



In the center mall at Indian Springs, 525 rectangles hang from the ceiling above Rita Blitt

# Her Art Graces Shopping Centers

by Jim Lapham

The sheer, glorious *uselessness* of it all, that was its appeal.

It was a big-mouthed, bow-necked, skinny-bodied, 3-legged, rope-wrapped monstrosity. And better yet, it was no accident. This was premeditated. It was an *objet d'art*.

"What do you think of it?" the artist, Rita Blitt, inquired.

Electric is a word that springs to mind to describe the artist as she waited for the verdict. Her dark eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

Laughter, toned down to polite mirth, was my wordless response.

"Good," she said. "You responded to it."

The object was positioned between the entrance hallway and the living room at the home of Mrs. Irwin Blitt at 3522 West Eighty-ninth Street, Leawood.

Her sculptures are the kind that inspire feelings ranging from "What th' — is it?" to admiration and the desire for ownership.

The piece that had caught my imagination on first entering her home was one of the "found object" works Rita Blitt does with the same serious care she devotes to all her art.

Its base, resting on feet that came from an old trunk, is a tripod of unknown function found in a barnyard. The top is the horn-shaped speaker from a Victrola, its mouth stoppered with a round mirror sprouting a feather duster. The whole works is wrapped in rope coiled around and around from top to bottom.

As tall as a coat rack, it stands by the door, serving no other purpose than its own existence.

Optimism and imagination spur Rita Blitt on the search for found objects. On a table beside the sofa is a piece looking like just what it is — the headless, limbless torso of a child's doll, mounted atop a crystal ball.

"I waited breathlessly as I watched it being washed in from the sea," Rita kidded herself. "I was going to be the first human to see whatever it was."

When it turned out to be merely a broken toy, she perched it, characteristically, on the clear globe. Characteristically is the word, be-

Photographs by Roy Inman and Charles Brenneke

cause Rita feels inspired by the shape of the circle.

"The circle is important to me," she said. "It fascinates me."

Love of art, and the misconception that she was the first girl born at Menorah Hospital, have been with Rita 40 years.

On her 40th birthday — which is tough enough — she learned she was not the first girl born at Menorah. She was the second.

"So I didn't win that one," she said. "I still feel like a winner. I always have."

Initially art meant drawing and painting for Mrs. Blitt.

She still remembers praise from a first grade teacher for her drawings of people under umbrellas. She straddled the bench before her drawing board at the Kansas City Art Institute with the enthusiasm another child might have brought to riding a pony. Letters exchanged with her grandfather at that time were always illustrated with original art by both correspondents.

She was in the fourth grade at the Troost elementary school when she won a scholarship at the art institute.

"I am very serious about everything I create," Rita said. "It all comes from the bottom of my heart."

