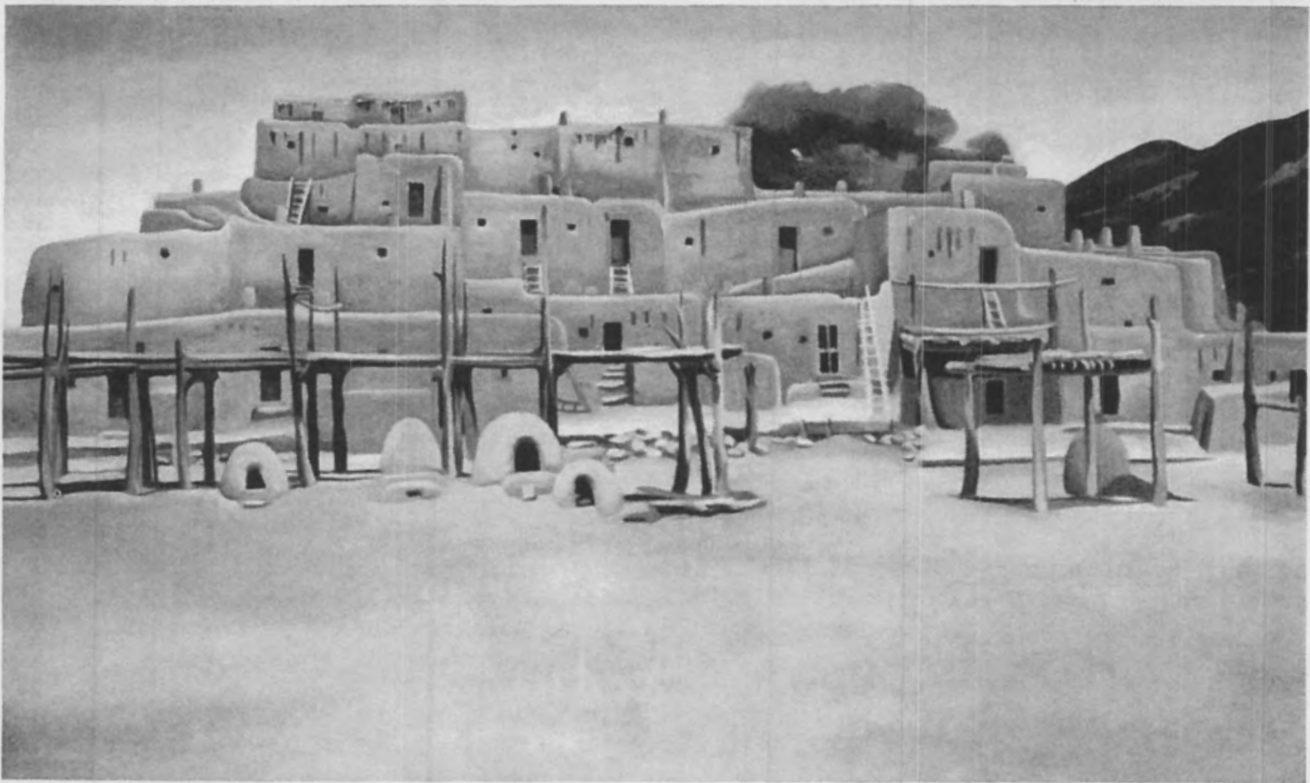


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GEORGIA O'KEEFFE & OTHER WOMEN ARTISTS

Purity in Form: The Sculptures of Rita Blitt

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Approximately forty miles west of New York City on Route 80, past industrial waste zones, graveyards for expired cars, airport terminals, and a riot of overpasses, bridges and railroad tracks that mark our contemporary landscape, stands "Tatsu," a 19-foot steel sculpture, its high-keyed orange visible from the road and no doubt a puzzling symbol for those searching for gas stations or the nearest hamburger. "Tatsu" answers neither need. Instead, exuding the serenity of a Buddha, it presides over the central court of Rockaway Townsquare Office Park in Rockaway, New Jersey. Like the fifty or so other sculptures by the Leawood, Kansas, artist Rita Blitt that have been installed in shopping malls and public spaces around the country, "Tatsu" seems to break through its cement environment like some magical, extraterrestrial flower, engaging, whimsical, and perhaps a slightly wistful reminder of other values in a commercial world.

The first thing that can be said about Blitt's work is that one hardly needs a pretext in order to like it. Nature is a guiding presence, and her repeating images include primal forms that suggest dancers, a cross between a flower-

ing plant and gesticulating human forms, butterflies or the fluidity of oil taking shape on the surface of water. Always elegant, with cadent movement, her work shies away from hard angles. There is something spare and distilled, innocent and unguarded, in the aesthetic she pursues. Her free-standing and wall sculptures invariably succeed in retaining a light quality of mass though often heroic in proportion. Since 1977, Blitt's sculpture has represented forays into the artist's subconscious through the practice of quick, spontaneous drawings, which she believes summon up an externalized symbol of the *ding an sich*, or essence of her art. In actuality, "Tatsu" is a monument to a doodle, or to be less cryptic, like most other Blitt wood and steel sculptures, it began life as a fairly unprepossessing one-inch drawing on a sketch pad, later referred to as a fecund source for sculptural ideas. The notion of drawing on the power of the subconscious and of yielding to the spontaneous moment have been central in developing the vocabulary of her personal forms.

