

# Referring to Rembrandt

E.A.  
Betsy  
Kellas



*E.A. BETSY KELLAS*

*Referring to Rembrandt*

Exhibition organized by E.A. Betsy Kellas and ArtSpace@WHRC, Women's Health Resource Center, Sutter Health CPMC, San Francisco, CA  
Installation, 2015. Acquisition, 2016

Cover: Detail of panel

Unless otherwise noted, all artwork is oil and latex paint on wood panel.

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Published by E.A. Betsy Kellas

[www.betsykellas.com](http://www.betsykellas.com) | [betsykellas@gmail.com](mailto:betsykellas@gmail.com)





*Landscape with Three Trees*, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1643

*From my earliest days as a young printmaker through subsequent decades making and thinking about art, Rembrandt's work has impressed me with the power of art to communicate empathy and compassion, and has helped me see the sublime beauty of the human condition in all its forms.*  
-E.A. Betsy Kellas

## *Referring to Rembrandt*

### *E.A. Betsy Kellas, Artist Statement*

*Referring to Rembrandt* is an installation of thirty-two paintings on panel designed specifically for the Women's Health Resource Center at Sutter Health California Pacific Medical Center, San Francisco, CA.

In preparing for the installation, I thought about the purpose of the Women's Health Resource Center and about providing support for women facing different and often difficult challenges. I wanted to create work that would feel calm and uplifting, and interesting to those who would see it day after day over several months.

I have been a painter for many years. My paintings are usually abstract, focusing on paint and gesture rather than representation. However, for this space I felt the need for an image that could serve as a reference point for the abstraction, some recognizable thing to hold the paintings together and evoke a story as the viewer walked past them up and down the hallway.

For help, I turned to Rembrandt and looked closely at a few of my favorite reproductions of his work. From my earliest days as a young printmaker through subsequent decades making and thinking about art, Rembrandt's work has impressed me with the power of art to communicate empathy and compassion, and has helped me see the sublime beauty of the human condition in all its forms.



His etching, *Landscape with Three Trees*, is a particular favorite of mine. I am drawn to the composition with its heavy dark lines falling sharply from the sky on the left and the lighter, curved lines of the floating clouds moving in behind the strong, leafy trees on the right. I am fascinated by the little man sitting on the hill to the right of the trees. He wears a big hat and looks out at a landscape we cannot see. He is holding a sketchbook and pen.

For me there are few things more beautiful than the velvety richness of an etched line, and Rembrandt's lines are perfection. I explored the lines in different parts of Rembrandt's image, using an ink jet printer to enlarge sections so they became increasingly abstract. I focused on an area between the two trees on the right, just above the cart and into the trees where the leaves are mingled.

I made enlargements from this area and transferred them to silkscreens.



Using oil paints, I printed the images into the paintings. It made me very happy to realize I was using one printing technique (silkscreen) to refer to another printing technique (etching). I painted, blended, dripped and rubbed the painted surfaces. I built layers and sanded them away. I worked the images as if they were entirely abstract.

As I worked, I arranged the paintings into four *polyptychs* or groups, one for each of the four main areas in the hallway of the Women's Health Resource Center. Because the hallway is narrow, the work must be seen either close-up or peripherally while walking. For this reason I included empty spaces for the eye to rest and small dark panels to stop or pace the viewer's eye through the installation.

As I arranged the paintings in the studio, a horizon emerged and seemed to shift from near to far and back again. In some paintings I felt tangled in the foliage, in others I floated above the horizon beyond the sky. I felt a mild disequilibrium as everything moved and changed and I adjusted my perspective. I was reminded of a sentence in the essay, *On Beauty and Being Just*, by the philosopher Elaine Scarry:

How one walks through the world, the endless small adjustments of  
balance, is affected by the shifting weights of beautiful things.

It is my hope that this installation offers moments of beauty for everyone walking through life's uncertainties.

–E.A. Betsy Kellas, September, 2015





## *Referring to Rembrandt*

*Essay by Nicole Miller*

How does context affect our experience of viewing art? When we gaze at a painting we do not isolate the image from its environment but actively take in all the information around that image, relevant or not. In a museum, this could be signage giving information about a work, the adjacent painting or the color of the wall. Context can hinder or facilitate our recognition and understanding of an artwork and influence the overall viewing experience, both through its physical and psychological attributes.

