

# THE MICHABOD



# A DREAM COME TRUE

By Kathy Busch • [kbusch@wufoundation.org](mailto:kbusch@wufoundation.org)

**R**ita Blitt was first introduced to Washburn in late May 2015. The Kansas City native was on campus to talk about her life's dream – a permanent home for her art.

Rita is a world-renowned, award-winning artist, painter, sculptor and filmmaker. Irwin is a retired Kansas City-based commercial property developer. Together, they have made the most significant gift to the Mulvane Art Museum in its 91 years of existence.

On Oct. 16, Washburn University Foundation held a press conference to announce that the Blitts will donate a significant portion of Rita's life work – nearly 1,000 paintings, drawings and sculptures – to the University and the Mulvane. In addition, they made a generous contribution for a stunning new art gallery addition to White Concert Hall that marks the first phase of a new performing arts venue. When completed, the venue will include the Rita Blitt Archive Gallery, a rehearsal room and an intimate recital hall that will seat 225 to 250 people, with performance space for instruction, rehearsal, concerts, small ensembles and civic events.

"Irwin and I selected Washburn as the home for my life's work because of its commitment to

the arts and its vision for the future. The Mulvane is the perfect venue to exhibit my art, a wonderful place where my pieces can live together as a body of work," said Rita. "We are thrilled to give this gift to Washburn and to the region. This is my dream come true – more than I ever hoped for."

"We are humbled and deeply honored to receive this priceless gift from one of the most celebrated artists of our time," said JuliAnn Mazachek, president, Washburn University Foundation. "Rita's generosity and vision will allow us to create a wonderful space for her art, which will continue to inspire others for generations to come."

Rita's works will become part of the permanent collection of the Mulvane, adding to its approximately 3,200 pieces.

"Rita's work is a wonderful addition to the Mulvane," said Connie Gibbons, director, Mulvane Art Museum. "This gift will have a lasting impact on the museum, our students and the art community. We are so excited to have Rita's work, to exhibit it here at the Mulvane and



Rita Blitt, and her husband, Irwin, announced they will be giving a significant portion of her life's work – nearly 1,000 paintings, drawings and sculptures – to the Mulvane Art Museum. In addition, they made a generous contribution for a stunning new art gallery addition to White Concert Hall that marks the first phase of a new performing arts venue, and they established an endowment so her work can travel around the world.



(From left) JuliAnn Mazachek, president, Washburn University Foundation; Randy Pembrook, vice president, academic affairs; Connie Gibbons, director, Mulvane Art Museum; and Rita and Irwin Blitt announce that the future site of the Rita Blitt Archive will be north of White Concert Hall.

to curate and create exhibitions that can be shared with other museums and galleries across the country.”

Randy Pembrook, vice president, academic affairs, understands what doors this gift will open to the students.

“Having Rita’s work will add another dimension to the educational opportunities we provide to our students,” he said. “They will be able to see many of Rita’s outstanding works, and hopefully that will serve as an inspiration to them.”

Rita has had more than 70 solo exhibits. Her art can be seen in the collection of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, the John F. Kennedy Museum, the National Museum of Singapore and many others.

Her sculptures have been installed in multiple Kansas City locations – including one installed in November 2015 at the Hyatt Regency Skywalk Memorial in Kansas City – and throughout the world. “Confluence of Love and Learning,” the sculpture in front of Morgan Hall, is one of Rita’s works and was made possible through the support of Dale, bba ’69, and Susan Pond.

“Mulvane is truly a regional treasure, and Rita and Irwin’s generous gift will bring new opportunities to campus,” said Jerry Farley, president, Washburn University. “This is an investment in the community, an investment in the University and an investment in our students’ education. We are honored that Rita and Irwin have chosen Washburn as a home for Rita’s art.”

## DANCING ON PAPER

From an early age, Rita was drawn to art. Her grandfather, Isaac Sonfus, a Russian immigrant who designed embroidery patterns for a New York firm, drew flowers at the bottom of letters he sent to Rita. She did the same when she wrote back. She later said, "Perhaps my lines continue his."

