

Rita Blitt, *Confluence*, located in front of the administration building at Washburn University, 16', 2017



Rita Blitt

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## RITA BLITT

Visual Artist | Painter | Sculptor | Film Collaborator

Place of Birth: Kansas City, Missouri

Current Location: Leawood, Kansas &

San Francisco Bay Area

Age: 91

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**I WOULD LOVE** to see the arts and artists supported as much as possible. Art feeds the soul.

**O**ne of the most significant developments in my life as an artist occurred in the 1970s, when I was in my forties. I began drawing continuously every morning, realizing that my spontaneous lines were the essence of me, letting the works flow as long as there was still paper in the house. On this particular morning, I was drawing and probably had music in the background. All of a sudden, I picked up two Conté crayons instead of one. I was feeling so free. I drew with both hands at once. I was terribly shocked. I wrote in the lower right-hand corner of several drawings, “Two hands.” I remember being startled and feeling like a circus act.

Shortly after this experience, my drawings were on hold during an installation of one of my sculptures. When I went back to drawing, which I vividly remember, I drew with one hand, and I felt awful. I felt awkward. I needed to draw with both hands to feel honest and whole.

I proceeded to work exclusively with two hands.

In 1981, I was drawing with two hands, starting at the bottom with my hands together in the center and then reaching outwards to the sides and up to the top. The shape created from this movement was an oval. After adding pastel colors and sharing the work with a friend, I shocked myself by saying, “This is what I have been searching for all these years. Why have I been dancing all over the page?” My *Oval* thus was born.

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Rita painting with two hands  
in the late 1990s

This series contained some of my most important creations. Those works are very spiritual. After a few years, I realized that working with two hands was making me a more centered human being. This was an amazing and thrilling revelation.

After many years devoted to the oval, I returned to working with one hand, using either one hand or two as desired. In recent years, when beginning a new painting, I sometimes wonder if I have an obligation to pass on to the viewer the feeling of calm that comes from my own centering when creating with two hands at once.

**A**nother important moment was in 1988 when I was close to age sixty. I was painting with two hands, and all of a sudden, I realized my eyes were closing as I worked. At first, I was startled. But then I decided to accept this new development in my process and not fight it like I did when I began working with two hands at once eleven years earlier. I realized that, like a musician performing at a concert, my eyes closed because my emotion is so deep while I'm painting.

My body is very much part of my creative experience. When I create, it's movement. It's dance. My whole body is involved. I've become more and more aware of how important music is in my life.

**T**hinking about music and dance makes me want to talk about the 1990s, a very creative period, when I was in my sixties and seventies. Those years were so important for me. I was drawing every morning and "letting my hands dance on paper," until 1996, when my granddaughter Dorianna was born. During her first two months, my husband and I devoted ourselves to assisting our daughter Chela with her baby and loving every moment of it. I became so obsessed with Dorianna that it should have been no surprise when I returned to painting, wanting to dance across the eleven-foot-wide canvas with joy, that I made a painting that shocked me by its subtle reference to birth. This ushered in a new period of large, unusually strong paintings.

In 2000, following the publishing of the book *Rita Blitt: The Passionate Gesture*, while still drawing and painting, I became very involved with films that were an organic extension of my art. The films I collaborated on provide an integration of my art with music and dance. The collection *Rita Blitt: Visions of My World* includes nine of my films of

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creative inspiration. The film *Caught in Paint*, which was invited to over one hundred and thirty film festivals internationally and received sixteen awards, features David Parsons and the Parsons Dance Company. During filming, I painted on four-by-eight-foot transparent surfaces while the dancers are seen through the painting making movements along with my paint strokes. The photographer Lois Greenfield captured this creative and magical energy. It has been said that to understand the art of Rita Blitt, one should view the film *Caught in Paint*.

**A**nother significant part of my career is the Kindness Program. In the early 1980s, my friend and Kansas City activist Beth Smith stopped me as I was crossing a bridge in Aspen and said, “I wish you could create something we could send all over the world to make the world a better place.” I was quite flattered that she thought I could do such a thing, but it seemed impossible; how could I send something all over the world, and what could it be? Five years later, these words came into my mind: “Kindness is Contagious. Catch it!”