We do not walk into an art gallery or museum in the same emotional state as we do a medical facility. Often, we do not even expect to see artwork when visiting our health care providers. The ArtSpace@WHRC<sup>1</sup> has aimed to change this through its art exhibition program, making use of the space to create a welcoming, serene and healing environment for its visitors.

The ArtSpace@WHRC where E.A. Betsy Kellas installed her thirty-two panel polyptych *Referring to Rembrandt*, is a far cry from a white walled gallery. Rather it is a public corridor with doorways, light fixtures and signage, that also serves a utilitarian purpose. Kellas auspiciously utilized the space, by continually enveloping the viewer in a meditative and inspirational environment through the use of her collage-like arrangement of painted panels, and her nature-inspired color palette that flows expertly with the movement of the work through the space.

The relationship between the context of art, its arrangement and how it relates to the environment in which it is presented, has been a part of the viewing experience since the dawn of painting. From church frescoes to large-scale installations, the viewer is encouraged to experience the artwork not merely as a window to another world but a space through which one can move.

Kellas is strongly influenced by painters such as Barry McGee and Kurt Schwitters, artists not contented with displaying their work as a singular framed piece, but who sought to surround the viewer in their own contrived world. Although subtler, Kellas gives us this same feeling of immersion. By freeing the panels from their frames and filling each wall with horizontal bands of color, the artwork complements rather than competes with the other elements in the space.

When first entering the ArtSpace@WHRC the entire artwork is viewed as a whole in profile. Like an assemblage, the panels push in and out, mimicking the door frames and structure of the hallway itself. As we move through the space, the palette flows across panels and groupings from subtle grey and greens to silvery bluish grays and whites, through to the final composition over painted with varied shades of blue from bright lapis lazuli to periwinkle. Our emotions go along for the journey as the colors evoke a range of expressions.

Kellas' use of color directs our movement around the space as much as the depth variation of the canvas draws us into the space. Although we are predisposed to "read" the canvases from left to right - down and back up - the work does not address the viewer as a narrative so much as a natural process unfolding much like a time lapse film of changing seasons. The cyclical organization of the panels enhances this reading, although the final scintillating blue panels could be seen as a climatic end, it could also be metaphorically winter giving way to spring.



The imagery and patterns used also evoke the natural world, conjuring reflections of storms passing, wind bellowing and pattering rain. Each grouping is repeatedly punctuated with clippings of Rembrandt's *"Landscape with Three Trees"* - turned upside down and sideways, blurred, dripped-over and hidden in shadow. This constant direct reminder of nature's power and beauty is reassuring and strengthening. It keeps us from drifting across the panels without end. "I knew I wanted an anchor, this nameable image," says Kellas.





Like Rembrandt, Kellas was also trained as a print maker and experiments with a variety of techniques and materials to achieve the final surfaces. Oil and latex paint are brushed, blended, dripped, rubbed and screen-printed. The image of the trees is cut and pasted, chopped in half at the edge of one panel or greatly enlarged in scale so that the leaves suggest pop art flowers. In sections the focus is on the negative space of the trees buried under translucent layers of paint like a batik fabric or leaves crushed on the forest floor. The graphic trees become brushstrokes in their own right tempting us to make sense of the picture plane.


On a single panel we see only the remains of the silk screen process, the image of the trees erased, the distinct line from the edge of the square screen and beside it squeegee marks from pushing the paint. These details in texture and line skillfully jumbled together with the recognizable imagery keep us engaged in the work and again evoke the medium of collage. Layer upon layer of paint create washes like floating landscapes – barely perceptible, wispy clouds occasionally peep out behind abraded or dripping paint. Other panels evoke tranquil glassy ponds with gestures of thick paint overlaid and spectral white trees hovering – cut off from or flowing into the next panel. The combination of painterly hand and graphic effects keeps us engaged, our eyes roaming for the next logical mark in the sequence only to be denied, and therefore contemplative as to what is happening in this painted landscape.











“A passing rainstorm, muttering as it flees,  
Secular trees,  
Rejuvenated giants – see them spurn  
The earth and spring to greet the sun’s return  
Such is the scene. You hear the raindrops hiss,  
The glittering wet leaves babbling in the breeze,  
Nature to re-create – what mastery this –  
Grand as the trees!”<sup>2</sup>

This poem, published in 1906, was inspired by Rembrandt’s print, but also stands as an apt description of Kellas’ panels; the senses are evoked by an image - a moment of contemplation on nature and its greatness. Kellas, likewise, creates an alternate world for us to share in by enveloping us in her abstraction, driving the senses and providing limitless space to meditate, heal and find strength.