Miró used the technique of automatic drawing and Klee consciously set out to look at the world through the

eyes of a child in order to achieve a spontaneity untrammelled by reason: "I want to be as though new-born, knowing nothing," he stated. It was said of Jackson Pollock that he worked with his left hand because his right hand knew too much. Blitt feels that her sculpture has been unhampered by academic training and that her progress has been a series of struggles and triumphs in mastering one medium after another. Her sculptor's odyssey has taken the approach of the fiercely willful child to new experience, welcoming it but insisting on doing it his own way.

As a nine-year-old Kansas Citian, Blitt won a scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute, where coincidentally she encountered Dada-Minimalist artist Robert Morris as a classmate. Her sole sculptural training was at the University of Illinois, where one-fifth of a semester's curriculum was devoted to sculptural techniques. Her first assignment, she recalls, was an instant success. "I did a clay sculpture that everyone loved. It was given an A and was photographed. The second sculpture earned me a D and it was thrown back in the clay barrel. With the first one, I think instinctively I did something good—I have no idea how or what or why. And I think I felt self-conscious that I had to go on. Also, the second one drove me crazy because the teacher wanted perfection on the surface, perfect smoothness, and that is contrary to my nature." She subsequently completed her B.A. at the University of Kansas, by which time she had met and married Irwin Blitt, and then enrolled for three successive years in painting classes at the Art Institute with Wilbur Niewald, who exerted a strong influence on her in the breaking down of the essence of painting into the interrelationships of forms. Decidedly

unconcerned with isms, movements and trends, the earliest awakening of her urge to free herself from subject matter probably occurred in the '50s at the University of Illinois when she stood in front of a Jackson Pollock painting. Though she wanted "desperately" to like it, she found she was unable to respond to it directly because of a lingering suspicion that Pollock might be putting her on. After further looking, reading, and soul-searching, the point came when she felt she could wholeheartedly accept and experience abstraction. Until then, she had felt: "It was pompous. I wasn't sure it was important enough to allow what was within me to come out." Finally, however, it was to be sculpture that released her from representation.

As a painter, her concern had been with displacement, movement, "with sunlight as it hit the water and danced off" or "the movement of sea gulls and the rolling waves of the ocean." Her color palette during the early '60s was richly Chagalesque, and works glowing in nature's largesse exhibited Redon-like swirls and flowing textures. If there was a lack of fulfillment in working on the picture plane, it was quietly dormant; yet given the first opportunity to convert to three dimensions, she did not hesitate more than a moment.

The genesis of her vocation as a sculptor was quite accidental. She was painting murals at a shopping plaza that was being renovated in St. Joseph, Missouri, when the architect, who had inherited some design problems, asked her to create a work that could be suspended from the ceiling and help hide a post in the mall. Remembering how when she viewed the work of a sculptor friend her stomach "would churn with creative juices," she realized this was

precisely the direction in which she wished to move. She left the architect's office and bought clothesline wire at the drugstore and 3M sheet metal at the hardware store. When the shopping center project was completed, the bent and shaped sheet metal hung from the clothesline wire, cunningly distracting attention from the post, and, more importantly to Blitt, it thrillingly revealed and moved in space.

She could not return to painting on flat canvas, yet was unable to give up her paints. Her "Canvas in Space" phase was the next transitional step in her conversion to sculpture. Again she used metal sheets, this time cutting out forms and covering them with canvas, a demanding job that entailed groping and experimenting, first with sewing, then with a variety of glues. After swathing the metal in canvas, she would hang it from the ceiling and attempt to apply paint, which became a "wild experience" of spattering paint and dangling canvas colliding mid-air. A representative work resembles large autumn leaves perennially suspended between autumn and winter (or is it two dancers responding to each other's improvisatory steps?).

Two factors were responsible for Blitt's turning next to a new medium—acrylic sheet. First, she was finding it difficult to keep the integrity of her forms when dealing in multicolors. Secondly, she had discovered while browsing in a bookstore a manual on plastics. With the same instinctive response she has had to other momentous events, she recognized that plastics would be her next passion. She describes her "taming" of plexiglass: "In the book they said you were supposed to saw and drill and buff the plexiglass, but that was totally out of character for me. I took a hammer and

started pounding it to cut it, and of course that didn't work. Finally, I did have to learn to saw and drill, but I was doing it my own way. I had read in the book that you could soften acrylic sheet beginning at 250°. Wearing several layers of gloves, I started holding it over the burners of the stove and would heat each little spot, shaping it till it was right. Next I began sticking it in the oven at home, but before long I discovered a man who made plexiglass domes and who had a 14-foot oven. Then there was the matter of getting a smooth finish. At first I resisted using the proper machinery and instead tried to minimize scratches by rubbing with Wright's Silver Cream. That was quite tedious, until this man began to polish the edges professionally for me. Then I wanted larger plexiglass sculptures. I had no idea how to make them, so I had to figure it out. I asked questions. Movement is very important for my work, and when I was inspired to create a flag blowing in the wind as a Bicentennial project for Overland Park, Kansas, it was designed out of 1,748 pieces of plexiglass. I had to figure out how to connect them all, and somehow, I just did. It was a mathematical feat."

Some of Blitt's most compelling works are of acrylic sheet. They bubble, take on crystalline, frosty, glacial forms and subtly mimic gelid phases of nature. Often they are installed in settings with fountains and waterfalls. Aside from highlighting the pure, flowing, harmonious aspects of her work, her output in plexiglass demonstrates her faith in spontaneous, split-second judgments and in an instinctive understanding of her material and its possibilities. Whatever the material, the artist tries to divine its nature. In acrylics, speed is of the essence as when the limp, freshly warmed sheet is released

from the oven, it remains malleable for mere seconds. Together with a crew of ten consisting of her husband, daughter, and the man who owned the oven, she pushed and pulled and allowed the plastic to find its own most desirable position before freezing the gesture. Perhaps because of the challenges inherent in the material—the plexiglass scratched, burned, and cut her—it also served as her only vehicle to express feelings of rage and frustration. To convey political outrage, she has tied up her crystalline sculptures with rope, squashing the plexiglass to make it appear the rope is actually baked in. Blitt considers one of her most important images a hanging sculpture (with two 22-inch circles) which looks as though it has just undergone an inner explosion. She feels the contrast between the beautiful calm that the circle represents and its violation are particularly potent expressions of universal pain and violence.

