

VALI MYERS

by Ruth Cullen

Vali Myers artist, dancer, shaman, and muse to many was a fire starter, a creatrix, a force of nature. She was the real deal and you either got it or you didn't. She didn't care either way.

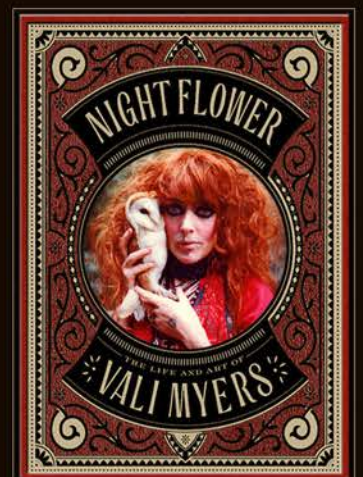
Her base, and source of inspiration for much of her art, was her wild valley, Il Porto, near Positano, Italy which she shared with her many animals and her partners. She lived in a tiny cabin without electricity or running water in a canyon that could only be reached by foot. And that was exactly how she liked it – elemental and wild.

"In the valley of the Toads and Tears, in the land of the Foxies and the Fire" (Diary excerpt)



Here, in her burrow, she drew by gaslight late into the night with her beloved fox "Foxy" nearby. While her personality was buoyant and larger than life, her paintings are delicate, timeless and rippling – magical, mythic, Visionary Art.

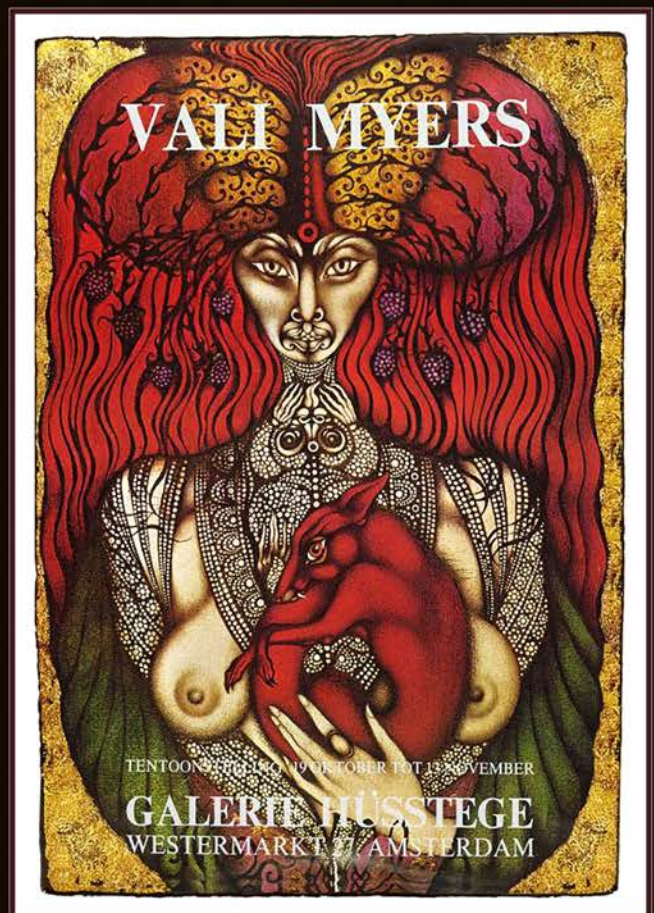
Her materials were ink, watercolour and gold leaf and she drew with a fine English pen nib set onto a goose feather for lightness. Although she was self-taught, she had an extensive knowledge of poetry, literature, and mythology and these elements all



found their way into her work. Her output was comparatively small – one or two paintings a year. Once they were finished she'd set off either to London, Amsterdam or New York where her collectors were based.