–Nicole Miller

#### Footnotes

1. ArtSpace@WHRC is located in the Women’s Health Resource Center at Pacific Medical Center, San Francisco, CA.
2. T. P.’s Weekly, Volume 8, July 6 – December 26 1906, edited by Thomas Power O’Connor, Holbrook Jackson

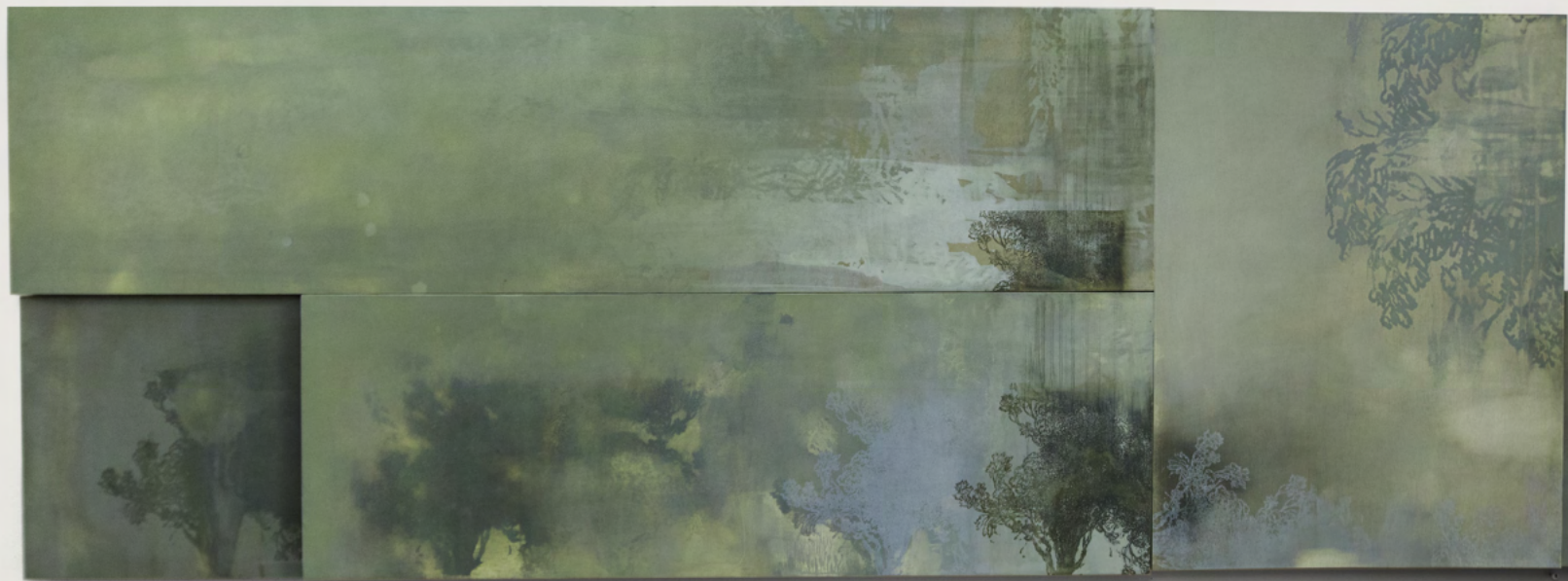


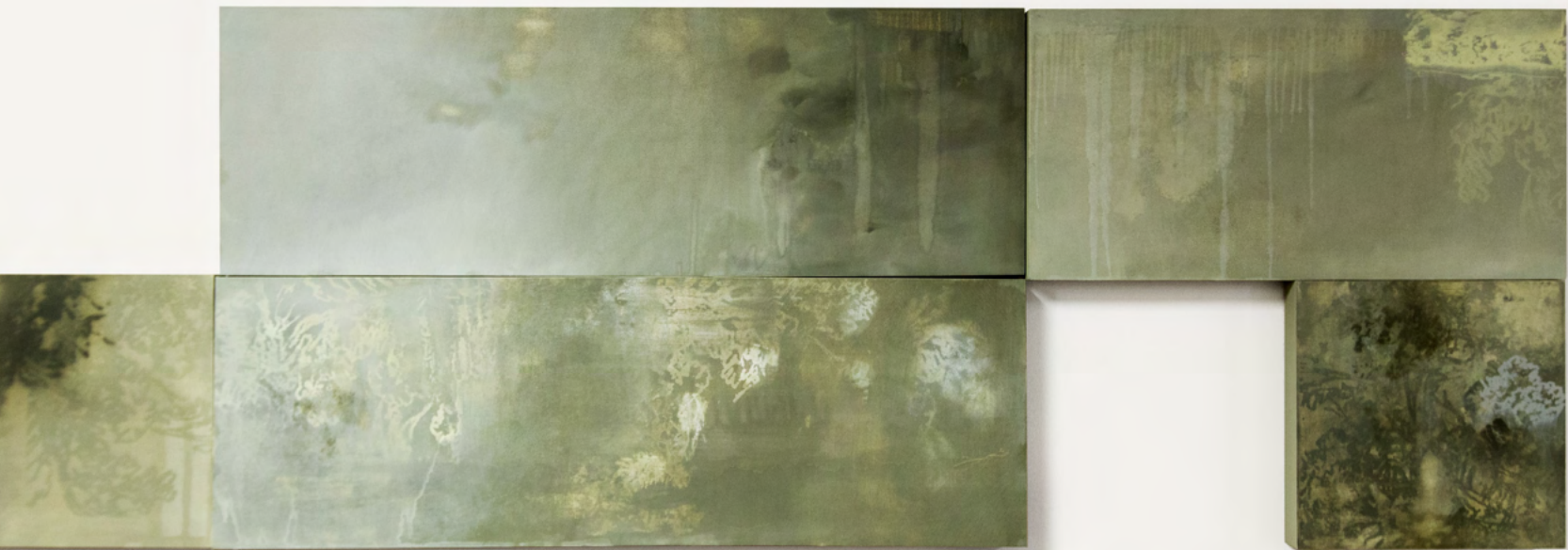






















**Meet the New Practitioner**



**Janice Lee, MD, MEd**

Dr. Lee is a board-certified pediatrician and a mother of two children. She has a passion for patient care and teaching. She is currently completing her residency at the University of Michigan. She is excited to join the team and contribute to the care of our patients.

**Meet the New Practitioner**



# *Referring to Rembrandt*

## *Founding Director's Message*

For the past 20 years, the Women's Health Resource Center has been delighted to host Bay Area artists, in our exhibition corridor, ArtSpace@WHRC. Our intention is to provide a space that is warm and welcoming to both patients and staff and to provide a setting for leading women artists to share their work and their voices. I believe the potent combination of healing one gets from art as well as from health education, information and compassion, all provided at the WHRC, helps our clients achieve optimal wellness.

When Betsy Kellas approached the WHRC in early 2015 we were drawn to the colors, layers, serenity and movement in her portfolio submission. Her work asks one to linger and take a longer, deeper look. As Betsy prepared for her installation, she took time to learn about the Center and the space in great detail. She created the 32 panels in *Referring to Rembrandt* with a color palette that incorporates and highlights the shades of grey and sage in the center's hallway and classroom murals.