Blitt has described her creative process as "an explosion of joy," her sculpture as "drawing in space," and her drawing as "dancing on paper." In a 1987 show at the Joy Horwich Gallery in Chicago, some of the titles of Blitt's works were "Ascent to Glory," "Flowing Energy," and "Inspiration," reflecting spiritual qualities and goals.

Most of her work is non-confrontational, lyrical, and undertaken with a sense of exhilaration and complete belief in the human spirit. An anecdote that will illustrate her incapacity to identify with the seamy side of life took place against the backdrop of the Douglas Drake Gallery, transplanted a year ago from Kansas City to New York's 57th Street. One of the gallery owners was describing how five (drug) dealers had been sitting on the hood of her car one evening when Blitt, whose

attention had been focused on a Milton Avery oil, asked uncomprehending, "What were the five art dealers doing on the hood of the car?" Typically, she sees the beauty and the art, not the viciousness and crime.

Periodically, Blitt says she asks herself, "Should I be addressing myself to the horrendous pain in the world? Am I doing enough?" In 1982 she purchased Robert Arneson's "Holy War Head," which she describes as "the most beautiful, painful work of art" she has ever seen and widely considered to be his best. A ceramic head of a child, two feet high on a four-foot base, it is about the effects of nuclear war. The child's head has been punched in, distorted and tortured. Blitt sends it around the world as a peace statement. Her strong attraction to the work and the compulsion to own it is almost a Dorian Gray-effect. So long as this powerful piece of art speaks of all the angst she knows exists—and of the darker side of her psyche—she feels able to justify her positivism and continue producing joyous forms.

By the early '70s, Blitt felt that anything she had to say in acrylic sheet was already behind her. After 1975 she just reiterated some statements in thicker glass, a material she began working with when it was surplus from one of the public malls she was working for. Plexiglass helped her articulate some of her important themes, and later, when she developed her spontaneous drawings, she found they were reminiscent of what she had created in plexiglass.

With the largest piece of acrylic sheet available only a six-foot square, Blitt had to cast about a bit to decide how to fill commissions for larger pieces. She came across a little doodle of which she was particularly fond and which struck her as the perfect skeletal

idea for a large-scale sculpture. At a foundry she located in Grand View, Missouri, the doodle was fabricated into a seven-foot steel sculpture. Blitt's reaction upon seeing the completed work was one of total identification. She felt it was closer to the essence of her than anything else she had ever produced. Thereupon, she began "pouring out doodles, one after another, until there wasn't a clean piece of paper in the house. These drawings were very unself-conscious, they were perhaps very related to music, and it was pointed out to me later that I was working in a series. I see now that I was doing one form over and over until I was through with it." (See illustrations.)

When Blitt speaks about her spontaneous drawings, it is as though she is enacting some life- and energy-endowing ritual. She describes a related experience: "About a year later, in 1977, I picked up two crayons and began working with two hands at once. I was very shocked by this and then I was fascinated and realized I had to go on doing it. I needed both hands to feel whole, to feel honest. When I first started doing these drawings, I think I was consciously thinking of dancing (because of a bad knee I never could dance). And when you dance, one part of your body can go one way and another part of your body can go another way; yet the forms are graceful and relating to one another. Then I started feeling it was important to be symmetrical and to have both hands doing the same thing. My right hand was leading, I feel, and my left hand was echoing the right one. So I insisted on symmetry from myself rather than pursuing the dancer I started out to be.

"More recently, she has returned to one hand because she has observed an excess of repetition and wants more

inspiration in shapes.

To any artist, the formula for creativity is ineffable, and to utter it aloud is perhaps to invite the wrath of the gods and a blockage of the inspirational flow. By allowing the sensuality and physicality of the drawing process to take hold, by believing in the rightness of intuitive judgment and in the sudden illumination, Blitt taps into a deep wellspring of artistic impulses. Her drawings almost seem to take on a life of their own.

How, then, does the embryonic doodle Tatsu transform into the strapping orange Rockaway, New Jersey, "Tatsu"? After a "cooling down" period, Blitt has her drawings blown up into blueprints of whatever size sculpture is needed. A structural engineer will calculate the strength of material and the type of ground structure required to anchor the work. On her large public art she also works closely with architects, or water experts in the case of aquatic sculptures, with construction crews, and sometimes with packing and shipping consultants for monumental works that will be making a long trip. ("Orblitt '78," also installed in Rockaway, New Jersey, was sent east in several trucks and is suspended in place with airplane cable!)

She seldom finds that a work compromises its qualities by being blown up too much. Her ability to extrapolate her works to very large sizes is keen. In fact, recently when she decided to sculpt some very small pieces specifically for galleries, people began calling them her "maquettes," causing her to wonder if the public simply expects large-scale sculpture from her or whether she may not be at her best in large version. The identical drawing may be rendered in different sizes and also in different forms—either ribbon

or massive form. Originally, she favored steel ribbon as it adhered more literally to the feeling of the drawing. Now, as she finds she is less beholden, "less in awe of the simple line that came out of me which I had not wanted to distort in any way," she has gathered more confidence about "what to do with the accident or the subconscious material and carry it a step further."