"A good fox hunts far from the burrow" (The Tightrope Dancer - documentary)

I met Vali in New York in the early 80s. I also made two documentaries about her. The first one was when she was living at the Chelsea Hotel. At that time Manhattan was about as hard core as it got in the "I've seen everything stakes" but even then Vali stood out. She was a magnificent beauty and remained so for the rest of her life, but it was her wild red hair, huge kohl rimmed eyes, facial tattoos and her gypsy robes that literally stopped people in the street. Later she had her front teeth plated gold but it wasn't attention she was after, it came from within. Like her art, she liked wearing the inside on the outside. She was a proud peacock – beautifully displayed in all her finery.



Photographers loved her – Dianne Arbus, Mary Ellen Mark and Scavullo photographed her, and the acclaimed Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsken made her the focus of his cult classic Love On The Left Bank. This book features stunning black and white photographs of Vali and her friends adrift in Paris – young post-war vagabonds who populated the cafes of the Left Bank.

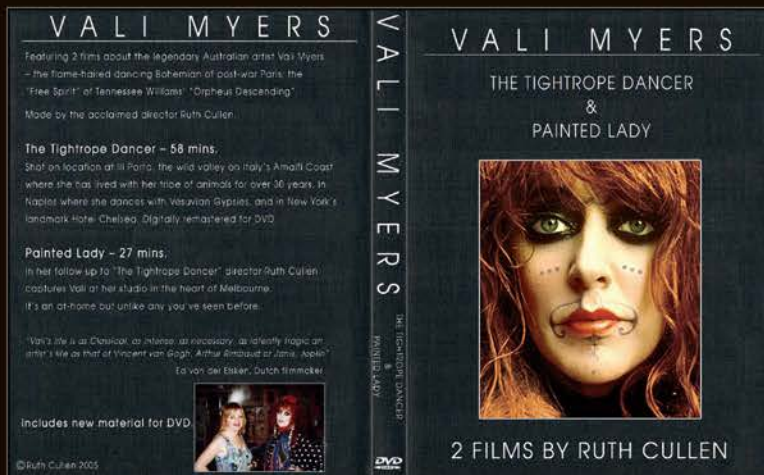
"Paris 1955 spinning in on myself, touching rock-bottom, flirting with death"

Love on The Left Bank went on to inspire many, including a 14 year old Patti Smith who became infatuated with Vali when she discovered these dark Romantic images. They opened up possibilities of a life far from the

banalities of the factory floor and New Jersey. Years later Patti met her idol at the Chelsea Hotel in New York and Vali tattooed her knee with a thunderbolt.

Valerie Ruth Myers was born in Sydney, Australia in 1930. She was 19 when she fled the country for Paris and she didn't return for over 40 years. During these "Paris years" she started to draw seriously. It was a time of "dark incubation" and opiated dreams where she rarely

saw sunlight. Only a few drawings have survived this period – tiny black and white self-portraits of a fragile soul close to death. These early "nigredo" works already encapsulate the elements that were





to become so much a part of her art later on.

After nearly 10 years of drifting around Europe and the UK, she finally settled in her oasis, Il Porto, Italy in 1958. This valley became her base for the rest of her life and her former partner Gianni continues to live there today. Vali always claimed that her valley bought her back to life and, as always, this was reflected in her work – especially *Lammas Tide* which she completed in 1964.

