

An aerial photograph of a textured, brownish surface, possibly a beach or a field of sand. The surface is characterized by numerous vertical ridges and grooves, creating a complex, organic pattern. Several horizontal bands of a slightly different shade of brown run across the image, suggesting layers or different types of material. The overall appearance is that of a natural, weathered surface.

**E.A.  
BETSY  
KELLAS**

shifting weights

*E.A. BETSY KELLAS* **SHIFTING WEIGHTS**

Exhibition organized by E.A. Betsy Kellas and the Sebastopol Center for the Arts, Sebastopol, CA  
July 31 — August 30, 2014

Cover: Detail of SW.SCA.16

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# Shifting Weights

*E.A. Betsy Kellas*

Essay by *Maria Porges*



Gallery III

Shifting Weights  
G.A. Bessy Weights



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

—Elaine Scarry

*On Beauty and Being Just*



# Shifting *E.A. Betsy Kellas* **Weights**



## Once Upon a Time

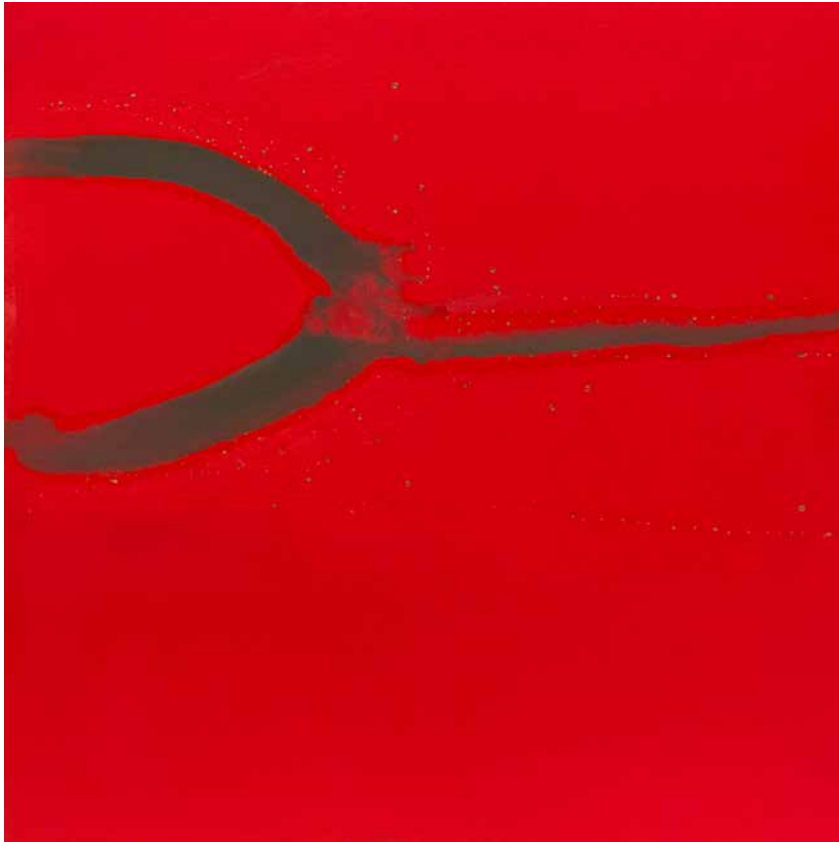
The idea of a story that has no certain beginning or end; within which events can be encountered at will, appears at first to be ultramodern: an invention only made possible by the computer. Yet nonlinear narrative is as old as the hand's inscription of text itself—older, really, in that its earliest examples (Homer's *Iliad*, for one) were recited from memory long before they were written down.

It could be argued that more linear storytelling—this happened, then that, and it ended thusly—is mere convention, invented to make sense of the chaos of events we call history. Memory works more like the flow of paintings in *Shifting Weights*, E.A. Betsy Kellas's installation of seventeen squares and rectangles nestled side by side on the four walls of a small rectangular gallery, with no apparent break. In a rhythm set into motion by and through a series of formal decisions—about palette, scale, methods of mark-making—the paintings flow in a horizontal band. The space between,

above and below them becomes a significant frame for the works themselves: a kind of punctuation, not unlike the moments in music when the notes stop, or when, talking or singing, we take a breath between phrases.

