

"Political Issues in the Work of Rita Blitt"

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I met Rita Blitt a few years ago when, as a gesture of appreciation for a talk I gave, she offered to send me a drawing. This interaction stood out in my mind, for no one had ever given me a drawing after a talk. Her gift seemed original and appealing. My curiosity led me to want to learn more about Rita Blitt and her art.

We corresponded occasionally but did not meet again until several years later, when she told me she would be visiting the Boston area. In the interim, I had founded the International Research Institute on Jewish Women, located at Brandeis University. The purpose of the Institute (IRIJW), which is unique in the world, is to study Jewish women in all times and places, using all the disciplines.

Rita came to Boston and I took the opportunity to ask her if she expressed being a Jewish woman through her art. At first, Rita responded that the connection was unclear. True, her mother had been extremely active in Hadassah (the women's Zionist organization of America) as Rita was growing up. Did her mother's activism and Zionist passion filter into Rita's art? Or did they represent a contrast with Rita's decision to pour her energies into making art rather than healing social ills? Was it her family's more general commitment to Jewish concerns, rather than anyone's specific causes, that formed a context for Rita's artistic expression?

Our discussions led Rita to pose several key questions. Is Jewish art any art produced by a Jewish artist, regardless of content?

Is Jewish art any art product that focuses on a specifically Jewish theme? Where does the Jewishness lie -- in the artist or in the art? These remain unanswered but compelling questions.

Rita Blitt is not an ideologue. She does not draw or sculpt to hammer home a point. Yet she is politically engaged and has treated numerous "political issues" in her work. As a child of 11, she was troubled by the way whites oppressed blacks in this country. Perhaps her early works depicting African Americans became her way to express distress and to motivate others to change. These childhood fantasies are not so strange. As a child of 10, in 1956, I remember dreaming that I met Khrushchev and (almost) convinced him to make peace with the United States.

Another theme in Rita Blitt's work also concerns injustice -- the Holocaust. It is the rare Jew who has no family ties to the Holocaust. Nearly every Jewish person alive today has learned something about this tragic unprecedented slaughter, so that every Jew's view of the world is necessarily shaped by that knowledge. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that an early political theme in Rita Blitt's art was the Holocaust and concentration camps, as expressed in the paintings *I Shall Never See Another Butterfly* (1966), which was inspired by the creative works of children at Theresienstadt, and *Exodus* (1960).

The senseless killing of American hero and president John F. Kennedy, was another political subject that motivated Rita to make art. The world was supposed to have become a safer place after the Holocaust. To depict the horror of the assassination, Rita used violent

methods. She gouged, stabbed and burned the words of Kennedy's famous plea, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" onto a celastic American flag she had produced. This work is now in the collection of the Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston.

In 1957, Russia launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite. While most Americans interpreted the Russian accomplishment as a threat, the seemingly limitless possibilities of outer space exploration freed Rita's imagination to create the mural *Animals in Space?* (1965) in fulfillment of a commission for Briarwood Elementary School, Prairie Village, Kansas.

In 1975, news accounts accusing the CIA of murders and reports of the United Nations' passage of a resolution equating Zionism with racism seemed to signal a world gone mad. (The resolution was condemned unanimously by UN members in 1991.) Blitt's response was a work titled *Struggle for Survival* (1976), in which she wrapped a Star of David, symbol of the State of Israel and of the Jewish people, in barbed wire. Jews during the Holocaust were literally enclosed in barbed wire, and now it seemed that Israel was similarly bound. A viewer of *Struggle for Survival* (now in the collection of the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles) has the impulse to free the sculpture, to let the art go free, as we should let people live in freedom.

How should patriotic Americans relate to another country, be it Italy or Israel or Ireland? Should the attachment of ethnic groups to their countries of origin be a symbol of unreliability? Is it a problem? It certainly was during World War II, when the United States government interned Japanese citizens. Rita addressed this dilemma head on by producing an acrylic sculpture composed of two connected flags, Israeli and American. Titled *Not Dual Loyalty but Extended Love* (1975), from a quote by Gerda Klein, it suggests a peaceful way of looking at international relations.

No matter what kinds of resolutions the United Nations adopts, the Middle East remains a volatile, dangerous political arena. Most of the conflicts focus on Israel. The Gulf War, however, was ostensibly a conflict between Iraq and Kuwait that went on to engulf many world powers. In 1991, the United States and the United Nations issued an ultimatum to Iraq with a specific deadline. Americans watched the clock tick toward war. Blitt's series of triptychs, *In Fear of War* (1991), convey her anguish at the thought of another confrontation.

Finally, in 1993, a dove bearing an olive branch appeared in the skies. Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization took their first steps toward peace through the intervention and diplomatic leadership of Norway. Hope was in the air, and Rita Blitt wanted to express gratitude and relief in her own way. Using her massive sculpture *Inspiration* (1989) as a model, she produced a small wooden version as a gift to the government of Norway. She also produced a special-edition print in honor of Norway's peacemaking role; each country in the United Nations was presented with one of the prints as a reminder to reach out and aid others locked in conflict.

The streets of cities and towns in the United States, the richest country in the world, are "littered" with mentally impaired, alcoholic, drug addicted, and outright rejected human beings. Rita Blitt was devastated by the sight of the homeless at Grand Central Station in New York City. The vision of utter hopelessness inspired a drawing which she later translated into an acrylic sculpture, *Inner Torment*, 1989.

Jews are supposed to take care of others in need. We are instructed to "repair the world," to

bring people into our homes, to remember that we too were homeless and wandered for 40 years. In our history we have been forced to leave countries in which we have settled -- Spain, England, and Germany, for example -- while being barred from countless others. Our experience forces us to take on the responsibility of helping others. Blitt's Inner Torment evokes the image of one person caring for another. Like mother and child, a basic image of human relatedness, adults must take care of vulnerable people, one on one, for in the process of supporting others, we are supported as well.

People react individually to works of art. In Hebrew there is a saying for this phenomenon, "Taste and smell are two things you cannot argue about." No one is right or wrong, when it comes to taste. Either you like it or you don't. I like Rita Blitt's art a great deal. Perhaps I react as I do because of my love for movement and dance. But I also resonate to her courage. The willingness to make and display art reveals one's naked self to anyone who wishes to look. I find the sweeping lines of Blitt's paintings and sculptures playful yet strong, the movement light yet definite. I find these same characteristics admirable in people.

In a way that is almost naive, Rita Blitt attempts to change the world by offering art that is pleasing and accessible. As we probably all want to do, she encourages everyone to engage in simple gestures of kindness, gentleness, and honesty. She inspires us to care. For most of us, these aspirations are mere dreams. For Rita Blitt, they are the wellsprings of action and artistic expression.