

ON THE COUCH

CHRIS BECK

Picture: CHRIS BECK

**Vali Myers / artist**

Your art is always described as personal. Would you describe your art as you would yourself?

How can you describe spirit? I was born that way. I'm not a great thinker, I'm just pure instinct.

Are you too scared to analyse your art?

No, I'm afraid of nothing, nothing.

Have you ever had a truck barreling towards you?

No, I'm street-smart. I lived in New York, I've been out in the streets, I never had any trouble because they are scared of the way I look. I look too weird. Wherever I've gone, people are careful. And they are right, too. I never go on the defence. I'm extremely aggressive. If I get cornered, I come out like a wild thing.

You have lived in the hills of Italy among 40 dogs and other various animals. What did you learn from them?

Even as a kid, I wasn't attracted to human beings. I have a connection with animals. I was never afraid of death adders or anything. Everything that is worthwhile is from animals. I like people but you have to be careful. I know exactly where I stand with an animal.

Are you one of them?

I feed them and they know it. But I get on great with them. I can talk fox language. Foxy (her fox companion of 14 years) and I would be up all night, playing and working, and we'd go to sleep together around about when the sun came up.

And what did you talk about?

Just fox talk. You know, they have an enormous range of sounds. I was like a mother because her

mother was shot. She bonded with me. She died of old age; she had a wonderful life.

Was it like a death in the family?

It was worse. I was in the middle of working on a book. The only thing that saved me was my pig. I'd go out late at night and talk with my pig. I love pigs. I'd tell the pig that Foxy's gone and she'd go: "ooomm, ooomm."

Why did you live in a cage in your home in Italy for a while?

That was when I was going through a time . . . it was like a nest. It was like a protection from the outside. If you cut down all the trees, the animal has lost its cage. Even when I walk through Fitzroy Gardens, I often feel like going up the trees, you know. I need to collect myself. I used to work in the cage. It was comfortable. People would visit. Marianne (Faithful, Vali's friend) brought Mick Jagger and he sat outside the cage.

You love nature and animals, which are natural creatures. Do you think it is a paradox that you are cosmetic with your make-up and face tattoos?

Oscar Wilde said: "The biggest affectation in the world is to be natural." Humans are not natural . . . it seemed to me unnatural to have nude skin.

Do you ever feel as one with anyone?

Yes. (But) when they start glueing (getting too close), I back away. I like talking with people on trams,

buses, meeting them like that; goodbye, you know. Aussies are kind of nice; they say "Hi", give you a smile and pass on by. It's a beautiful feeling.

Is happiness important to you?

Often you have to put your personal happiness on the side for something you really believe in. Happiness for me is a bit of a cheap thing. I prefer those moments of joy. A very lovely Puerto Rican poetess said: "I gamble everything to be what I am." I feel the same.

Is anything subtle about you?

I'm very subtle. It's funny; they have a nice expression in Italy that means refined barbarian. Like the Vikings, the intricate things that are on their boats. People have this idea that Vikings ran around hitting people on the head. They find out now that most of them traded . . . they did a bit of (raping and pillaging) but look at us when we have a war and look at politics. And there is nothing wrong with it; it's human nature.

Who were you in a previous life?

I'm very fascinated by the Elizabethan era. I can relate to it and I love the music. They were like refined pagans, too. Elizabeth, what a queen she was.

An Afternoon with Vali: Documentaries, 'Vali — The Tightrope Dancer' and 'Death in Port Jackson', plus a discussion with expatriate artist Vali Myers, is on at the Valhalla, Northcote, Sunday 19 June (tomorrow).