



Alice Elahi

Rocks and Spray (St Francis Bay), undated -circa 1987
Watercolour on paper



ALICE ELAHI, A CAPETONIAN AT HEART

Alice Elahi, the renowned South African landscape artist, was born nearly ninety years ago in Cape Town, and though she has spent most of her working life in Pretoria, she has never broken her ties with the Mother City.

Growing up in the leafy suburb of Bishopscourt as the daughter of an MP and founder of the Oros soft drinks company, Elahi showed her interest in art at an early age, recently finding a linocut of the Zebra River near Oudtshoorn she made as a 14-year-old for her father. She was destined to take up the role of chemist in the Oros factory, but her time completing

a science degree at UCT was filled more by organising the art society than anything else, and she jumped at the chance to study art in London on finishing her BSc.

Life took a different turn when she married an Iranian water engineer, and although the family returned to South Africa, they settled in Pretoria, where she has lived since 1957. With her parents still in Cape Town, the family would migrate there for the summer holiday and her early subjects were mostly of her children on the beach at places like Miller's Point, or sunning themselves on the stoep of

Hout Bay Harbour at Sunset, undated
Watercolour on paper



the ramshackle house near Boulders they regularly rented for the December holidays. After a hiatus in her career, Elahi had flung herself back into working mode when she won the 1968 New Signatures Award, and the first of many solo exhibitions followed in 1972.

In the early Seventies Elahi discovered the thrill of the boats preparing for the Cape to Rio yacht race and her work of this era is filled with the colour and bustle of sails and masts. At the time, the city docks were a working area which required a permit to enter, and on the quays of what is now the V&A Waterfront Elahi sat night after night painting sunsets and howling South Easter gales, creating a series of inks

of the little Penny Ferry and the tugs going out to the tankers, the ropes that tied up the huge ships, and the cranes that dotted the docks. The reflections of boats in the water also fascinated her, and this era captures historic images of not only the city harbour, but also the fishing harbour in Hout Bay and Simonstown's naval dockyard. There are paintings which have been in the artist's own collection since they were first exhibited in the Seventies, including an oil of night reflections of fishing boats docked in the Irving and Johnson basin in the city or another of the smoke belching from one of the harbour factories. "There is an intensity of mood when painting as the light fades, or in the darkness," she says.

Seals on the Rocks, Cape Cross, undated
Watercolour on paper



Trained to paint in oil, and using watercolour primarily as a notational medium, Elahi soon became a master in using the immediacy of watercolour to capture the changing light and shade as she painted out of doors. Her *plein-air* studies at times have sea-spray, raindrops or desert sand embedded in them.

The place where sea and land meet has always fascinated her, especially when the evening light casts its spell over them. "It's a time of such magic," she says. "People have gone and you have the place to yourself, and it's as if you can feel the essence of the landscape. That's what I am trying to capture in my work. It's not about creating a pictorial representation

of a scene. Certainly I have always been drawn to water, particularly the sea, because it is always changing. In the time that it takes to paint a watercolour, there will have been many waves breaking on the shore, each with its own patterns, and your painting has to capture that. Storms and sunsets are fleeting moments and putting them down on paper becomes a battle with the elements which I find thrilling. You need to be there, to have the wind in your hair, the smell of the sea in your nostrils, to really capture the mood."

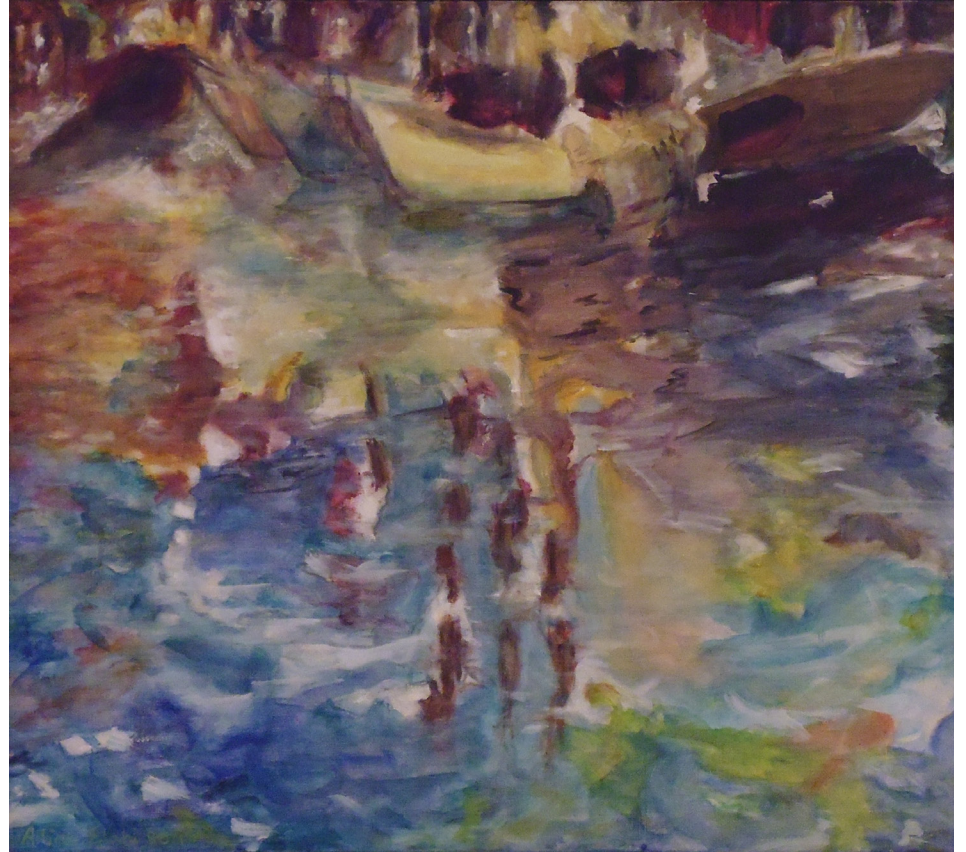
Elahi started painting in Namibia's red dunes in the early Eighties after a series exploring the Cape's mountain passes. She soon moved from the



Cloud Pouring over the Mountain, Cape Point, undated
Watercolour on paper

stark desert patterns to the wild barrenness of the Skeleton Coast, but painting trips along the Cape coast always interspersed the long and arduous desert ones. “I have explored up and down the Cape coastline over the years. Perhaps not living by the sea meant I could always see it with a new delight whenever I came down to the coast again. I’m like a fish that needs to get back to the sea to recharge my soul.”

Reflections, Irving and Johnson Basin, 1980/1
Oil on canvas



Hulls, Reflections, 1979
Watercolour on paper



Sunset, Lüderitz, 1993
Watercolour on paper



Reflections and Smoke, Cape Town docks, 1979
Watercolour on paper





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Page 1: *The Zebra River near Oudtshoorn*, 1940, linocut (done as a present for her father when Elahi was 14 years old – initialled AB as Alice Brooke)



Grasses at Cape Point, undated
Watercolour on paper

- ⊕ Cullinan - Gauteng
- ⊕ Dullstroom - Mpumalanga
- ⊕ Graskop - Mpumalanga
- ⊕ Pretoria - Gauteng
- ⊕ Richmond - Northern Cape