Her present interests are taking her forward in a three-pronged direction: she will concentrate on works in clay, plaster, and concrete that she can fabricate manually, working more in mass; she will again combine painting and sculpture, treating sculpted surfaces in a painterly way; and she plans to do imaginary, abstract landscapes in clay—shapes and forms that already inhabit her works will co-exist on one sculptural base.

In evaluating Rita Blitt's output, it is illuminating to quote from the letters and remarks of another artist whose singular vision also flowered far from the hegemony of the New York art scene, and that is Elizabeth Layton of Wellsville, Kansas, one of the most individualistic artists of recent times. Of the Blitt drawings which she has seen and of photographs of the sculptures (it is years since Layton left Wellsville) she has written: "Somehow your work seems very appropriate for Kansas.

There is nothing dark, heavy, cumbersome or earthbound in it. It relates to our Kansas sky and rolling prairies. (This must be in part due to the 'doodle' process you use—an absolutely uninhibited outpouring of yourself.)" And, "Dear Rita, We are all thrilled with the great review of your exhibit today in the *Star*. Don Lambert got to see it yesterday, too, and says it is absolutely beautiful. Don was telling us about the one piece and the sun

shining on it and colors and sparkles going all over the place. It is so exciting." There is a mutually nurturing friendship between the two women, as well as a lively correspondence wherein they engage in verbal doodles, if you will, commenting on works in progress, achievements, exhibitions and everyday life.

One recent note from Layton reads, "Read in the *Star* today that you have really been busy working. Doing so much. I know the pieces are lonesome and gay and everyone that passes by will feel their spirit uplifted." And "your dancing sculptures are conducive to calm and peaceful thoughts at any time—such perfect harmony Love E."

After friends visited "Karma," a seventeen-foot steel sculpture that plays the music of New Age Mexican composer Mario Lavista when sensors detect someone approaching, Layton wrote: "All your sculptures are superb. I especially like 'Karma' and it is intriguing to think about the finished and unfinished symphonies coming from it. I think more than walking away because they don't like the music, people would walk away because they have other commitments. Or maybe just because one can only bear so much beauty. I have this problem with mountains and sunsets. I can not stand so much beauty but for a short time. Then I have to turn away (I haven't figured that out yet. Maybe we get too involved in beauty and perfection, and have to have something more mortal. If you figure it out let me know.) I like that few seconds of pure beauty, & then the memory of it forever after. I guess I need a dropped petal, a lost note, a smudged color."

Layton has refused to succumb to the dictates of the art market and the only way to acquire one of her works is

to be given one or to get a donated work at auction. She describes how she tried to draw a picture for Blitt: "I had one of a leaf falling from the sky and a woman holding out her hand to catch it; but it was a horizontal picture, and it simply wasn't fit for her at all. So I made it vertical with the leaf coming from way up high. Because I always think of her as reaching not for the stars, you know, like the Kansas motto goes, 'To the stars through difficulties'—but it seems she's reaching for beauty and joy." Blitt says, "One by one she sends her work to people she cares about. She sent me this drawing that's long and narrow, maybe because she's thinking of my 60-foot sculptures. I do see myself in it."

Layton has been a spectator to Blitt's process of the doodle. "It's fascinating to see her make those drawings with her two hands working at the same time, in a real rhythm. My own process is painstaking, plodding and you

might say, arithmetic, and hers is so dancing and full of joy. . . . She always gives me a boost." This fundamental way of seeing things—a reliance on inspiration, on preventing yourself from thinking, on catching the soul during its off-guard moments to free you is something Layton and Blitt perhaps share with Georgia O'Keeffe at her best. Layton continues, "You know, what I do is a doodle. That's what it's considered—not that I consider it that. But when you sit down with a piece of paper, and you aren't looking at it, you aren't thinking about it, then you're just doodling. That's what contour is, you just more or less look at your paper and you don't think about what you're putting down. Perhaps we both like simple things. It's why we like each other. I think beauty is very deep within her. She reaches down in and pulls it out and gives it to the rest of us with her work."

New York City

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Mary Huntoon. *Girl With Sand Painting*, 1939. (Permanent Art Collection, Kansas State University)

Illustrations of the Art of Rita Blitt

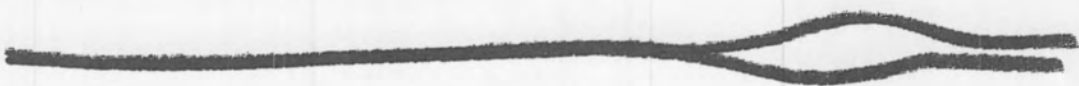


Fig. 1. Doodle for "One." 1976.
Original drawing 18" X 24"

