

Spontaneous reactions: Paintings, sculpture by Rita Blitt capture the essence of gesture

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Armed with two paintbrushes, one in each hand, Rita Blitt approaches her canvas. With a few sweeping gestures completed in a few seconds, she has said all that she needs to say. But that doesn't mean she's finished.

Some drawings just beg to become sculptures, the artist has said. "Passionate Gestures," an exhibit of Blitt's paintings and sculpture, is on display through Aug. 5 at the Walton Arts Center in Fayetteville. Curated by WAC with all of the exhibited works selected by Michele McGuire, WAC's curator of exhibits, the exhibit offers a comprehensive view of Blitt's 60-year career. Works are displayed to clearly convey Blitt's creative process and to offer insight from the artist through labels she personally wrote for the show.

Blitt, an internationally recognized painter, sculptor and filmmaker, is known for her ambidextrous and spontaneous abstract expressionist style. Moved by nature, music, dance or poetry, she creates in an instinctual, reactionary manner known as gesture painting, which McGuire described as "trying to capture the movement of gesture and the movement of the moment. It's very fast."

The flow and energy of Blitt's gestures are clear to viewers in the apparent beginning and end of each stroke.

"She has ... a sense of [exuberance] and a free flow of energy that I personally find peaceful and exciting at the same time," McGuire said.

Blitt herself likens her painting approach to "dancing on paper."

At age 10, she received a scholarship to attend Saturday classes at the Kansas City Art Institute. She later obtained a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Missouri at Kansas City and attended postgraduate classes at the Kansas City Art Institute. Her work is exhibited internationally as public installations and included in museum and private collections.

A prolific artist, Blitt creates both two- and three-dimensional works on large and small scales, with sculptures that range in height from 6 inches to 60 feet. Blitt also incorporates several mediums into her works such as crayon, pencil, pastel, acrylic, oil, aluminum, stainless steel and wood.

Many of Blitt's works have resulted from uncountable doodles and black line drawings that were sketched at concerts or dance rehearsals. In the mid-1970s, her works jumped from the page into the three-dimensional realm when she recognized the significance of her doodles after completing Lunarblitt XVI, her "yellow ball sculpture" that is on display at the Oak Park Mall in Overland Park, Kan. In the late '80s and early '90s, she entered her Black Box period,

a time when she felt compelled to create sculpture from her black line drawings and began cutting out shapes from the compositions, rearranging them and then welding elements together, sometimes duplicating or omitting parts. Two works from this period are included in the exhibit at WAC.

Also included are three pastel works from Blitt's "Oval" series, which marked the first time she created works using two hands. Initially shocked and embarrassed to be painting with two hands, Blitt later said the experience was liberating.

"I'm finished," she said. "This is what I've been struggling for ... To feel right, honest and whole -- to feel like me -- I needed both hands."

Blitt's career has also included numerous collaborations with performing artists, including dancers and poets.

The WAC exhibit includes some works from her Udow series, which is based on the music of composer and percussionist Michael Udow, as well as several ink drawings created during a collaboration with choreographer David Parsons, whom she has worked with three times. The same works also include reaction prose by friend and poet Colette Inez. Another poetry-infused project is Blitt's Li Po series, a storybook-like series based on the music of Mexican composer Mario Lavista and the words of Chinese poet Li Po, who lived from 701-763 A.D.

In 1995, Blitt created four large-scale paintings and a suspended sculpture to serve as backdrops for performances by the St. Joseph Ballet of Santa Ana, Calif.

"I love that interdisciplinary aspect of her art. She's not just a sculptor or a painter. She collaborates with other artists to show that interaction between the arts," McGuire said.

Also showing in the Cynthia H. Coughlin gallery is "Caught in Paint," a six-minute film by Blitt that documents her collaboration with the David Parsons Dance Co. and photographer Lois Greenfield. In the film, Blitt paints on large acrylic sheets, and dancers imitate her strokes while being captured in still images by Greenfield. The film has been screened at almost 60 film festivals and won several awards, most recently the Documentary Short award at the 2006 Golden Star Film Festival in Hollywood and the Director's Citation Award at New Jersey's Black Maria Film Festival.

The artist will attend an Art Party taking place at WAC from 5-7 p.m. June 16. The event will also feature live music by the Claudia Burson Trio, hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar. For more information on the artist, visit www.ritablitt.com.