

Dancing Waters: Rita Blitt at Mulvane Art Museum

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Dancing Waters is a new exhibition at Topeka's Mulvane Art Museum, curated by museum director Connie Gibbons, and featuring the work of Rita Blitt, who has been making art consistently and diligently for over sixty years. In that time, Blitt has created a body of work of immense breadth and scope, encompassing thousands of drawings and paintings, as well as sculpture, from the monumental to the intimate, and even film. The current exhibition draws upon Mulvane's extensive permanent collection to provide viewers with a synoptic appreciation of this prodigious and underexposed American artist.

Dancing implies movement; and in Rita Blitt's work the embodied, performative quality of tracing the line is an essential component. The terpsichorean aspect of Blitt's art is irreducible to either technique or style: it is essential to both how she works, and more importantly, to how her paintings and sculptures work upon us. The saltant movement of water is realized in her expansive, bounding and fluid brushwork. For Blitt, water is not merely the inorganic chemical compound, but essentially elemental, the viscosity of the natural world – it is living and moving – and her engagement with water, this primordial stuff, is an engagement, or rather an embrace, of what the philosopher Merleau-Ponty would call the 'flesh of the world,' underscoring our 'embodied connection to the spaces we inhabit deeply, primally, elementally'. Flesh involves not only water and its flows, but the air and its windy respirations, the earth with its forms and vicissitudes, and fire, as luminous and life giving as the sun.

The exhibition commences with two large-scale paintings, *Dancing Waters I* (2001), and *Dancing Waters III* (2001) – both of which serve as an excellent introduction to this consummately lyrical and expressive artist. They provide a good place to begin because Blitt is first and foremost a master of line and linearity, as these paintings show. They are also an exultant reminder that Blitt is essentially an affirmative artist, one that generally prefers to paint the ecstatic joy of the world, rather than its estrangement and pain. Paintings such as these are ultimately a vision of humanity's reconciliation with the internal

and external world. The bright yellow fountain of paint that rises through the heart of *Dancing Waters I*, is as fine a confirmation as any that Blitt's work occupies a Mozartean world of *jouissance*.



Source: [Molvane Art Museum](#)

Bermuda (1958) is the earliest of Blitt's paintings on view. What we find here, among other paintings from this period, is an interest in the formal relationship among shapes, which would in time be carried over into her monumental sculpture. On the left-hand side, a sharply defined triangular object, presumably a boat of some kind, juts up out of the water at a 45-degree angle. Butting up against this is a semi-rectangular object, the shape of which is repeated in a building rising out of the tropical background. On the right-hand side, one can clearly discern the bold expressionistic strokes that would come to dominate her linear abstractions. Blitt has managed to successfully combine, in a particularly striking way, this intense regard for shape with the energetic and unrestrained gesturalism of the white spray. It is a reminder of Clement Greenberg's observation that every finished painting is, indeed, "the result of the successful resolution of a difficult struggle."

Winds of Change (2004) and *Celebrating Fall in Aspen* (2003) are dazzling, large-scale examples of Blitt's non-naturalistic landscape painting.

There is a certain formal, structural similarity between the two paintings, both of which feature an undulating line that stretches the entire length of the canvas. It is a line that one may be tempted to regard as rehearsing the founding gesture of creation: the separation of what is above from what is below. It is not merely a long voluptuous line, but the thread that makes possible the very fabric of a landscape, that allows us to embrace the landscape and be embraced by it. In the *Winds of Change*, wide expressive swirls of purples, blues, and grays hover above the horizon. Blitt is a master of letting paint work its way over stretches of canvas. Her paint is thin enough here (and in *Dancing Waters III*) that it runs on its own in delicate filaments. She is not afraid to allow the paint to collaborate with gravity, and produce effects which bear comparison with Hiroshige's woodcut, *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi bridge and Atake* (c. 1920-1929) included in the exhibition.

Blitt is as adept with transparency as she is with color and density. *Untitled* (1968), a translucent and elusive acrylic sculpture that appears to float in midair, is the occasion for a subtle presence to emerge – as if empty space itself has congealed into something diaphanous and ethereal. The exhibition includes a small but notable sample of Blitt's

explorations of the sculptural possibilities of acrylic. Perhaps the most extraordinary of these is Aquablitt (1972), made from a single sheet of perspex, internally divided into wide ribbons, and then shaped by four people alternately lifting from each corner, at Blitt's direction. In many ways, this work epitomizes the themes of the show: the acrylic has become a strange and billowy surge that never seems to finish but is constantly shifting and spreading from a ripple to a swelling wave.

The exhibition includes individual paintings and sculptures by a handful of other artists whose work is thematically related. Among these is Transmutation Still Life (2018), a mixed media sculpture by installation artist Marguerite Perret, associate professor of art and design at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas: it takes a realistic look at the strange form an ordinary human artifact can assume over time – in this case, a swimmer's bright orange life vest colonized by the sea and transformed in the process into something recognizable yet new, mysterious and utterly captivating.

"Art is not indifferent to truth," as R.G. Collingwood wrote, "it is essentially the pursuit of truth" – but we must add that this is not the pursuit of a pre-existing truth as much as it is the bringing of truth into being. If this is what modernism recognizes, then modernism is not primarily a chronological category: it is aesthetic and critical, and exemplified in the work of Rita Blitt. Painting and sculpture are for her precisely about recovering what Theodor Adorno referred to as 'the marrow of experience,' which has been lost as a consequence of rationalized modernity, the reduction of reason to instrumental reason, and the domination of nature, inner and outer. Modernist abstraction, and Blitt's gesturalism in particular, reveal that "sensuous particulars can mean, can be hypnotic objects of attention, apart from and in defiance of any form of identifying mechanism other than the one their sheer presence insinuates."

Blitt's work is ultimately aimed at re-claiming the significance of our embodied experience and the status, indeed, the prestige of unique, sensible particulars as the objects proper to such experience. As Adorno observed, there is "really no art that does not have, as a substantial element, the aspect of giving a voice to what has been muted or suppressed –" i.e., sacrificed, though "not necessarily destroyed – in the process of the progressive control of nature." Art allows this, this irreducible sensuous particular to emerge as inherently meaningful, to recover its voice, and stake its claim upon us. In that case, a true appreciation of Rita Blitt's art must also do justice to the utopian aspect of her work: that is, its beckoning us towards an as yet unrealized reconciliation with nature (inner and outer), a reconciliation with those aspects of humanity (the playful, spontaneous and erotic impulses) that have been sacrificed in our relentless drive towards mastery of nature.

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