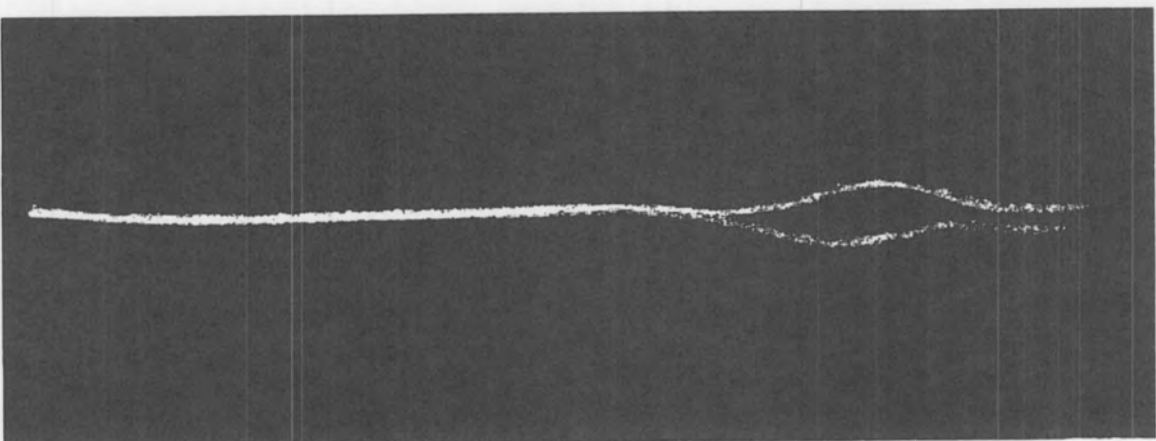


Fig. 2. Doodle for "One"
white on black. 1976.

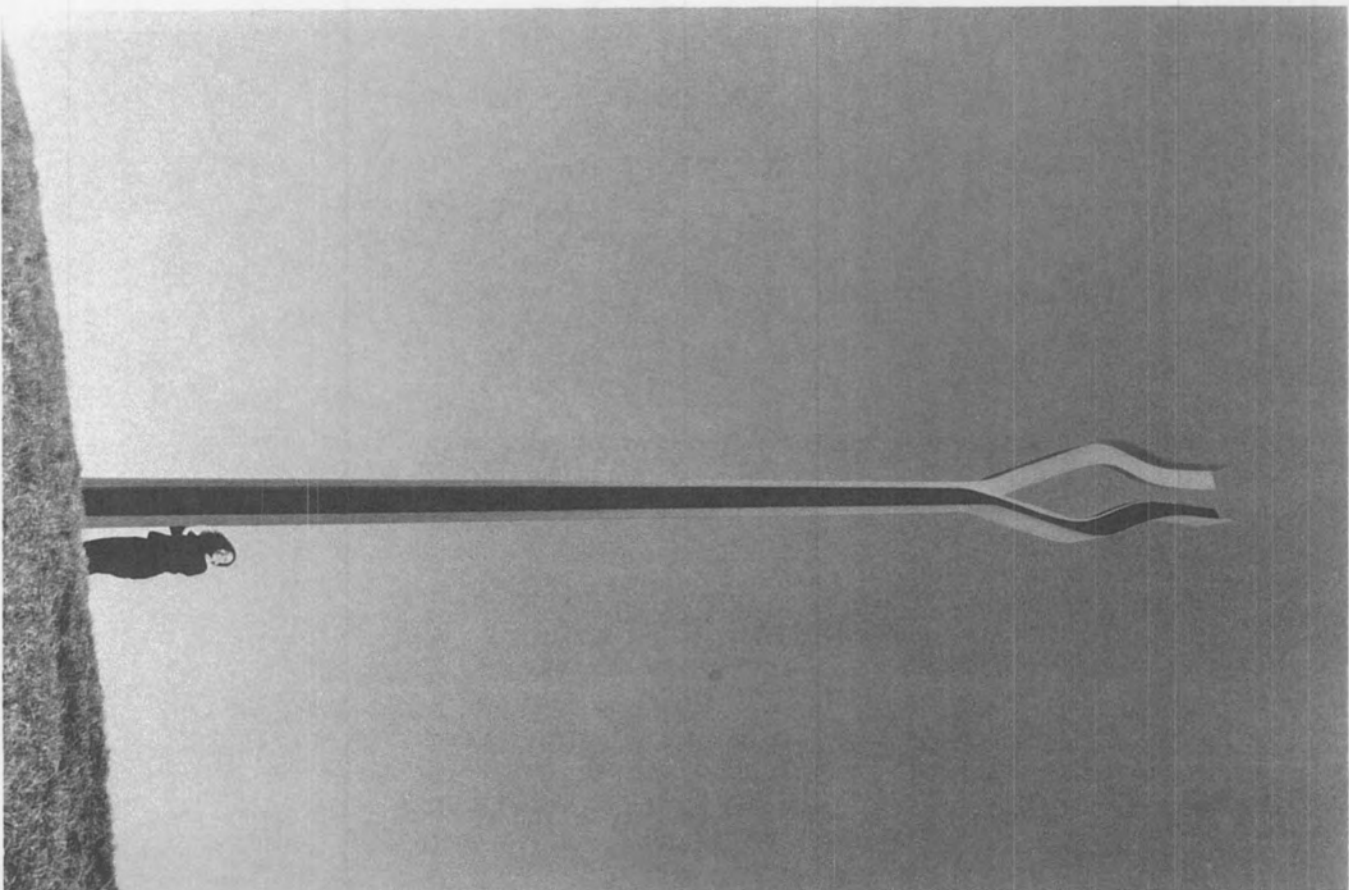


Fig. 3. "One." 1984, 60' steel sculpture. Renaissance Building,
Overland Park, Kansas. (Photo courtesy of Jan Beran.)