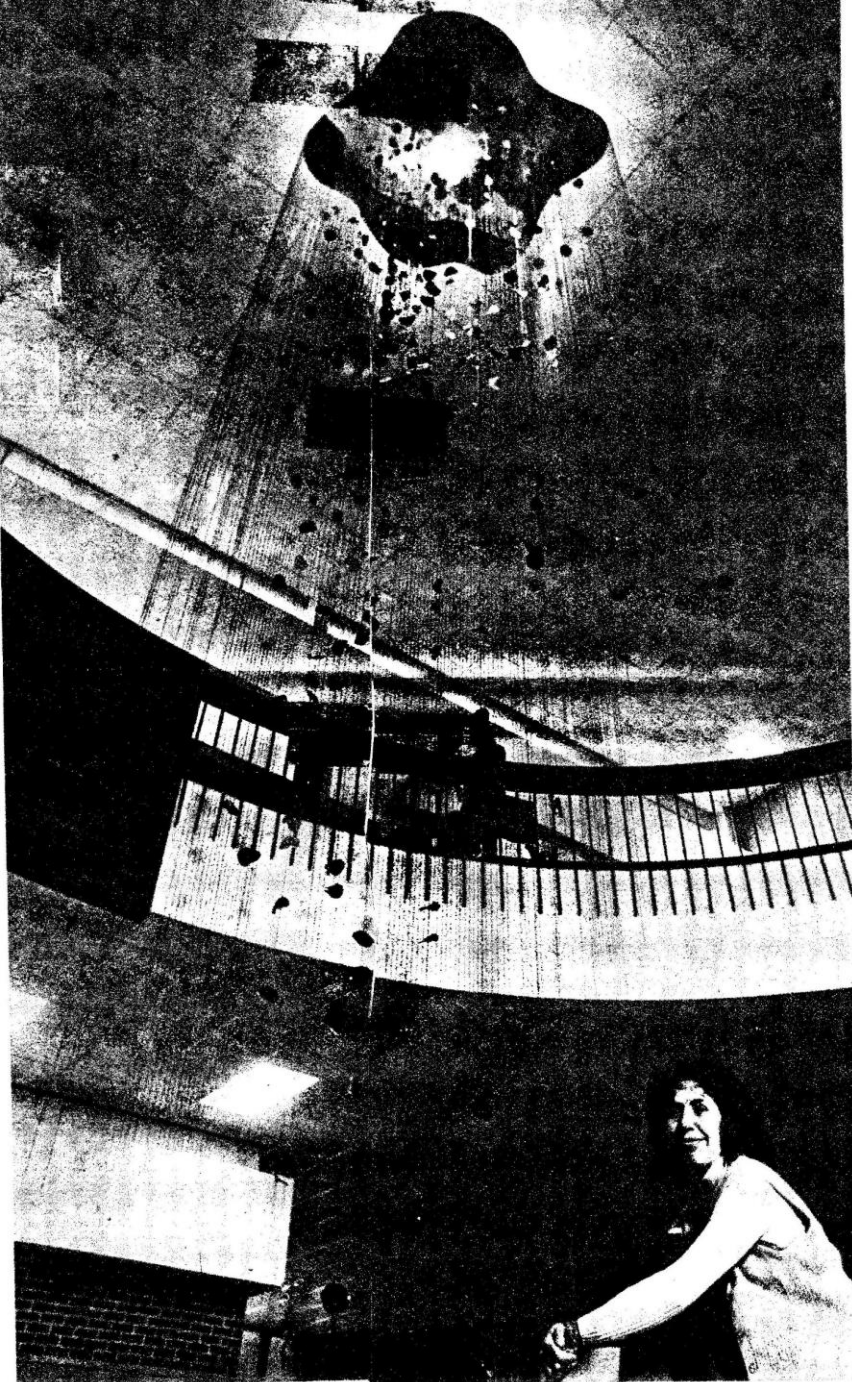
Precocious and ambitious, she even applied to Hallmark for a job as a professional artist at the age of 13. The job didn't come through, so instead of becoming a 13-year-old commercial artist, she finished high school and went on to college where she met, and later married, Irwin Blitt. She attended the University of Illinois and was graduated from the University of Kansas City where she majored in art.

Found object art attracted her even then. Once she sifted her sorority's wastebaskets for objects to use for collages.

Art, at this stage in her development, still primarily meant painting.

After college she taught kindergarten and nursery school until her daughter, Connie Blitt, now 19, was born. Then the roles of

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From 9,000 feet of beaded chains, Rita Blitt suspended 250 colored plastic discs at Indian Springs in Kansas City, Kansas.



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wife and mother became paramount.

As her daughter grew older, Mrs. Blitt found more time for painting. Gradually she gave up all activities, except those related to her family, in order to have time for painting.

"I loved painting and felt very successful as a painter," she said. "My paintings hung in many juried shows and I was often asked to exhibit them.

"The secret of my success in being a wife, mother and artist, too, is putting first things first — my husband and daughter come first. Because I do this I feel free to then devote my total being to art."

Her first step toward sculpture was a "Canvas in Space" show at Hallmark in 1967. The canvas was suspended on metal. Following that came an invitation for a New York show.

"Panic caused me to be overcritical then," she said, and she started looking for a new medium to work in.

A book on plastic, picked up by accident, resulted in the "coronation of Her Highness Plexiglas," Mrs. Blitt said.

"I experimented and fought," she said. "Those horrible acrylic sheets cut me, burned me, exhausted me, and after endless hours of struggling, cracked in my hands."

Indeed, at times the task assumed something of the proportion of trying to fry a 15-foot-long strip of bacon and getting it to curl just the way you want it to.

But different times call for different approaches. At one time bronze and marble sculpture identified the temples of the gods. Today's temples to commerce — the shopping centers — may be decorated with plastic shapes. It takes a different kind of person to fashion them.

