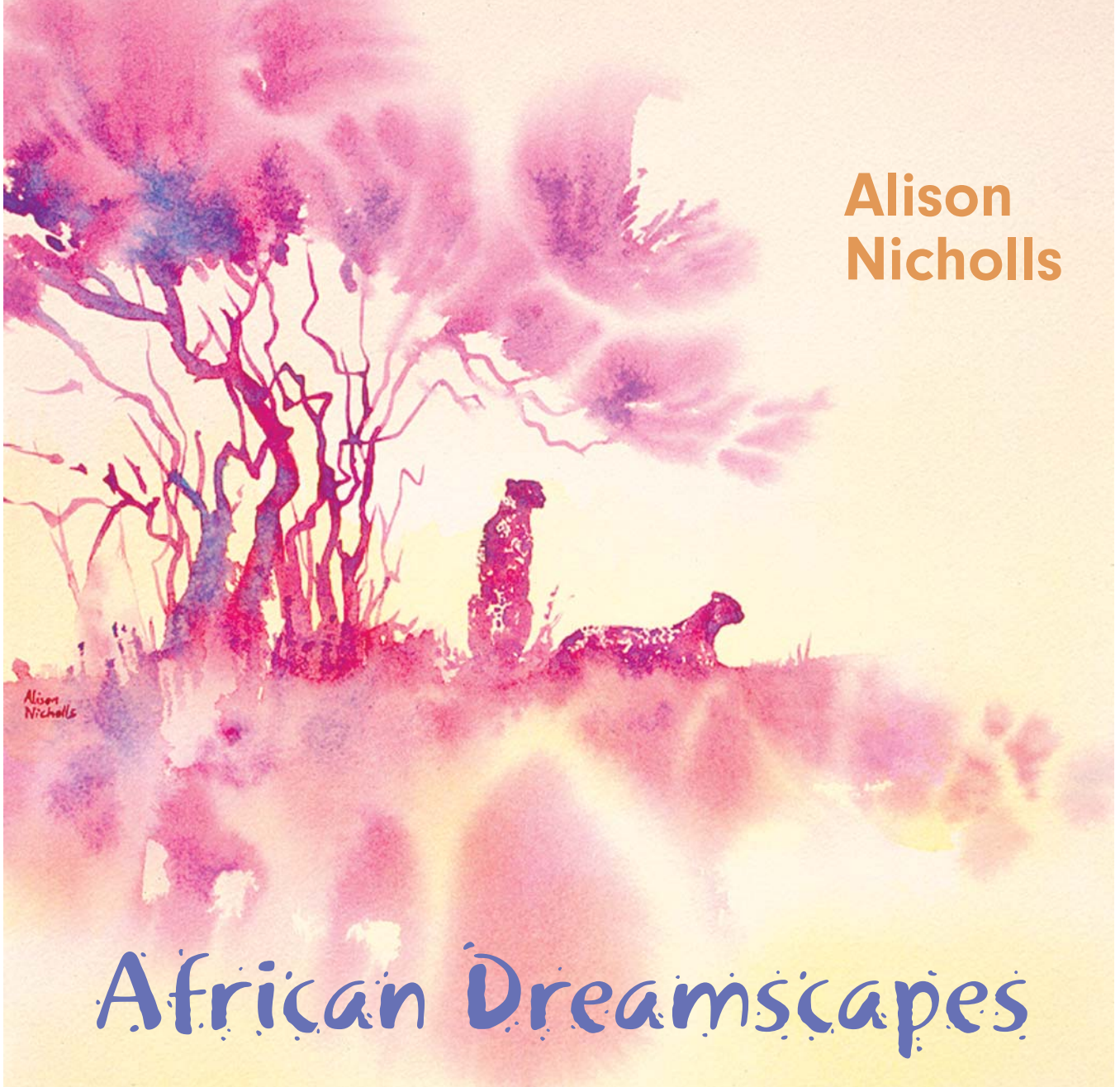


Alison Nicholls



African Dreamscapes

A Shady Spot (watercolor, 11½ x 11½")

BY DENNIS GAFFNEY

On a balmy winter's day, English watercolorist Alison Nicholls invites me to join her for lunch in her suburban home just north of New York City. Surrounding us are nostalgic reminders of her other world, the one she often dreams of. We sit at a massive molasses-colored table made of weathered teak railway ties from Zimbabwe, a wedding present to Alison and her husband, Nigel. Perched at the far end of the table is a piece of driftwood carved into an abstract-looking hornbill. On the wall, hangs a replica of a 1626 map of Africa, and all around are reminders of that continent: paintings and photos of lions, leopards and hippos, and on a side table, a vase stuffed with porcupine quills and feathers from guinea fowl and kori bustard that Nicholls says

she "picked up from the bush in Botswana."

"I miss it hugely," she says of the southern African bush, particularly in Zimbabwe and Botswana, where she lived for nine years before moving to the Westchester County town of Port Chester in 2002. "My friends must get tired of hearing me revert every conversation I have back to Africa."