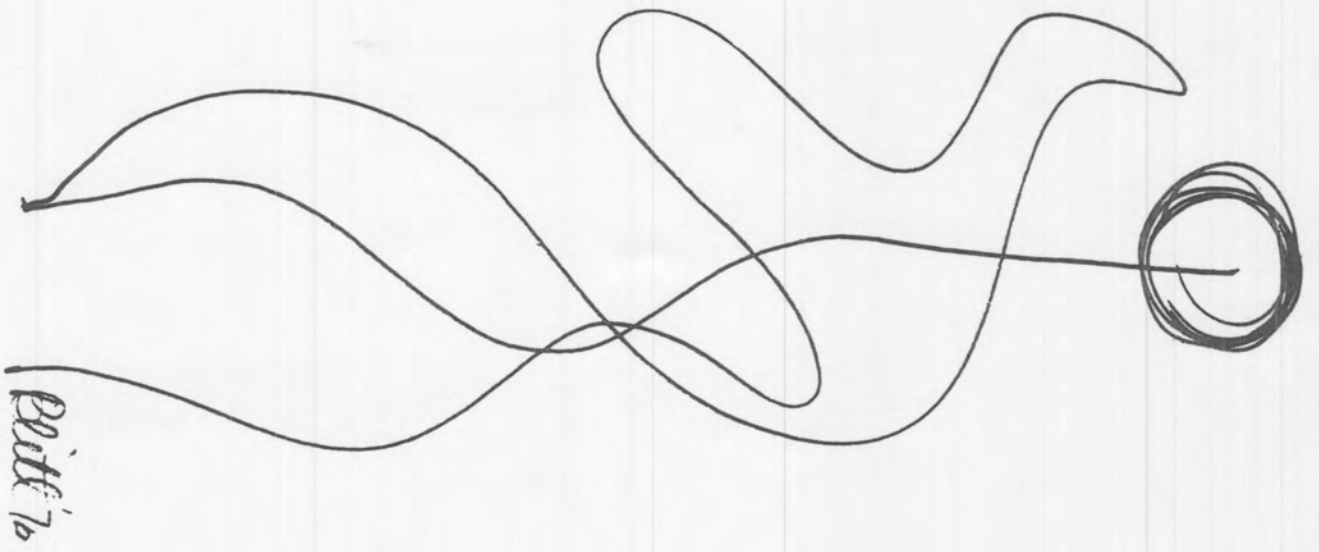


Fig. 4. Doodle for "Dancing." 1976.

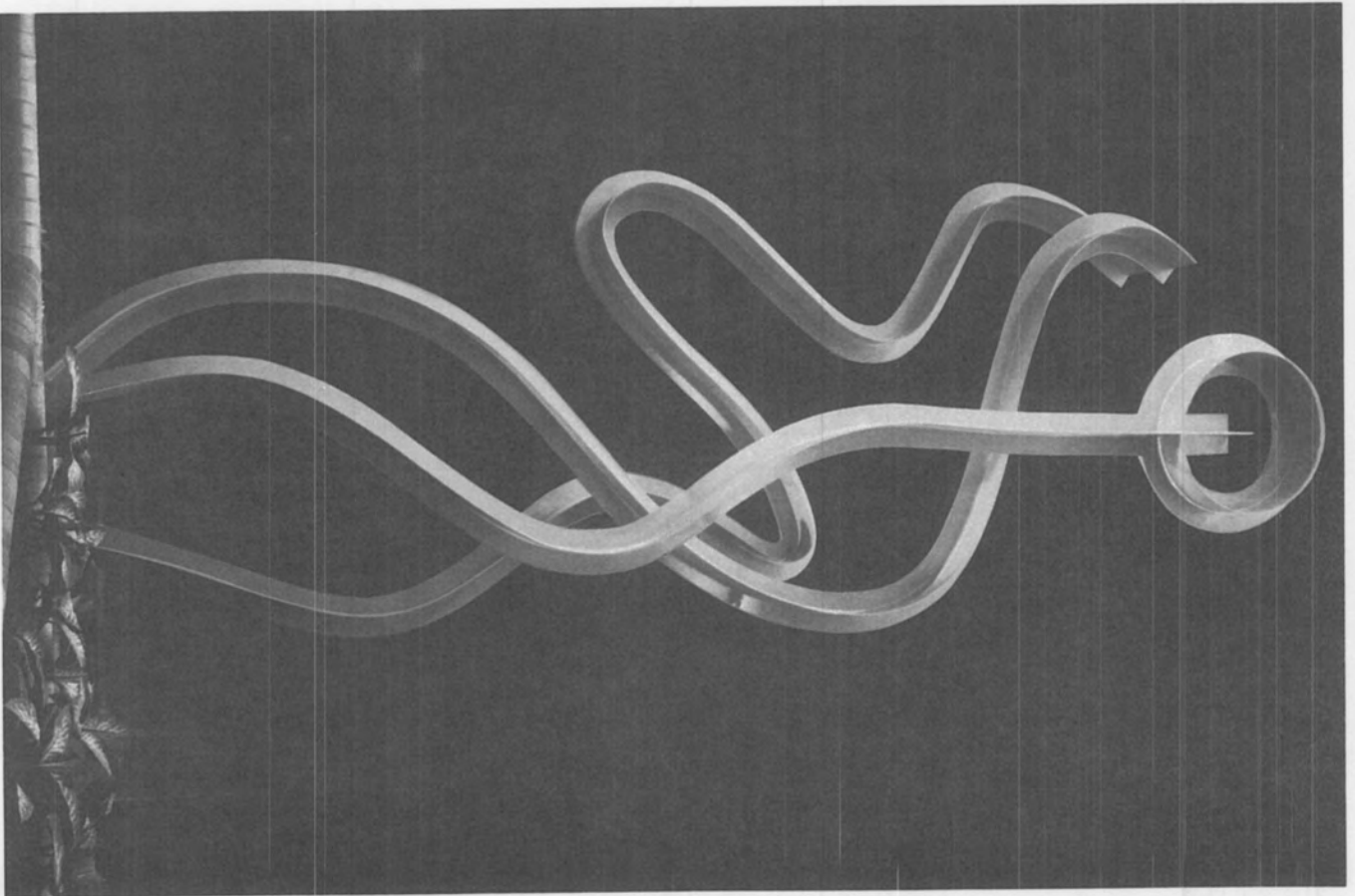


Fig. 5. "Dancing." 1980. 26' steel sculpture. Kansas City, Mo.

