

Doodling a Passionate Gesture of Discovery

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"Rita Blitt: The Passionate Gesture" and "Armin Muhsam: Recent Works" continue at the Leedy-Voukos Art Center, 2012 Baltimore, through May 26. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. Call (816) 474-1919 for information.

"The Passionate Gesture" is an apt title not just for Rita Blitt's current show at Leedy-Voukos Art Center but indeed for her overarching approach to more than half a century of artmaking. A true believer in using art as a means of discovering and sharing joy, Blitt attempts to convey no less than the essence of life itself. While Blitt, who has exhibited internationally, is best known for large-scale outdoor sculptures generated from small "doodles" (pieces in Kansas City include those at Bannister Mall, Oak Park Mall and the AT&T Town Pavilion), her works on paper and canvas take precedence here.

These 40-plus, mid- to large-scale two-dimensional works demonstrate Blitt's embrace of intuitive, spontaneous expression. Her forms emerge only in the moment of their making, as her brush (or brushes – she often draws with both hands at once) discovers them in the process of moving paint across a surface. While the inspiration for her work comes from diverse sources – modern dance, classical music, Eastern philosophy – her pieces are abstract and fundamentally about the energy applied to and contained in a fluid, painterly gesture.

The success of this loose approach varies, at times making for works that feel lyrical, poetic, essential, while at other times seeming to lack concerted direction. As such, it tends to be the simpler pieces, often comprising only a single, looping trail of paint, that are most successful. These find a sense of vital, concentrated energy and convey elemental gestures that stand as metaphors for a mood, a body, a motion, a song, a moment, a state of being.

Typically these are the more intense in terms of color as well. A swipe of thick black acrylic paint, perhaps mixed with traces of red, yellow or green (as in the strong "Chi Spring I-IV"), begins as a lush stroke then thins out as it moves, its varying thickness and density directly reflective of the immediate physical action that created it.

In her "Dance Series," the lines suggest posed bodies, while the works comprising "Under the Influence of Beethoven" convey the more all-over, multidirectional energy of a musical composition. In perhaps her best work here, "Around and Round," a satisfyingly dripping deep blue horizontal line cuts through and plays off intersecting black spheres, its anchored weight a complementary partner to the buoyant motion of the black.

Signed copies of Blitt's book, chronicling her development and career as an artist, are available at the gallery. It's also titled *The Passionate Gesture*.

Surreal emptiness

On view in the back gallery at Leedy-Voulikos are the smart, challenging recent paintings of German-born artist Armin Muhsam, which provide a more conceptual and decidedly postmodern counterpoint to Blitt's expressions. Although reared in Munich, Muhsam earned a master of fine arts in painting from Montana State University in Bozeman in 1997 and is currently assistant professor of art at Northwest Missouri State University.

While perhaps best described as landscapes, Muhsam's paintings depict an eerie, imagined world marked by the impact of modern technologies. Uninhabited, their surreal emptiness and deliberate artificiality (often furthered by keyed-up color) recall the work of Giorgio de Chirico. Yet, while Muhsam speaks to a tendency to exchange one set of "machines" for the next in the name of efficiency (which might characterize the entire 20th century), his well-crafted paintings evidence distinctly contemporary iconography. Alongside abandoned bridges and excavation holes, satellite dishes emit signals to far-off receptors.

Throughout Muhsam's work runs a sense of abandonment of the once cherished and new. Bridges or dikes leading off to distant horizons end abruptly in the foreground, telephone lines criss-cross to form abstract patterns across the sky, seemingly disconnected from any function. These traces of man's intervention are set into sweeping vistas, juxtaposed against verdant rolling hills and clusters of deep green trees and bushes, so as to amplify their constructed nature as well as to highlight the notion that we are constantly manipulating the landscape to suit our wants and needs.

What makes these works so engaging, ultimately, is the undeniable beauty Muhsam achieves in spite of the disconcerting strangeness of the sites he depicts.

As the artist states, "when I paint an artificial landscape in the most beautiful manner possible I challenge people to reconsider their expectations of beauty."