Nicholls, now 40, first went to southern Africa in 1994. At that time, Nigel had been offered a transfer with an engineering firm from England to Zimbabwe, and Alison encouraged him to take it. The move gave her more free time so she decided to take up drawing, a childhood passion that she'd abandoned after still life lessons in high



Alison Nicholls

Photo by Dennis Gaffney

school art classes dampened her enthusiasm. After they moved to Botswana in 1996, she and Nigel frequently camped in the rugged, dry grasslands of the Kalahari, often in national parks, where people are as rare as trees. On their trips to the bush, they had to carry in their own food, water and fuel, and camped in places that are still a long way from having cell phone coverage.

"Immediately, I loved it," she says. "It brought back all these memories" of elephants, zebras, lions and other animals she had watched on TV nature programs as a young girl. She also found herself drawn to the desert landscape, a passion common among the British, perhaps the result of "all that green at home," she says. One of the first African subjects Nicholls drew was a msasa, a twisted tree common in Zimbabwe. But at first, the tree on her sketch pad resembled a British oak.



Duma (watercolor, 10 x 12")



Running from the Rain (watercolor, 11 x 15")

comes to color, I think dusk or dawn or the heat of the day," she says. "I like the atmospheric effects. I like all the dust in the air." And the wide-open spaces in her paintings seem to mimic those of the desert's grasslands and their horizon-to-horizon skies. In her watercolor, *Running from the Rain*, she turns sky, rain and grassland into an impressionistic curtain of purple and blue watercolor washes.

But the two wildebeests in that painting, like all her animals, are realistic and detailed. "I want the anatomy, the stance, the gait, to be correct," she says, "I'm painting for myself, but I'm also painting for people who appreciate African wildlife. They might say, 'That cheetah's purple, but it's right in every other way.'"

At Home in the Bush

"It was a case of learning to draw what you actually see, not what you think you see," she says. But she kept returning to the African bush, and kept drawing a world she quickly came to feel at home in. "I love to fall asleep at night," she wrote in one of her online newsletters, "listening to lions calling, elephants breaking branches behind camp, hippos grunting in the nearby channel, and hyenas whooping, clear as a bell."

Her muse is clearly the African bush, a world that has not only shaped her subject matter—she now only paints African animals in these habitats—but also infused her style. The fine dusty beige sand of the Kalahari Desert almost coats her paintings, muting her palette. "When it



Crossing the Road (watercolor, 12 x 20")



Out of the Blue (watercolor, 8 x 10")

Her hankering for accuracy is also the reason she paints animals as they live their lives, not engaged in some Mutual of Omaha-like melodrama. "I try not to look for dramatic moments," she says. "I can't think of one that I've painted." Her portrayal of two gemsbok in *Crossing the Road*, which are doing just that, is about as dramatic as it gets in a Nicholls painting. Many of her animals are simply lazing around, as is the cheetah in *Duma*, which is lounging with its back to the viewer, looking off who-knows-where.

"I rarely paint animals looking right at you," she says. "If they're looking at you, it's because they've been disturbed. Animals spend most of their time feeding or resting, and that's how I like to paint them. When I think of elephants, I don't think of charging elephants. I think of them taking a drink." A Nicholls painting sometimes doesn't include an animal's face, a given in so much wildlife art.

"A lot of friends," she says, "accuse me of just painting back-sides." She chuckles at that, and takes it as a compliment when told that her languid-looking animals and their muted colors are calming, not amusing or exciting. "That's my intention," she says. "I like art in my house that's calming. I don't want a controversial political statement on my walls. It's not me."



Spots in the Grass (watercolor, 10 x 14")

Why Leave Africa?

So why did someone who loves the African bush so much end up in the suburbs of New York City? "After nine years in Africa, it was time to move on," she says. "I can go back to Africa when I need to, but here, I can market my work. In Botswana, the market is very small."

Since settling in the United States, Nicholls has started an online newsletter, participated in numerous shows, and has done slide presentations at the Bronx and Central Park Zoos. She also was invited to join the Worldwide Nature Artists Group, an international society of artists, which named Nicholls one of its Artists of the Month. Since 2003, she has worked full time on her art—four days a week on painting, with one day a week devoted to marketing.




Eyes of Africa (watercolor, 16 x 26")

Being away from southern Africa also serves her artistic muse. It's difficult to work with watercolors in the field, she says, as dusty winds can soil the watercolors while they're still wet. And the paints often dry too fast in the arid air to create the washes she likes to use. She's even had moisture bees, desperate for something to drink, settle on the end of her brush while she's painting.

But getting away from the bush is also essential in another way. When Nicholls is in the bush, she's immersed in detail, which she records with pen and pencil sketches, and by taking extensive field notes. (During a visit last year, her companions teased her about her obsessive note taking on various grasses.) But when it's time to paint, Nicholls wants to be free of details, the reason she avoids sketches and photos when composing her watercolors.

"Being here," she says of her American home, "allows me to eliminate unnecessary details." Often a composition pops into her mind while she's taking her German shepherd, Kim, for a walk. Other times, she closes her eyes, and her next painting reveals itself.

"Painting is as much about what you leave out," she says, "as what you put in." 

Dennis Gaffney is a free-lance writer living in Albany, N.Y.

Images courtesy of the artist.