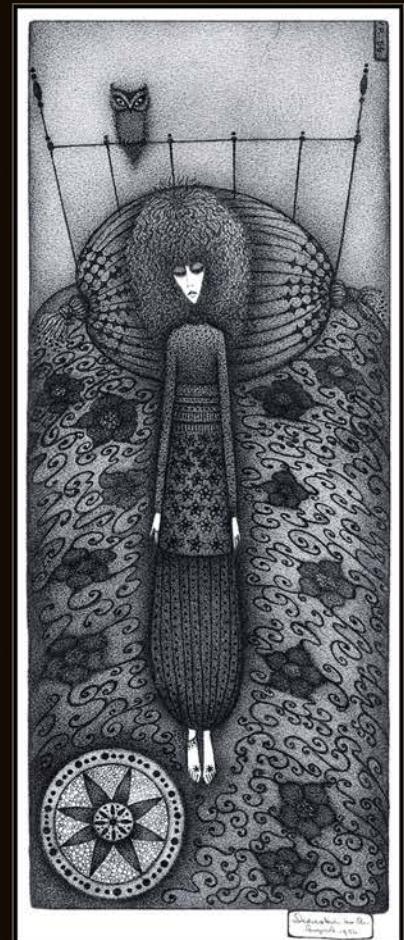
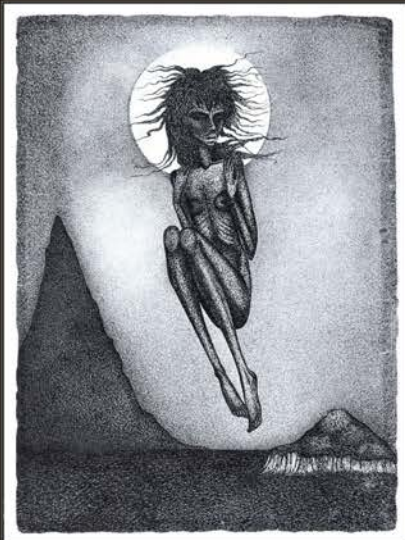
"It was like the rebirth of my spirit waking up again".

Symbolic death and rebirth were to feature prominently in both Vali's work and in her life, and this cyclical duality is fundamental to understanding her art. As she grew stronger, her drawings became more complex, they grew in size, and the content broadened to include the valley, her animal familiars, folklore, mythology, men, her lovers. Black and white led to sepia, then additional colour made its way into her work.

One of these early colour works *Opium* from 1967 is being exhibited at the Giger Museum. This drawing was only discovered recently and it has never been reproduced or exhibited before.

Vali spent most of the 60's in her valley. Sometimes people would come to her, like Marianne Faithfull and Mick Jagger, but for months on end, her only companions were her animals and her husband Rudi and later Gianni.

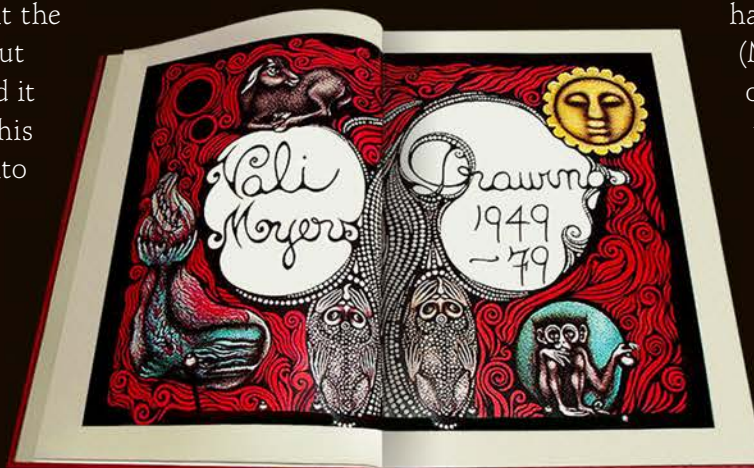
Vali never lived in the middle lane, she wouldn't have known how. All





her life she embraced the peaks and troughs of outrageous fortune. She hated the word happiness but believed in intense moments of joy. Side by side with this went the dives into the abyss but she wouldn't have had it any other way. And this duality fed directly into her art.

"You got to take that pain and suffering and turn it into something magical." (The Tightrope Dancer – documentary)



One of her strongest influences was Herbert Melville's *Moby Dick* which she re-read every year. Many of her drawings feature a

harpooned white whale (*Moby Dick*) and one of her most important works shares the title. Any optimism in her art is symbolized by this harpooned whale of nature dragging human greed and hubris to the depths of the ocean before rising up triumphant as

nature re-balances and regains her rightful place.