Rita Blitt discovered she was such a person while working with Chris Ramos, a Kansas City architect, while both were working on East Hills, a shopping center in



Plastic shapes appeal to the imagination but are hard work for the sculptor.

St. Joseph. Rita was doing a mural there, and Ramos also felt the need for sculpture.

Ramos does public buildings and business areas such as shopping centers (a current project is for the Rockefeller interests in Venezuela) and feels strongly about the use of sculpture for such projects.

His work includes large, public areas, Ramos said, which require sculpture.

"These are big spaces and they need something physical to articulate the space," Ramos said.

This art should be more than simple decoration or decor, Ramos said, adding at the same time that the projects should not be considered as galleries for the display of sculpture. Such areas are for business purposes, he said, but so strongly does he feel they need the "enrichment" of art that his plans call for sculpture in the most choice, central locations.

While driving back to Kansas City from the St. Joseph project Ramos discussed its need for sculpture with Mrs. Blitt. Paper and scissors were in the car and Ramos and Mrs. Blitt began cutting out shapes to illustrate their thinking. So engrossed did they become that they pulled off the road to continue the planning, illustrated with paper cut-outs.

"Art and architecture are kin," Ramos said. "They should enrich life. Rita caught on at once and did exactly what was needed."

Sculpture in public spaces should be dynamic and spontaneous and suggestive of movement because it is in a busy place, Rita's use of plastic is good because it is unique. It is appropriate because it is refined and stud-

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ied, and is not common material as sculpture.

Somehow, her work shows that she is a woman," Ramos said, "and it has a delicacy and a frailty a man would never have in such large work."

The number of persons doing sculptures for such architectural projects must be limited, Ramos concluded, but among those who do it, "Rita is well represented."

She is indeed. While her work may strike one at first as unconventional, it stands, hangs and leans, in shopping centers from the Midwest to the East Coast.

Two 7-foot sheets of aluminum might be bent and welded together, then lined with red, imitation fur. To Rita, and presumably the imagination of children who climb and crawl through it, it is a perfectly acceptable "animal." It can serve equally well as pony or dragon.

Adults are also invited to bring imagination to their viewing, feeling free to interpret. While some of the sculpture is massive and motionless it still may have a sense of motion. Other sculpture is mobile, an airy cascade of sparkling colors.

Her work is as free in size as it is in shape. She may conceive a work as being 40 feet long and weighing hundreds of pounds, or it may consist of tiny chips and discs strung together so that they seem to swarm and float without weight.

Although plastic art would seem to call forth images of conformity and sameness, Rita Blitt has found plastic to be a cantankerous medium with a character of its own. She said she heats it and shapes it, drills, saws and tears it and "encourages" it.

"But it is important to let it arrive at its own final moment when it is through," she said.

Whatever the result, it is calculated, not haphazard.

"I know when it is right," she said. "I just feel the answer. I know when something is right."

Although her initial contact with shopping centers was through the firm of Copaken, White and Blitt, developers of centers, Mrs. Blitt said only one of her sculptures is on their behalf ... it will be at Oak Park shopping center on Quivira Road. Paul Copaken is her brother, Louis White is her brother-in-law, and she is married to Irwin Blitt.



Painting and free-form sculpture of her own creation surrounds Rita Blitt at home.

Area shopping centers that have her work inside them are Indian Springs in Kansas City, Kansas, and East Hills in St. Joseph, Mo.

Rita Blitt's sculpture is inside the center court of the Golden Ring Mall, a Baltimore, Md., shopping center; the Jefferson Square Mall, a Joliet, Ill., center; Eastland Center in Bloomington, Ill.; Pittsburg Plaza Center in Pittsburg, Kan., and the Leavenworth Plaza in Leavenworth, Kan.

She is working on sculpture for the Pyramid Mall, Paramus, N. J., and the Town East Mall in Wichita.

She designed sculpture for a 60-foot pool outside the Oxford Mall in Philadelphia.

"I hate to think of the words 'commercial success' used about my work," she said, declining to discuss the prices paid for her work. However, since it is placed at the focal point of prime commercial locations, it could be assumed that it commands commensurate payment.

As a person who has happily blended a career with putting her family first, Mrs. Blitt said the Women's Liberation Movement had not influenced her life-style.

"It just removed any lingering inner guilt I might have had about the time I devoted to art," she said.

"I like challenges," she concluded. "I don't want my work to be like anyone else's. It must be honestly mine." ■