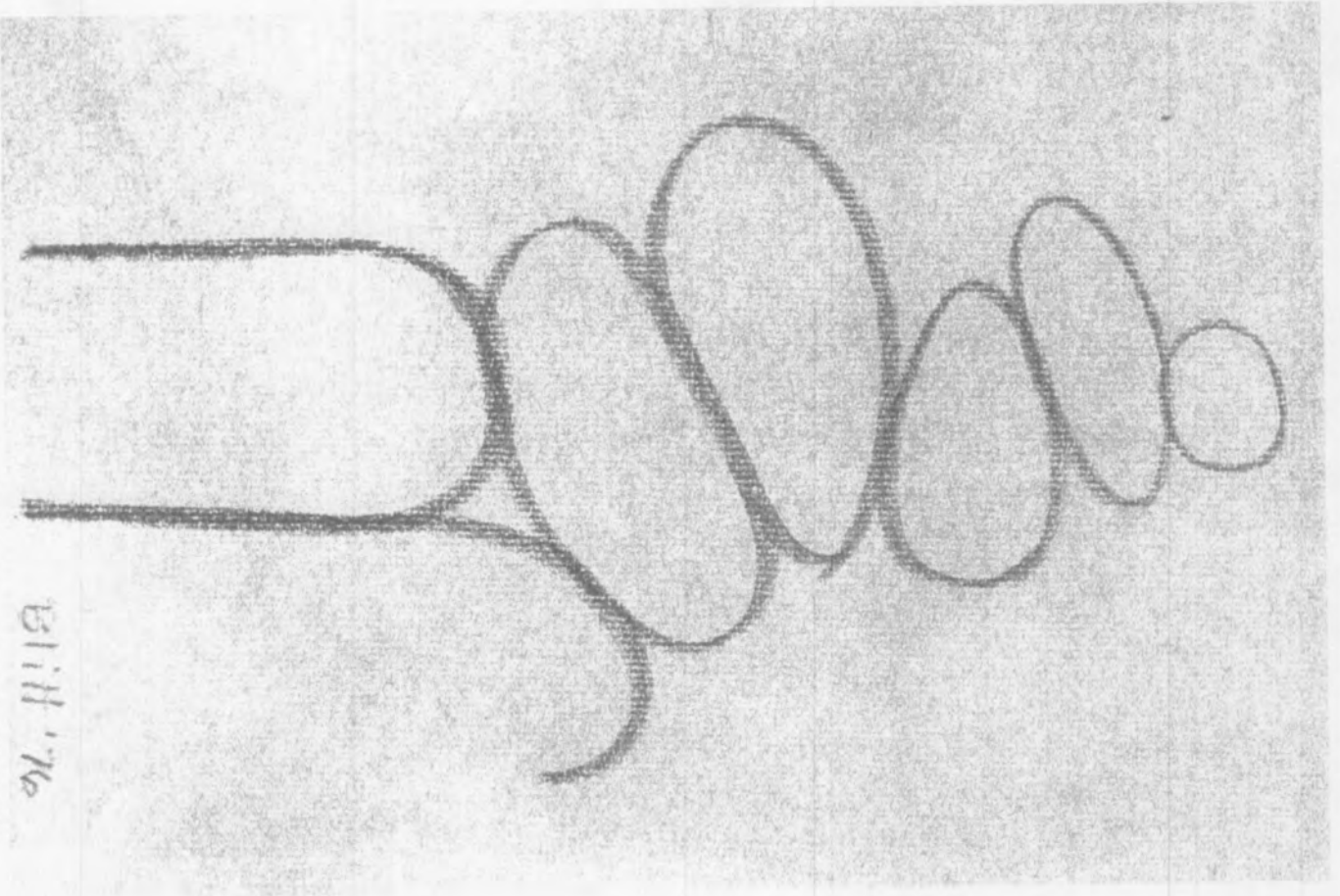


Fig. 6. Doodle for steel sculpture. 1976. Original drawing 8" X 10"