The panels reference Rembrandt's etching *The Landscape with Three Trees*, which bring in the movement of floating clouds, the swaying of tree branches in the breeze and the gaze of an artist with a sketchbook overlooking scenery not in our viewpoint. Altogether her work leaves a viewer with a feeling of the fluidity and mystery of life. Its calming and uplifting energy draws one into the heart of the Center.

When I first laid eyes on Betsy's work, I immediately felt it had an organic fit to the work we provide at the Center. So, I am pleased to say that this beautiful installation, *Referring to Rembrandt*, now has a permanent home at the Women's Health Resource Center. ArtSpace@WHRC is beyond grateful for the generosity of individual donors and the CPMC foundation that have made this permanent exhibition possible.

Barb Silver, Nurse Practitioner and Founding Director  
Women's Health Resource Center, Sutter Health CPMC, San Francisco, California  
January, 2016

## Acknowledgements

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The generosity of the CMPC Foundation and individual donors who made the permanent acquisition possible.

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Lia Roozendaal Photography, for the exceptional quality of her photographs, all taken *in situ*, and her remarkable ability to capture the spirit of the exhibition in the catalog design.

Elaine Scarry, Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics at Harvard University, whose book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, continues to inspire.

And Rembrandt van Rijn, of course.

Advocate  
rt *Courage*  
Gratitude  
ssion Live



