

THE ASPEN TIMES

WEEKEND: Rita Blitt B5

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www.theaspen-times.com • July 20-22, 2012

weekend

What's my line?

Rita Blitt to be honored by Red Brick Center for the Arts



Stewart Oberheim | The Aspen Times

Rita Blitt

- Red Brick Council for the Arts Artist Tribute & Benefit Dinner
- Tuesday, July 24 at 6 p.m.
- Red Brick Center for the Arts, Aspen

Rita Blitt to be honored by Aspen's Red Brick Center for the Arts

JULY, 20 2012

[STEWART OKSENHORN](#)

THE ASPEN TIMES

ASPEN, CO COLORADO

ASPEN — Rita Blitt has been concentrating on things other than making drawings, paintings and sculptures the last few weeks. She has been taking a ceramics class at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center with her daughter and granddaughter, mostly as a way to get in some family time. And she has been occupied with an event in her honor, the Red Brick Council for the Arts' Artist Tribute & Benefit Dinner, which will be held on Tuesday at the Red Brick Center for the Arts in Aspen. The event includes an exhibition of Blitt's work currently showing in the west wing of the Red Brick Gallery.

So on Thursday morning, Blitt woke up at around 5:30 a.m. and, while listening to Rachmaninoff, she picked up some of her own instruments, pencil and paper. "I've been denying myself that this summer," Blitt said behind her home on the lower part of Red Mountain, on a lawn whose landscape includes views of the local mountains and several of Blitt's large-scale sculptures. "I missed drawing. I missed music."

Drawing is so fundamental to Blitt because she believes that what comes out in her work is her essence. From as early as she can remember, Blitt was drawing and painting, and she always had natural talent: At the age of 10 she earned a scholarship to attend her hometown Kansas City Art Institute, then won another scholarship the following year. Early on in her career, Blitt would have moments when something special would happen — not just nice pieces being made, but something closer to a revelatory experience

In 1975, those moments became something more solid, a realization that would guide her art up to the present. Blitt's husband, Irwin, was developing the East Hills shopping mall in St. Joseph, Mo., when the architect who had inherited the job noticed a tall post in the mall. He asked Rita to make a piece that would cover the post. Blitt had minimal experience as a sculptor at that point, but she had begun taking notice of the work of a sculptor in the area. "I was worshipping it. My stomach churned with excitement when I saw his work," she recalled.

Out of some hardware-store metal, and using simple drawings she had made previously, Blitt made a piece that hung 26 feet off the ground, with lines reminiscent of bird shapes. And with that, Blitt came into her own as an artist.

"I realized these doodles I'd been doing my entire life and throwing them in the wastebasket, were me, the essence of who I am," Blitt said. "After I saw the sculpture installed, I told Irwin, 'This is the essence of me.'"

The experience crystallized Blitt's vision. "If I was going to continue putting art into the world, it had to be art that was unique to me. Things that no one else could have made," Blitt, a small woman with big, soft hands and a lighthearted demeanor, said. She got six 18 by 24 pads and got busy drawing. "It was the first time I allowed myself to put my spontaneous lines on good paper. And when those six pads were full, I bought six more. I woke up every morning and let lines flow from me till there was no more paper in the house."

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Blitt's artistic awakening began, she suspects, when she was 3, and became aware of the embroidered flower designs her grandfather made in New York. At the bottom of the designs he would include a little line drawing. In preschool, Blitt would copy those drawings then eventually began doing her own. In first grade, the art teacher who dropped in every month or so held up Blitt's drawing — an umbrella with people under it — for everyone to see. She took the scholarship opportunities offered by the Kansas City Art Institute, and at college, first at the University of Illinois, then at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, she made art her course of study.

In the '50s, Blitt's imagery often centered around dancers, music and nature. Which doesn't seem much different from now, when she counts as her biggest influences concerts at the Aspen Music Festival, various dance performances, and the mountain views out her windows. But those subjects have taken on a different kind of life since Blitt's mid-'70s breakthrough.

"I knew I was only using nature and realism as an excuse to paint," Blitt said of her early years. "It wasn't really the subject matter than was moving me. It was the line and shape. Getting into sculpture freed me from subject matter. Once I started playing with shapes, that led me into experimenting with abstract forms."