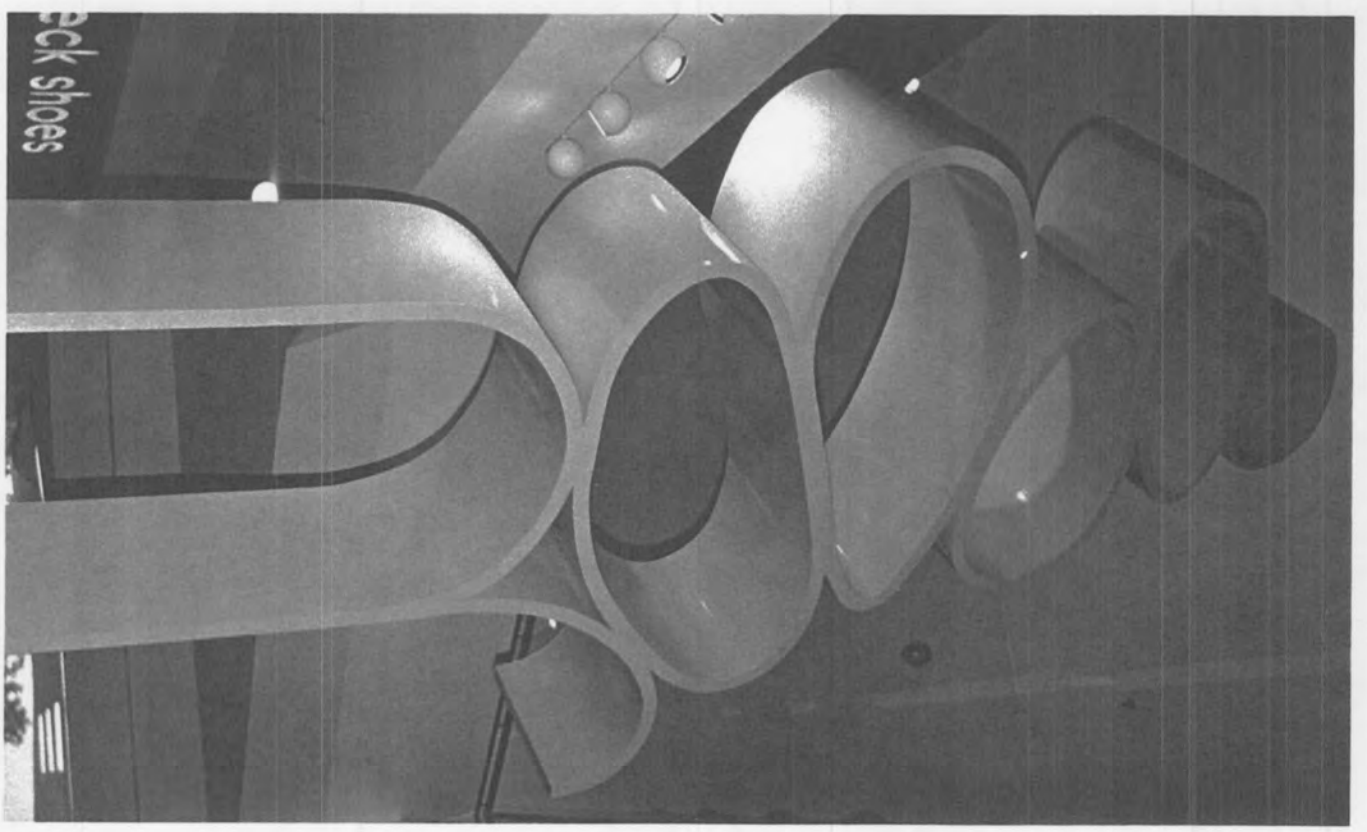


Fig. 7 Sculpture at Rockaway, New Jersey, mall. 26 1/2' steel.

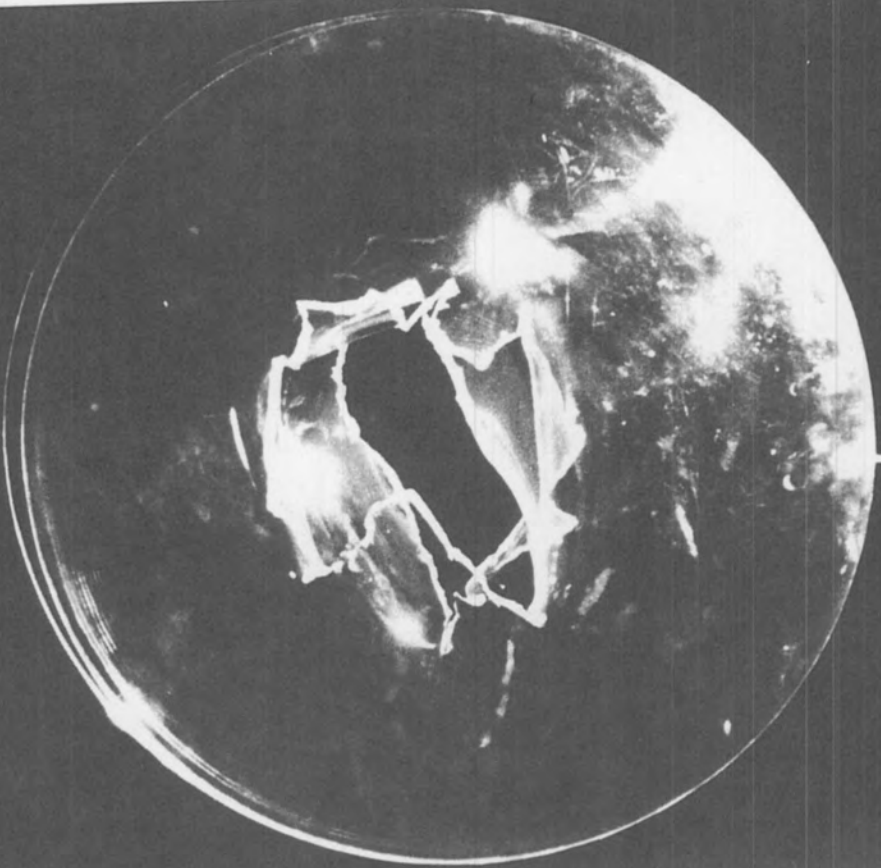


Fig. 8. "Orblitt I." 1968. Acrylic 22"
Collection of Ambassador & Mrs. Charles Price.

OUTSIDE YOU

Gregg Hodges

From outside looking in
at the initial of your
first name, dark and back
turned to the street, the
letter in the glass warm,
glowing in the frost that
fans like prehistoric flora,
of voluminous ferns caught in
the clear strata of evening
sifting to the street like
the buzz of a streetlamp,
like chirping night birds,
the shakings of iced trees,
cold, I give to you the
night, the still cold night,
your continental creeping,
the frigid drift of glass,
interiors, frames moaning
in low registers, the boxy
songs of one night motels,
the anxious reproach of
your home: I give you
one moment once what it
must look like looking in.