In grade school, Rita's teacher Ruth Ann Angstead had the class draw trees, explaining that every branch, every twig grew from the roots up. "When I drew trees, I was aware that every line I drew was from the roots up the trunk, out into the branches and twigs. Every tree was alive," said Rita. "These lines – coming from the roots up – invoked a feeling of honesty. I later realized this was very important to me as an artist."

In her life drawing class under John Raushenberger at the University of Illinois, Rita experienced speed drawing for the first time – a technique that would have a profound influence on her art. "I loved making quick figures sketches with charcoal," she said. "I discovered the speed with which I draw and paint today."

While at the University of Illinois, Rita met Irwin. They married after he graduated. Throughout her career, he has encouraged and supported her work as an artist. After the birth of their daughter Chela in 1955, Rita was torn between how much time she spent with her family and how much time she devoted to her art. In 1958, she made a decision to work on her art every day in order to develop her talent. "I owe it to myself to be the best artist I can be, while putting my family first," she said.

Rita's work evolved through the years, transitioning from doodles on paper to paintings to film and monumental sculpture. One of her sculptures, "Lunarblitt XVI," or the "yellow ball" sculpture, Rita considers a pivotal work. The sculpture, part of the collection Rita is giving to the Mulvane, has a stainless


steel base with a stainless steel arc that supports a bright yellow aluminum ball that is seemingly suspended in air. When she looked at the finished piece, Rita realized the yellow ball came from a doodle on paper. "It was the essence of me," Rita said. "I realized the doodles I had made over the years were really me."

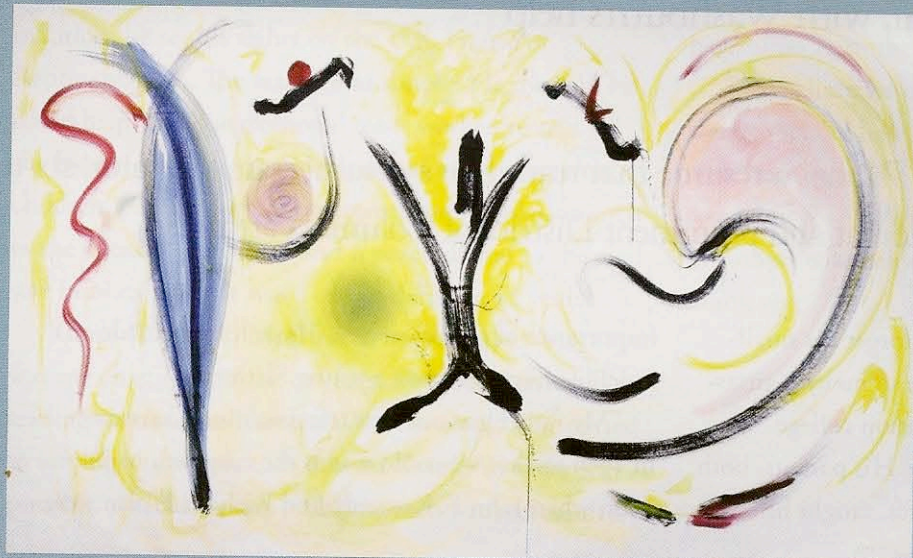
From that point on, she put her spontaneous lines on paper. In 1977, she began drawing with two hands at once with music playing in the background. She later wrote that she felt like she was dancing on paper.

From her early childhood, Rita's work has been inspired by her love of family and her concern about social injustice. Her art celebrates her love of nature, music, dance and the spontaneous flow of movement.

None more so than "Celebrating Dorianna," an amazing 12-foot painting that Rita made following the birth of her granddaughter Dorianna in 1996. "For months my sole focus had been helping to care for the new baby," said Rita. "When I finally got to my studio and painted, I danced across the canvas with joy. Afterwards, I was stunned to see gestures reminiscent of birth revealed on the canvas. For the first time I admitted to myself that my art was influenced by my subconscious, something I had always dismissed before."

Her most celebrated film is the six-minute "Caught in Paint," a collaboration with the Parsons Dance Company. Rita's words inspired a kindness program used in Kansas City schools and beyond, called "Kindness Is Contagious, Catch It."

Rita invites the Mulvane community to view her art, films and other projects by visiting [www.ritablitt.com](http://www.ritablitt.com). 



"Celebrating Dorianna" is a 12-foot painting Rita made following the birth of her granddaughter Dorianna in 1996.