Where Rothko, whom Blitt cites as among her favorites, had colors, Blitt has lines, which are central in all her work. "I realized the importance of my work was my line. My line, inspired by nature and music," she said. "Those lines come out from deep within me. Not preconceived. I just open myself up and let it happen."

As a child, Blitt often drew trees and, when she was in fifth grade, her teacher gathered a few of the more creative students to her house to talk art and poetry. The teacher spoke about trees, and the lessons from that conversation remain with Blitt: She sees her lines as an extension of the tree branches she drew long ago.

“I feel the roots from the bottom all the way up,” she said. “I feel the growing start from the roots. I didn’t just stick on a branch; I had to come honestly out of something. If I know my lines are not honest, I quit for the day. Because I didn’t want to put out anything that wasn’t deep within me.”

Blitt’s lines have served her well; her work has been exhibited extensively around the world and her sculpture “Inspiration” earned a prize at the Florence Biennale in 2005. Aspen, where she has spent time since 1960 and owned a home since 1976, has figured prominently in her career. One of her early solo exhibitions was in 1978, at Tom and Donna Ward’s Gargoyle Gallery. In 1992, the Aspen Institute had a solo exhibition of her work; two sculptures – “I Do,” a 6-foot piece between Paepcke Auditorium and the Benedict Music Tent, and “Together,” by the Boettcher Center, are still in place. Much of her inspiration comes from the Aspen Music Festival – “It brings me to tears,” she said of the festival – and last year, her drawing “Rhythmic Nature” appeared on the cover of the Music Festival’s season program, as well as on t-shirts and banners.

Spontaneity has become engrained in Blitt’s way of working. About a decade ago, Blitt was corresponding with choreographer David Parsons, to see if the two could collaborate. It turned out they would have two days of overlapping free time in New York City. With little time to plan, Blitt gathered the members of Parsons’ company in a studio with her paint and canvases and a film crew.

“I wanted to show that my painting and David’s dances were the same. That movement and lines were the same,” she said. “I painted, the dancers responded, I responded to them – totally spontaneous.” The sessions resulted in “Caught in Paint,” a six-minute documentary that was screened in over 130 film festivals.

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Decades ago, an art historian whom Blitt respected highly advised Blitt to put her creative career on the highest pedestal. “If you really cared about your work, you’d create every day,” she recalls being told. But Blitt at the time didn’t necessarily see herself as a career artist, and still defined herself as much by the volunteer activities she did as the drawings she made.

“But he was an art historian, so I listened,” she said. “That gave me permission to really care about my art. To create every day. Then I had guilt about not doing volunteer work. So I said, ‘I hope someday I can give to the world through my art.’”

Which she has been doing. In recent years, Blitt has slowed down on being an everyday artist; she does sculptures not only on commission, and mostly large-scale works, at least six feet in height. She doesn’t care to surround herself with her own art anymore – her Aspen home is filled with her pieces – and instead has busied herself with giving the work away. A rehabilitation center in Vermont and a charity hospital in Kansas City have been the recipients of large bodies of Blitt’s work.

In 1964, Blitt was asked to make a mural for a grade school. It was to be big – 4 by 10 feet – and she could put in it whatever she wanted. The space race between the U.S. and Soviet Union was on full throttle, and penetrated Blitt’s thinking when she painted “Animals in Space.”

“It was the time of Sputnik; I was inspired by thoughts of outer space,” she said. “I made forms, totally abstract, totally imaginative. I was so proud of it.” Blitt pinpoints it as one of the early moments of getting her essence into her art.

Blitt reflects for a moment on something she was once told – that an artist repeats the same ideas, over and over throughout their lives, in different forms. She isn’t sure she buys the idea, until she thinks about her own career.

“The trees, responding to music – isn’t that the same thing as today?” she said. “It’s these spontaneous lines, these dancing lines, responding to movement, movement in nature, movement in dance.”

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Courtesy of the artist



Courtesy of the artist

Rita Blitt's "Harnessed Love," acrylic on canvas, 2011.