The importance of nature was central to Vali work. Nature was always female and she believed that humans, symbolized by the male intellect, had lost their connection to the essential rhythms of life. As a consequence, life was out of balance in a very fundamental way. Vali's approach to nature was no hippie reverie, hers was a far more violent and savage entity than the peace and love crowd ever imagined in their Arcadian dreamings.

Vali hated the sun and always loved the bitter cold of mid-winter. She lived very simply in the valley, close to the elements and the cycles of the moon and the sun. She was frequently described as a witch, but she preferred to call herself a heathen. There's no doubt there's an esoteric element to her work but like the rest of her, she was part of it and transcendent at the same time. The witchy side is evident in the animal signposts – the raven, the hare, the owl, or the toads, which populate her drawings. It can also be seen in the central goddess figure such as the Madonna del Arco, Dido, or herself ("me but not me" she'd say). But regardless of whether it was a Black Madonna, a harpooned whale, or a warrior woman – sometimes fierce, sometimes sensual, sometimes dying, all would rise up again like a Phoenix from the ashes, just as she did repeatedly throughout her life.

One artist she felt a real affinity with was Frida Kahlo. The similarities between the two are immense (right down to their mutual moustaches although Frida's was natural and Vali's tattooed) but Vali never even knew Frida existed until the late 80s and by then Frida had been dead for 30 years. Like Frida, women and the self were right at the centre of Vali's art and her perspective was essentially a female one. "Where do you come from and where do you go back to?" she'd ask?



Vali worked at night - by gaslight. Sometimes she would have Gianni read poetry to her while she drew, sometimes it was music, other times just the frogs, but there was always a drink quietly sipped as she worked till dawn. Night Flight is the name of one of the small black and white drawings from her Paris Years, but it is also the time when Vali came alive.

She loved heroes and heroines, dreamers and outlaws and there was always a special place in her heart for her beloved gypsies (Roma) of Naples. She liked to mix people up and never liked things to be too smooth. She always preferred some "sand in the gearbox" as she put it. She had an enormous capacity for pleasure and was very, very tough but she could also be gentle especially with wounded and vulnerable ones.

She lived absolutely in the present but drew on a huge esoteric body of knowledge that gave her art a vitality and complexity. At

