

Artist profile: Rita Blitt

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The View from the Kansas City Art Institute

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Rita Blitt began her love affair with art when, at ages 10 and 11, she won scholarships to take Saturday classes at the Kansas City Art Institute. Years later, she returned to KCAI to take post-graduate courses with painting professor Wilbur Niewald, whom she described as "influential in my life's work."

"He continuously talked about how one shape relates to another in a composition," Blitt said. "The repetition of this concept puzzled me until one day, when driving down the street, I became very excited by the sight of junk in the truck ahead of me. I saw a shovel, a broom and other assorted objects as shapes in a composition. It opened my eyes to suddenly see the world as art."

It was then that Blitt "gave herself permission" to devote her life to creating art, while also hoping that she could somehow contribute to the world through her art.

Many years later, Blitt has more than accomplished the goal she set out for herself. An award-winning painter, sculptor and filmmaker, she is known internationally with work in public and private collections in Australia, Germany, Italy, Israel, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Uganda and the United States. Yet, Blitt always remembers to give back, donating extensive collections of work to schools, hospitals and other institutions needing creativity to enhance their environment. Most recently, Blitt donated 28 works on paper to help raise funds for the schools of the Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project in Uganda, and last year she gave a permanent exhibition of pastels, plus two canvases and a print, to the hospital at the University of California-San Francisco.

One of her proudest accomplishments is rising to a challenge issued by Beth Smith, professor of nonprofit leadership and management at UMKC.

"Beth came to me and asked me to create something that could be sent all over to help make the world a better place. I was honored but overwhelmed by the task. One day a few years later, as I was looking at bumper stickers, the words, 'Kindness is contagious. Catch it!' came into my mind and I knew that was it," Blitt said.

The "Kindness is contagious" concept led to the creation of kindness programs sponsored by Synergy Services. Each year, awards that Blitt creates are given to the Kindest Kansas Citizens. Additionally, the kindest local school is honored with her namesake award. The Rita Blitt Award recognizes outstanding achievements by area schools to foster kindness and eliminate bullying. Blitt took the kindness campaign to the international level by presenting kindness posters that she created to all the member countries of the United Nations as well as creating a sculpture to thank Norway for bringing Israel and Palestine together in peace talks.

Always yearning to create, Blitt continues to make and exhibit work. Her traveling exhibition "Courage to Hope ... While Dancing," which includes drawings, paintings and sculpture, is on view through Oct. 9 at the Lawrence Art Center in Kansas. She also will have a painting and

sculpture exhibition at the Green + Blue Gallery in Stowe, Vt., in October.

Currently, Blitt is in the midst of planning a show of drawings made in response to the music of composers who were victims of the Holocaust. Plans are under way for this exhibition to open sometime in 2011 at the Anne Frank Center in New York.