Kellas has spoken about the influence of language in particular in her work—noting her lifelong relationship with the sounds of talk and the way ideas spread over time as people tell stories, making room for thoughts and ideas through the words themselves. For her, words can act as triggers, suggesting a place where language becomes a gesture or a color, a shape or a field of shadow.

*There is a road from the eye to the heart that  
does not go through the intellect.*  
—G.K. Chesterton





Within *Shifting Weights*, another formal vocabulary comes into play. Throughout, there are patterns of resistance and flow, created in part through the deft manipulation of the push-pull relationship between oil and water (crucial to the success of printmaking processes—Kellas’s original field of study). In several places, a swirling elliptical stroke defines an open u or a closed oval, defining/enclosing sometimes positive and sometimes negative space. Veils of drips hang in reticulated, weathered-looking fields of parallel lines between dark stains of indefinable depth.

Like that dialectic of oil and water, Kellas’s deliberately disciplined palette recalls her education as a printmaker. Stark black and white are interwoven with complementary shades of greenish gray and brilliant red. Several small canvases painted a single color (red, black) resist visual entry, asserting their flatness. In others, rapid strokes of rich, inky black on white, or white paint on black gesso, seemingly urge the eye

to move faster, responding to the liquid speed of the medium with which she fills her brush. What remains ambiguous—exquisitely so—is where we are going. Towards the end, or the beginning?







Kellas has described this installation as a polyptych, stating that a single painting served as her starting point. Others were added to it, on one side and the other, the composition expanding and adjusting until the final arrangement of *Shifting Weights*—the whole story, as it were—had been determined. Still, nothing indicates what the first image was. We can start our journey, our metaphorical once upon a time, at the far right: the grouping first visible to gallery visitors, and move to the left from there, past a doorway to the longest wall. Continuing, we pass another shorter wall, the second of two corners, and end at the deep, soft darkness of the largest canvas, on the smallest wall. From there, we can return, spiraling outwards this time from left to right, a more familiar direction for Western viewers.

It is equally satisfying, though, to stand in the middle of the room and allow ourselves to be immersed as the paintings fill our field of vision, like an old-fashioned panorama—those immense circular scenes popular in the (pre-cinematic) 19th century that depicted continuous, 360-degree canvases of battles or landscapes. As in those picturesque attractions, Kellas creates an overall experience filled with specific incident, rewarding close examination with lovely discoveries. Relationships of shape or color move across the edge of one canvas and into the next, joining the two worlds. Layers of lines, dripped with exquisite delicacy in veils of dark on light or light on dark, begin to build a hypnotic, rough grid that disappears only to recur somewhere else.



The densely interwoven texture of such marks reveals that, not only were they created with a variety of media that resist each other even as they cling stubbornly to the surface, Kellas made them by turning the squares and rectangles of canvas or paper this way and that, tilting and flooding, alternately marking decisively and quietly allowing color to spread. We can imagine her doing the same as she devised her arrangement of the completed paintings: shifting them up or down, turning one ninety degrees, mounting another on deep, heavy stretcher bars while another remained unstretched.

In the end, like some board games of childhood (Chutes and Ladders, Candyland, Life), there are many different ways to move through these squares and rectangles—both imaginatively and metaphorically—circling to the end (or the beginning) and back. We can linger at every change in terrain, savoring each attenuated shift in color or light. We can jump, daringly, from red to red, including the tiny square Kellas has isolated near

the top of one wall, a reminder that the mind and eye are always free to drift away, like a rogue balloon. (It also invokes Kasimir Malevich's single black square, hung in the corner of a room in the spot traditionally reserved for the main icon in Russian Orthodox homes, thus asserting art's sacred primacy.) In other places, the jazzy rhythm of Kellas's paintings, large and small, flat and raised off of the wall on stretchers of different depths, suggests music—perhaps, Mondrian's beloved boogie woogie. Shifting from foot to foot, we can feel the silent syncopation of beauty itself.