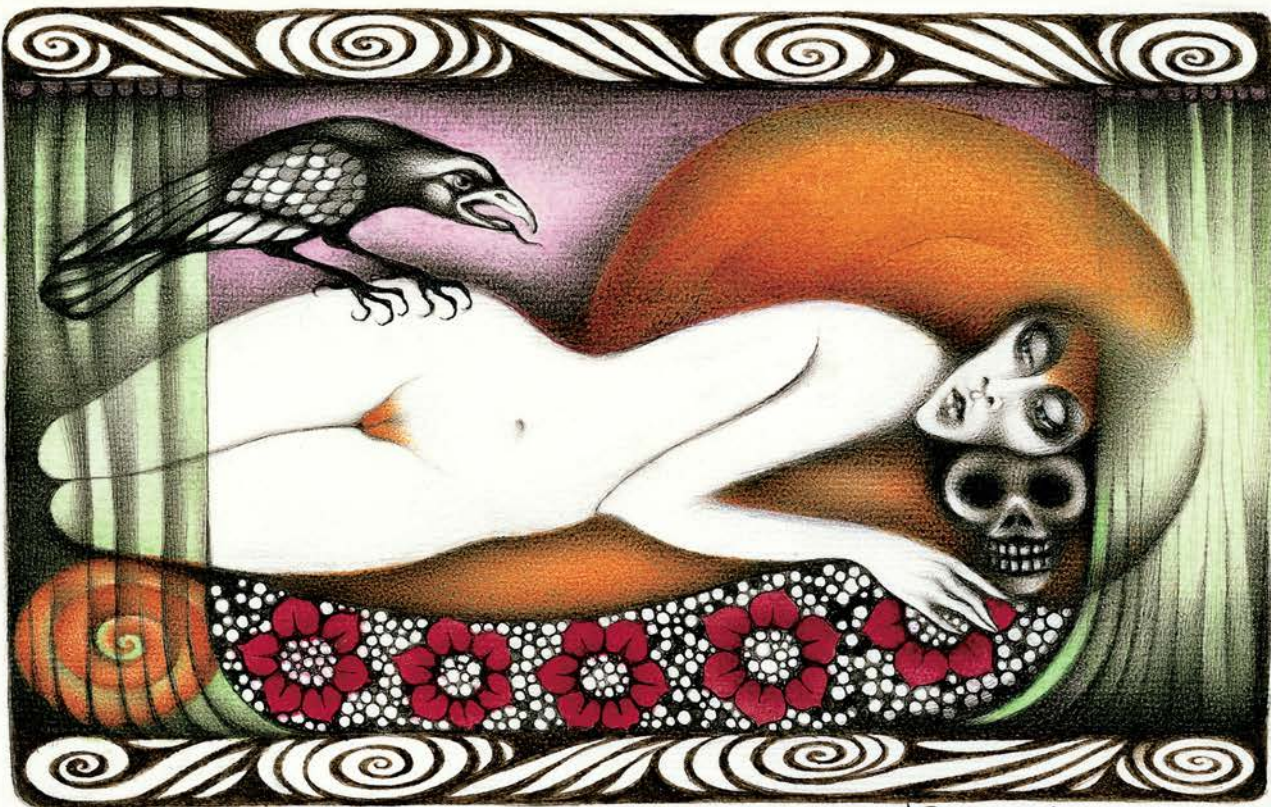


the same time, she wanted her drawings to engage people on a very direct level. People without any art education or training have always passionately responded to her art and this, in many ways, gave her the most satisfaction of all. I remember her telling me how a big burly truck driver once broke down and cried when he saw her drawings. She was thrilled to bits as that was ultimately the level that she wanted to connect on – a passionate engagement with everyday people who instinctively got what the work was about.

She finally returned to Australia in 1992 and established a studio right in the centre of Melbourne. It became a meeting place for the young, the outsiders and the occasional celebrity until she died in 2003.

Increasingly, new generations are responding to different elements in her work – young





Vali Meyers 1982

is all that we see or seem
but a dream within a dream

E. A. Poe.

girls especially. Her art continues to inspire and attract people from all walks of life just as it always has. These days, social media and the internet are expanding her reach and the growth of interest in her is exponential. Maybe this is because she has never been more relevant than she is today. She was a conservationist before the word even existed, and a feminist before the word came into fashion, although she would never have described herself in either of those ways as she hated labels of any kind. Ultimately she was an outsider, who carved her own distinctive path and in doing so created a substantial body of work while influencing some of the most significant cultural “players” of the late 20th century.

Today when the lungs of the world are being deforested in the Amazon and species face extinction on a daily basis, human hubris needs to take a back seat so nature can regain her rightful place. But it would be a mistake to reduce Vali’s work to simply an ecological theme, or a feminist stance, or an occult perspective. These elements are part of her art but not all of it. Vali’s art has the gift of making an outsider feel heard, and not alone; it has the gift of connectedness that great art can bring. It reminds us of another reality and provides a portal to a more eternal and timeless existence, to cite one of her favourite poets, Keats: “before the world was made”.

Ruth Cullen is an acclaimed documentary maker based in Australia. She was a close friend of Vali's for 20 years and is the Director of The Vali Myers Art Gallery Trust.

For more information about the book *Night Flower* and print sales contact - www.outregallery.com

For more information about the documentaries *The Tightrope Dancer* and *The Painted Lady* contact www.ruthcullen.com

