

Alice Elahi



"Harbour from Signal Hill" • 1979 • 410mm x 570mm •
Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"Moonlight in the fog" - Painted where the Waterfront now stands, looking towards Green Point • 1979 • 420mm x 530mm
Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"Boats at night" – Cape Town Docks • 1979 • 390mm x 530mm
Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"Early morning yacht basin" • 1979 • 410mm x 540mm
Indian Ink on Rice Paper

Alice Elahi

By Sean O'Toole

Alice Elahi still recalls the mid-summer evening over thirty years ago when her prized Swedish palette was plucked from her hand by a ripping southeaster and blown into the Cape Town harbour. It was 1979, or possibly 1980. The Elahi family, including Nasrollah Elahi, a Persian-born irrigation engineer, his wife, Alice, and their four daughters, were holidaying in Cape Town. Known for her directly observed colour impressionist studies of the stark coastline and hinterland that extends north from Cape Town to Namibia, Alice Elahi was working on a series of sepia-coloured ink paintings describing the large cargo ships and yachts moored at "isolated piers" in Cape Town, as Elahi remembers them.

Seated in the high-ceilinged, farm-style lounge of her Waterkloof home, where she has lived since 1965, Elahi recalls the scene along Cape Town's industrial shoreline when she arrived with her daughter, Nushin. "We were on the breakwater in our old station wagon," says Elahi, eyes brightening at the fond recollection. "The car was rocking with the wind. My daughter was terrified. I had Wagner's

The Flying Dutchman playing at full volume on the car's radio. I was on an absolute high, the way other people get drunk on other things."

The anecdote, joyfully delivered, summarises the pleasure Elahi found working on the 12 works collected here. "If the watercolours weren't done for joy and excitement, I didn't do them," she insists. "I didn't paint as a job or to make pictures for the market or to duplicate what I had done. In that way, I painted my watercolours for the sheer delight and excitement of using paint, and seeing what you could do with it. I loved the wild winds in the docks."

Born into the Brookes-Lemos family, who introduced South Africans to the Oros brand, Elahi's early interest in art was sharpened by her experiences serving as secretary for the art society at the University of Cape Town. After completing her undergraduate degree in chemistry, she enrolled at the Continental School of Art for a year, where the influential Cape painter Maurice van Essche tutored Elahi and classmates Erik Laubscher, Stanley Pinker and John Coplans.

Cape Town's docks soon established themselves as a passive backdrop to Elahi's early adult life. In 1949 she attended

the Anglo-French Art Centre in London, this bold new start prefaced by a two-week journey by ship, aboard the Union Castle line, from Cape Town. Elahi made a total of four return trips to London by boat over the next seven years. At this early point in her career – on the one hand raising a young family in austerity-era Britain, and on the other processing the teachings and influence of Zdzislaw Ruszkowski, a Polish impressionist painter and colourist she met in London – Cape Town's docks represented little more than an unavoidable interlude on her visits home.

Decades later, in 1979, her youngest daughter, Dorrieh, now a teenager, Elahi decided to revisit this place of windy wildness and latent nostalgia. Her decision to repeatedly paint Cape Town's harbour – as well as work on a few harbour scenes set in Hout Bay and Simonstown – using only a sepia-toned ink remains unusual given her enduring predisposition to colour and Matisse. "A pure black would have been too harsh," offers Elahi, who mixed traditional Indian ink with brown pigment to achieve distinctive colour. (Note: the work has been reprinted here in black.) She adds that these harbour studies were not the only time she experimented with a monochromatic palette. "I went to the Transkei and did some portraits

of Xhosa women," she says. "I tried it in the Namibian desert too, but describing the desert is so much about the colour and to reduce it to a monochrome wouldn't allow it, the desert, to speak."

Although not immediately apparent, there is a link between her spare desert studies, notable for their abstracted qualities, and these harbour scenes. Both were made under difficult circumstances. In Namibia, travelling alone for six to eight weeks at a time – "a tame life didn't suit me," offers Elahi at one point – flies and ants and "every kind of gogga" interfered with her *pleinairist*, or outdoor style of painting from nature. At Cape Town's docks, the hazards were different, albeit similarly marked: they included fierce winds and occasionally truculent sex workers.

The visceral nature of the environments in which she painted filters into the language Elahi uses to describe her scenes. Scenes were "flung" onto the imported Japanese rice paper she used in her harbour studies. "My watercolours were totally self-taught," she adds. "It became a marvellous medium for immediate work." In the same way that painters once used the pencil, and nowadays the camera, to look and observe, Elahi speaks of her

watercolours as notational: they were records of directly observing and seeing. "Some of the works were later translated into oils," she adds. "I would use these [the watercolours] to record the swirling vigour of the waves."

Whether viewed as work-in-progress sketches or complete works, these harbour studies are nonetheless linked by a singular ambition: to record, in visual form, "an emotional bonding" with a particular geography. "I am not interested in palms and blue seas, in tropical Africa," says Elahi. Rather, she wanted to make "a truthful statement" of a part of Africa that is personal, particular and entirely local. One might add to this statement, especially given the great cosmetic revamp of Cape Town's docks in recent years, that these works, marked by their resolute naval forms, bold graphic lines and agitated swirls of ink, offer a truthful account of what was, but no longer is.

Sean O'Toole is a journalist, author and editor living in Cape Town.



"Old Penny Ferry in the mist" - Cape Town Docks • 1979
420mm x 580mm • Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"Ship roped to the Bollard" - Signal Hill in distance •
1979 • 440mm x 570mm • Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"At Anchor" - Cape Town Docks • 1980 • 450mm x 580mm
Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"South Easter" - Cape Town Docks • 1980 • 440 mm x 560 mm
Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"In Harbour" • 1980 • 440 mm x 560 mm • Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"Steaming" • 1980 • 340mm x 530mm • Indian Ink on Rice Paper



"Large ship coming into harbour" • 1980 • 390mm x 500mm
Indian Ink on Rice Paper

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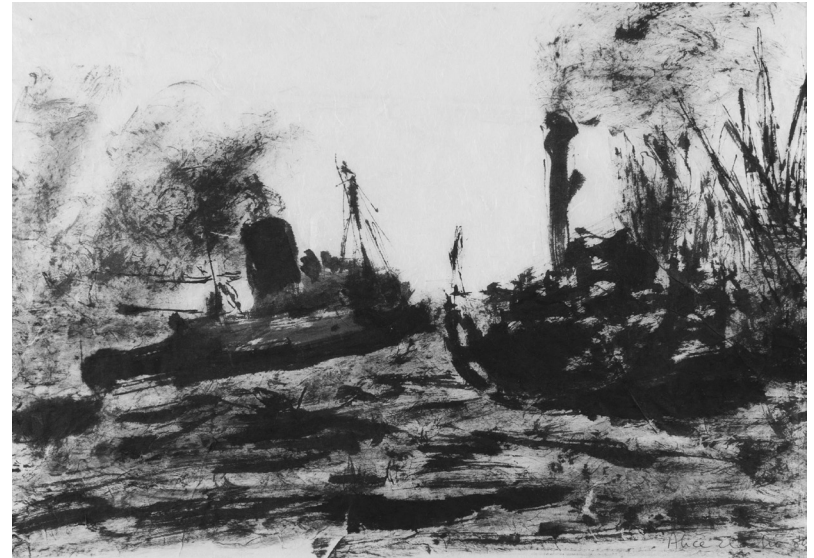
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"Smoking Tug" • 1980 • 390mm x 560mm • Indian Ink on Rice
Paper



Cullinan



Dullstroom



Graskop



Pretoria - Tshwane



Richmond