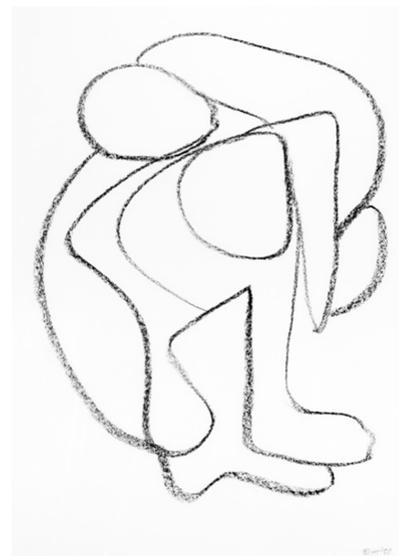
It may seem unbelievable now, but at the time, it took a lot of courage to talk about kindness. I was afraid to embarrass myself. What would people think? Still, I felt it so deeply and cared so much that I pursued it. Now, everybody talks about kindness, and I’m thrilled.

In 1990, the Kindness Program was created to encourage kind and compassionate acts of humanity all over the world. The program is now managed by Synergy Services and is more localized to the Kansas City area. There is an annual essay contest with thousands of students submitting an essay nominating their favorite person for the annual Kindest Kansas Citian Award. There is also the Rita Blitt Kindest School Award. I created small sculptures to give to the three kindest Kansas Citians and a large sculpture to give to the recipient of the Kindest School Award.

It’s a wonderful thing that has resulted! I witnessed how so much creativity goes into making a school a kind place. I feel that everybody who enters the competition becomes more conscious of kindness, which means a great deal to me.

**I**’m continuing to grow, following my deepest inspirations, and enjoying what I’m doing. It takes total concentration, practice, and devotion. I’ve always had a push within to grow and be the best artist I

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Rita Blitt, *Inner Torment*, drawing with Conté crayon, 22" x 30", 2016

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can become. This is not about being famous, but rather owing this to myself.

I'm currently working on a film related to drawings I made in the 1990s. I drew during a concert of Kodo drummers from Japan. I filled two drawing notebooks in response to the music. Ever since then, I've been wanting to create something more with those drawings. I love them. I didn't want them to just go into my Legacy Collection at the Mulvane Museum as closed books. Right now, I'm doing a film using about forty of those drawings. The film should be finished soon if all goes well. It's a short film, but it has filled me with the satisfaction of doing something that for a long time I have really wanted to do. The finished film will be called *The Sun Still Shines*.

While making the film, I was also very busy trying to place my remaining work, which meant I did not have as much time to create as I wanted. You can imagine how much I've created over my lifetime from drawing every morning until there was no more paper in the house! In recent years, because I am so prolific, at moments, I hesitated painting, thinking, "Oh my God. What am I going to do with it all?" But now, I realize that I must not have those futile thoughts. I should allow myself the joy of creating.

When I was younger, in my forties, fifties, or later, I never thought about what life would be like at the age I am now. I just lived in the moment and did what I loved.

**A**s I enter my nineties, I realize I must continue to create, or I would be denying myself the pleasure of being alive. And I must continue giving and inspiring others. I just hope that I will be blessed with the energy I need. I don't move as fast as I used to, but I'm very lucky. I still have a lot of creative energy.

I'm happy to create smaller works now, but if I had no physical limitations from aging, and no constraints with space, I would be painting huge canvases. I used to dance across the canvas with great freedom and abandon. At my age, I must be cautious not to fall.

An important thing for me to share about my life as an artist is that I have always put my family first. I'm lucky to have spent my life with a



Rita with her found object sculpture *Dance of Destiny*, 1973, opening of The Rita Blitt Gallery and Sculpture Garden, Mulvane Art Museum, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas

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supportive husband. I know that my ability to express love as I've been able to do has been key to my creativity. My husband, Irwin, passed away three years ago. We were married for sixty-six years.

Because of my conviction that my family was my first priority, I've been able to enjoy being a wife and mother as well as an artist. I have felt free to create. ❖



Rita Blitt, *Lunarblitt XVI*, fondly referred to as Rita's "Yellow Ball" sculpture, created in 1975, located in The Rita Blitt Sculpture Garden, Mulvane Art Museum