—*Maria Porges*

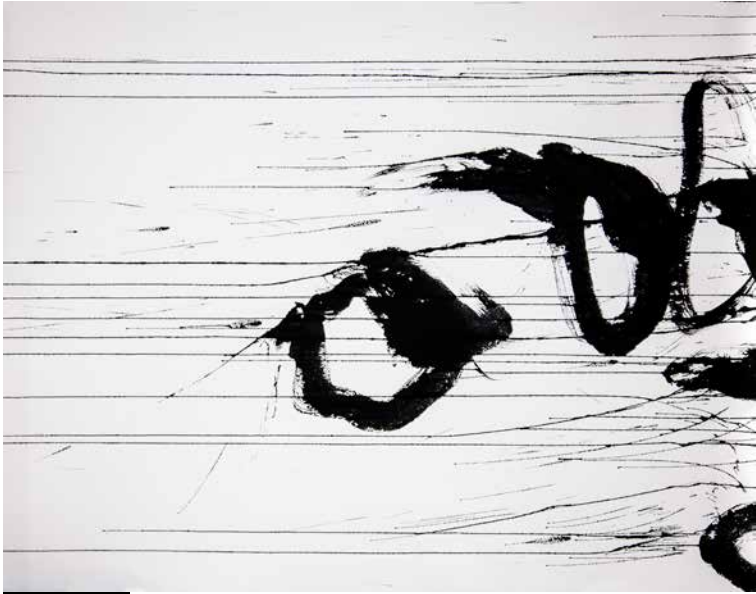






















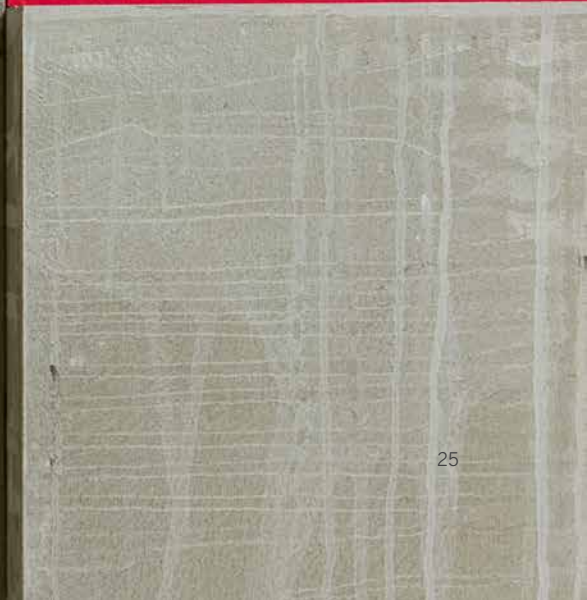
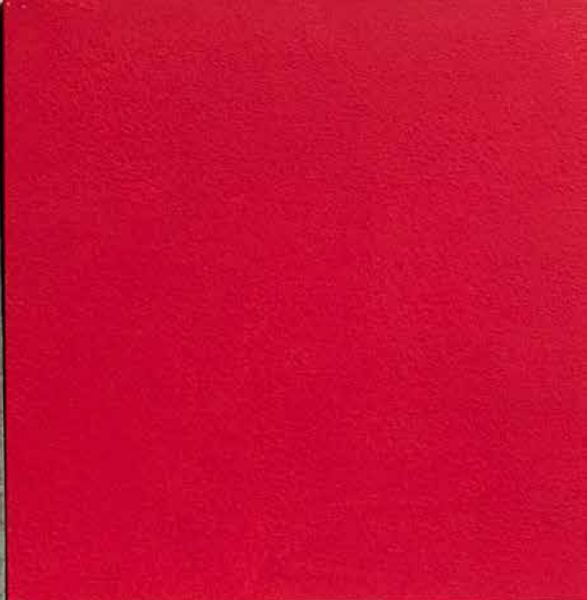














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#### SW.SCA.2

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#### SW.SCA.3

Oil paint, black gesso, and latex paint on paper mounted on panel, 12" x 12"

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Oil paint on canvas, 18" x 18"

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#### SW.SCA.12

Oil paint, black gesso, and spay enamel on canvas, 40" x 60"

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Black gesso on rag paper, 22" x 28"

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Oil paint and black gesso on canvas 9" x 12"

#### SW.SCA.7

Oil paint and black gesso on canvas 30" x 30"

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## Acknowledgements

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