

"Exercises in Movement and Gesture at Leedy-Voulikos"

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Rita Blitt: *The Passionate Gesture* is an apt title for the Leedy-Voulikos exhibition of Blitt's work and the RAM/Brandeis University published book of the same name documenting the artist's career.

Although known in Kansas City chiefly for monumental sculpture, Blitt sees herself as a painter first. She studied life drawing with John Raushenberger at University of Illinois, and says, "The speed with which I learned to draw the human body prepared me for a life of gestural drawing."

Later, Blitt studied with Wilbur Niewald at Kansas City Art Institute where, she says, he "taught me to see the beauty of shapes as they relate to one another." Another step was taken in Blitt's journey from painting rooted in realism to abstract expressionism. The Leedy-Voulikos exhibition updates this journey with works from the past three to five years.

Vigorous, supple line expressed early in doodles, then rapid brush drawings, often rendered with two hands simultaneously, have come of age in exuberant canvases with black brushed bolts cutting patterns through and between vibrant colors. Blitt's Chi series (beginning in 1995, works featuring acrylic paint on 30-by-22-inch paper) consists of bold explosions of wide, black brush configurations that rain spatter lines from the initial, dense strike then thin to shades of gray at the ends of strokes. The four Chi Spring works (1997 and 2001) combine strong gestural bursts of energy with acrylic color: a texturally thick, blood-red stroke, rising, or an expanded pallet with slimmer brush strokes in orange, green, and aqua that suggest (in II) the flight of an erratic insect. Blitt notes that her decision to return to color after a period of painting only in black was a thoughtful one, approached with care.

Celebrating Dorianna dramatically illustrates the change. Created out of jubilation over the birth of Blitt's granddaughter, the 71-by-118-inch canvas was painted first in 1996 using only the expansive bursts of black acrylic. In 1997, Blitt added oil color: luminous areas of yellow, blue, and pink accented by lilting red lines and colored orbs. From across the room it suggests a spectacular circus aerial ballet — a passionate gesture and tribute to life force.

The speed and intensity with which Blitt paints meshes with the great influence dance and music have had on her work. Dancer/choreographer David Parsons, with whom Blitt has collaborated, comments, "In Rita's creations, I find movement caught in time. Her paintings and sculpture allow me to see elements of my dances, which normally pass too quickly. Once in New York, we were in the studio creating *Step into My Dream* to an incredible jazz score by Billy Taylor. Rita was there drawing — moving as fast as the dancers, sweating, too, whipping out drawing after drawing — capturing motion on paper."

Four of the Jazz in the Parsons Dance Studio ink on paper drawings (1993, 14 x 11 inches) are pictured in the RAM/Brandeis University book, *Rita Blitt: The Passionate Gesture*, and many gallery works exhibit the same spontaneous interaction with music and dance: *Rumba* (2001, black and ocher acrylic on paper); *Dancing with Mozart* (1999, black acrylic on canvas, 30 x 68 inches, 3 pieces); *Beethoven* (1999, acrylic and oil paints on canvas, 50 x 67 inches), with its rising black shape amid predominantly yellow brush strokes with black accents; and a *Dance* series of six works (1997, black and red acrylic on paper, 28 x 35 inches). A gallery VCR makes available to viewers a 1984 video tape documentary, *dancing hands: Visual Arts of Rita Blitt*, that gives a comprehensive overview of Blitt's earlier work and contains her frequently quoted statement, "I feel as though my hands are dancing on

paper.”

Blitt’s rapid drawings are sources for her sculpture. Muscular, agile line is transformed into wood, steel, bronze, aluminum, and acrylic fabrications that assert life force. First executed in conté crayon as one of many rapid responses to the 1993 David Parsons Dance Company rehearsal, *Jazz*, was fabricated in a one-inch ribbon of bronze in 2000. Within the 15-by-9-inch drawing space, the abstract shape appears to leap, zig, and bow.

Movement in nature also informs Blitt’s commanding line. While on a ship to Iceland, Blitt drew with the rocking of the ship by 17-foot waves. One of these line drawings provided the genesis for *Iceland Surge* (1993, bronze, 13 x 24 x 4 inches), which projects the ocean force in dynamic, linear pattern.

Blitt’s sculptures can be found in eight states plus in Tokyo and Singapore. Exhibitions of her paintings and sculpture have been held in Germany, Israel, Singapore, and several sites in the United States. A retrospective of Blitt’s work at Brandeis University closed mid-February. The award winning book *Rita Blitt: The Passionate Gesture* is a handheld retrospective of all but the most recent works and is available at area bookstores, the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. A limited edition of the book includes one of Blitt’s Black Box sculptures with movable sections that may be placed in varying relationships.

September 9, a small exhibition of Blitt’s work will open at the Jewish Community Center in Overland Park. This upcoming exhibition and the book may be some solace to those who missed this spring exhibition. One opening night viewer accurately summed up the impact of the Leedy-Voulikos show when he observed, “It’s good this show is in a large room — the energy is coiled like springs. Makes me feel like I do after a good dance concert — I want to run out into the street and move.”

Editor’s note: Quotations from Rita Blitt and David Parsons are taken from the RAM/Brandeis University-published book *Rita Blitt: The Passionate Gesture*.

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