become comfortable relying on my

intuition. The thought 'Art is the link between man and God' has often been with me this summer."

In the 1984 documentary film, *dancing hands: Visual Arts of Rita Blitt*, both the lyrical, imaginative grace of Blitt's work and her focused, graceful movement in creating is illuminated.

"My greatest hope for the film," Blitt says, "is that it will encourage adults to experiment with their creativity, to let their hands just dance on paper, to be themselves, to have their work look like their own—not some outside standard. I feel creating is as important to life as breakfast."

"I know you also have deep concerns about building better relations between peoples. How do you find the time to be active in these issues, too?"

"For a long time," Blitt told me, "I had a lot of guilt about devoting myself to art which I love when my family had always been so involved in charitable work. But I hoped I could give to the world through art."

And so Blitt has. A friend and civic leader in Kansas City said to Blitt, "I wish you would create some-

thing we could send all over the world to make the world a better place to live in—remember 'Kilroy was here?'"

Blitt reports that driving along reading bumper stickers, the words "Kindness is contagious. Catch it!" came to her—words now part of 5,000 posters with one of Blitt's lilting red, blue and yellow brush stroke designs. Through a network of friends working to "Stop violence," the "Kindness Program" in Kansas City area schools was initiated. Children nominate candidates to receive the annual Kindness Award—teachers, counselors and others who through their kindness have made a difference in the life of school children. The winner receives a Blitt sculpture, and each child who writes a nomination letter receives a "Kindness" poster. The Kindness Program is now in 300 Kansas City area schools, 30 states and Canada. In addition, Blitt has sent posters to friends and other public institutions all over the world. "I like to think," she says, "that the posters are planting seeds of kindness."

In 1994 when Norway successfully brought Israel and the PLO together for talks that resulted in a peace



Rita Blitt

—Nancy Bundt

agreement, Blitt was greatly moved. "I never thought I would see this in my lifetime," she said. As an expression of gratitude, Blitt arranged to present to Norway's Ambassador to the UN a smaller version of "Inspiration," the large metal sculpture selected for the cover and cover story of *Art in Architecture*. The PLO and each of the 183 member nations of the UN received a lithograph print related to the sculpture and a

sculpture of Blitt's will be permanently installed on Baker's new north campus. The exhibit and sculpture will commemorate and celebrate the life of Dr. O. Dale Smith.

In the spring of 1994, Dale Smith completed a syllabus for an astronomy course he was scheduled to teach at Baker University in the fall. On May 10th, Smith and a fellow astronomer set up a telescope on the town square of Fort Scott, Kansas, from where the annular eclipse of the sun that day was 99 per cent visible. Smith invited passersby to look with him and explained what was happening. That evening at sunset, he died of a heart attack while mowing his lawn on his tractor mower. For many this came as a puzzling shock since, given Smith's background in medicine and investigative mind, he would have known his condition.

"Dale was very concerned about quality of life," Barker Smith told me. "He had seen how profoundly prolonged disease had affected his father and family. He made a conscious choice to die quickly of heart disease. Angioplasty might have made his heart outlast his brain, and Dale did not want the aging process to affect his intellectual life which for him was quality of life. He died instantly, the way he wanted to."

In its nerve and verve and imaginative use of positive and negative shapes and space, Rita Blitt's fall exhibit at Baker University will be a fitting celebration and tribute to the life of Dr. O. Dale Smith. It will be a celebration of life lived with rigor and joy, a tribute to the creative impulse—life energized by learning, experimenting, producing and giving knowledge and beauty to others. It will be a tribute to the habit of mind Lewis Thomas salutes in saying, "We are at our human finest, dancing with our minds, when we have more than two choices," ...when with freedom and exhilaration we explore the riches of the universe and mysteries deep within us, creating our own unique statements of what it means to be alive a little while on Earth.



Rita Blitt: Wall Sculpture

—Michael Zagalik

"Kindness" poster.

Like Dale Smith, Rita Blitt acts on her ideas, intuition and joy. Both, in the words of Joseph Campbell, have "followed their bliss" to fulfillment and success. From the early days of discouragement, Blitt has come a long way with one-person exhibits, significant placement of works and collaborations with other artists—composer Mario Lavista, the Parsons Dance Company, the Dr. Billy Taylor Jazz Trio and the St. Joseph Ballet Company.

In 1994, a retrospective exhibit of Blitt's work from 1969 to the present opened at the Kennedy Museum of Ohio University in Athens. The exhibit will travel to additional locations.

This September 26th, a new exhibit of Rita Blitt's work opens at Baker University's Parmenter Hall Gallery in Baldwin City, Kansas. Through the generosity of Rita Blitt and Dr. Betty Barker Smith, a large metal

