

TONI BURTON AND FIONA JEFFERY

Vali Myers: Australian artist

Vali Myers (1930–2003) was known as a free-thinking artist and dancer who lived a unique bohemian life true to herself. In Vali's own words, she was 'born foxy, she escaped education and cultural conditioning, she was original, solitary and innocent, like a shooting star in the night sky'.¹

Aged 19 and already a modern ballet dancer, Vali left Melbourne for Paris to forge an independent life and escape the traditional conventions of domesticity. Life in postwar Paris was difficult, and Vali spent three years living on the streets of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés quarter of the Left Bank and dancing in the city's nightclubs. She mixed with many well-known figures, including Jean Genet, Jean-Paul Sartre and Django Reinhardt. Her international career was established through photographs taken by Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsken for his 1956 photobook about bohemian life, *Love on the Left Bank*. In 1958 George Plimpton, the American editor of the literary magazine *Paris Review*, wrote about her life and reproduced her black-and-white drawings.²

In 1958 Vali left Paris, eventually settling in the remote Italian valley of Il Porto. She made her home there for 40 years, living in an abandoned one-room domed pavilion in a rugged and isolated ravine above the seaside town of Positano. She lived with Rudi Rappold and later with Gianni Menichetti, who arrived in the valley in 1971. Their home provided a sanctuary for over

Vali Myers, *Hotel Schatz*, postcard of original drawing, owned by George A Plimpton, 1955, H2021.90/9. Copyright Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust





Top left Norman Ikin, *Vali Myers*, c. 1949–50, H2007.114/125 **Top right** Rudi Rappold, *Vali and her fox*, 1972, H2021.79. Copyright Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust **Bottom left** Ed van der Elsen, *Vali Myers in front of her mirror, Paris*, 1953, H2019.51/74. Copyright Nederlands Fotomuseum / © Ed van der Elsen **Bottom right** Vali as an artist, c. 1951–55, H2019.51/8A. Copyright Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust



Entrance to Il Porto Wildlife Oasis, c. 1999, H2022.22/4. Copyright Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust

100 animals, and Vali fought hard to keep it as a pristine refuge, establishing the Il Porto Wildlife Oasis. The environment of Il Porto and the animals that she cared for, including her beloved pet fox, became her greatest inspiration and featured in almost all of her drawings.

‘Stella Maris’ in the upper left hand of this drawing is a whaling boat with men rowing like fury, busy hunting and harpooning the great white whale above the foaming swirl of the sea are my stormy petrels.

Vali Myers, Il Porto Wildlife Oasis, visual diary, January 2001, p. 38, H2018.443



Left Vali Myers, *Dido*, pen, black ink, watercolour and tempera, 35 × 23 cm, 1973–74, H2019.53/2 **Right** Vali Myers, *Stella Maris*, pen, sepia ink and watercolour, 38.4 × 28.0 cm, 1998, H2019.53/11. Both images copyright Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust

Anima – animals. Love everything connected with them. Kung-Fu (the art of fighting taken from animals). Shamans, art evolved from them, all dancing and drawing, all my dark roots and all my wild suffering.

Vali Myers, Year of the tiger 1974–1975, visual diary, January 1975, p. 93, H2018.434

When not living in her Italian home, Vali travelled regularly to the infamously bohemian Chelsea Hotel in New York to sell her highly detailed drawings. She cut a striking figure with her face adorned with distinctive tattoos, and she was feted by the rich and famous of the art and music worlds. Considered a muse to many, she was a friend of Jean Cocteau, written about by Tennessee Williams,³ praised by Salvador Dalí and an inspiration and friend to Patti Smith, Donovan, Debbie Harry and Marianne Faithfull. Vali established an international career and reputation during the 43 years that she travelled between Italy and New York.

Vali returned to Melbourne in 1993 and set up her studio-gallery in the landmark Nicholas Building overlooking Swanston Street. The last years of her life were spent between Positano and Melbourne; she passed away in 2003.



James Lauritz, *Vali Myers in her studio, Nicholas Building, Swanston Street Melbourne*, c. 1997, H2022.22/827. Copyright James Lauritz

As well as her meticulously detailed drawings, she also kept visual diaries from the mid-1950s to 2002. Each of these is a creative work, with Vali's intricate handwriting interspersed with cut-out pictures, photographs, magazine clippings and sketches. In a diary kept in 1993, Vali wrote about her travels and preparations for an exhibition in Melbourne after her return to Australia:

Came back to the valley from Melbourne, touching down in Sydney, Singapore, London, then Naples – considering, I was all O.K. Now on the 20th I begin to sleep and unwind. All my animals are fine – it's springtime and toads are everywhere. I've a lot to do between now and sometime in September, organising the shipping of crate-loads of prints and posters and books etc. from Holland where everything is stored and here, having invites and posters made in Naples for my show at the Emerald Hill Gallery in South Melbourne.⁴



Vali Myers, Sheila Devi Il Porto, visual diary, 31.5 × 21.5 × 3.0 cm, September 1992, p. 13 (left); February 1993, p. 37 (right), H2018.442. Copyright Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust

In 2018 the Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust donated Vali Myers's archive of drawings, visual diaries and personal effects to State Library Victoria. As well as her artworks, the archive includes photographs, posters, paintboxes and art materials, jewellery and cosmetics, books and videos, personal papers and her brass bed. This gift to the Library honoured her final wish to bequeath her life's work to the people of Victoria.

The Library is currently undertaking the archive's cataloguing and digitisation, and a finding aid has been created for the pictorial and realia components of the collection, which is available to researchers.⁵ The finding aid for the manuscripts component is in progress. After selective digitisation has been completed, links to the digitised content will be added to the finding aids. This work will ensure that the collection is preserved and made accessible to researchers now and in the future.