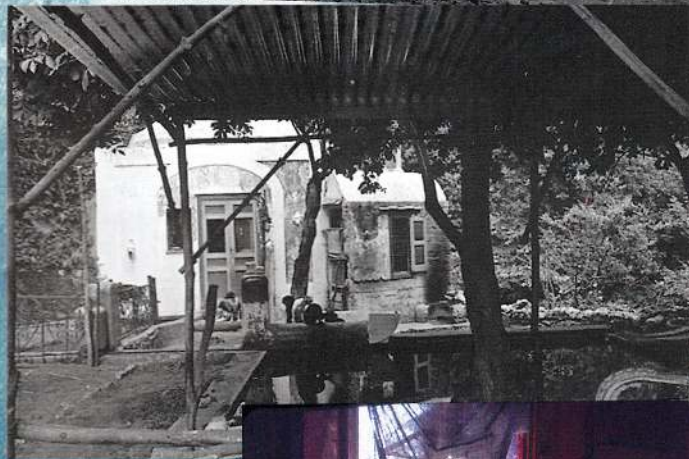
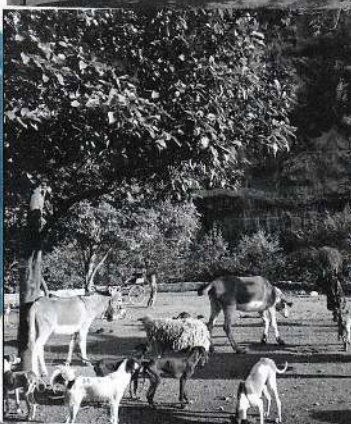
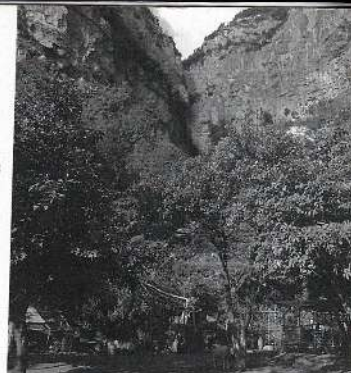


VALI MYERS THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Il Porto,
Positano,
Naples, Italy

text by **Federico Maturi**
photos by **Francesca De Col Tana**





**Una creatura indomita,
nomade nell'anima, stoica
e spartana. Con il dono
di entrare nella natura,
di parlare con gli animali.
Era la regina di Il Porto**

Esistono persone che sono uniche, irripetibili, come sospese sopra lo scorrere del tempo. Eppure sono la chiave d'accesso a un intero mondo, a un piano ermeneutico votato alla libertà, all'indipendenza di pensiero. Persone che assumono una potente valenza simbolica che va oltre la loro vita, la loro missione. Vali Myers era una di queste figure eccezionali. Nata nel 1930 a Sydney, è una bambina introspettiva, con difficoltà a leggere e scrivere, preferisce esprimersi con la danza e il disegno. Arrivata nella Parigi del secondo dopoguerra, vi conduce una vita bohémienne, frequentando molti degli intellettuali e artisti che ne animano la scena culturale, tra cui Django Reinhardt, Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, Jean-Paul Sartre. Frequenta anche le caves del Quartiere latino, ma non fa parte del gruppo esistenzialista. Istintuale e anarchica, non ama mescolarsi alle teste d'uovo dell'intelligenza. «Era troppo fiera, differente e autonoma per accettare definizioni», spiega Gianni Menichetti, poeta, innanzitutto, poi scrittore, pittore e per trentanove anni compagno di vita di Vali, la sua unica donna, che ha ritratto nell'intensa biografia "Vali Myers: A memoir". «Detestava etichette e denominazioni, fatalmente le andavano tutte strette. Era un Leone ascendente Leone, e a un leone assomigliava». Criniera rosso fuoco, selvaggia più che selvatica, tatuaggi tribali e no, anche sul viso, sovrapposizio-

Vali Myers detestava le etichette e le denominazioni, fatalmente le andavano tutte strette. Era un Leone ascendente Leone, e a un leone assomigliava. Criniera rosso fuoco, selvaggia più che selvatica, tatuaggi tribali e no, anche sul viso, sovrapposizioni casuali e sontuose di abiti usati, che per prima andava a cercare sulle bancarelle del mercato di Resina, a Ercolano, indossandoli come una sovrana

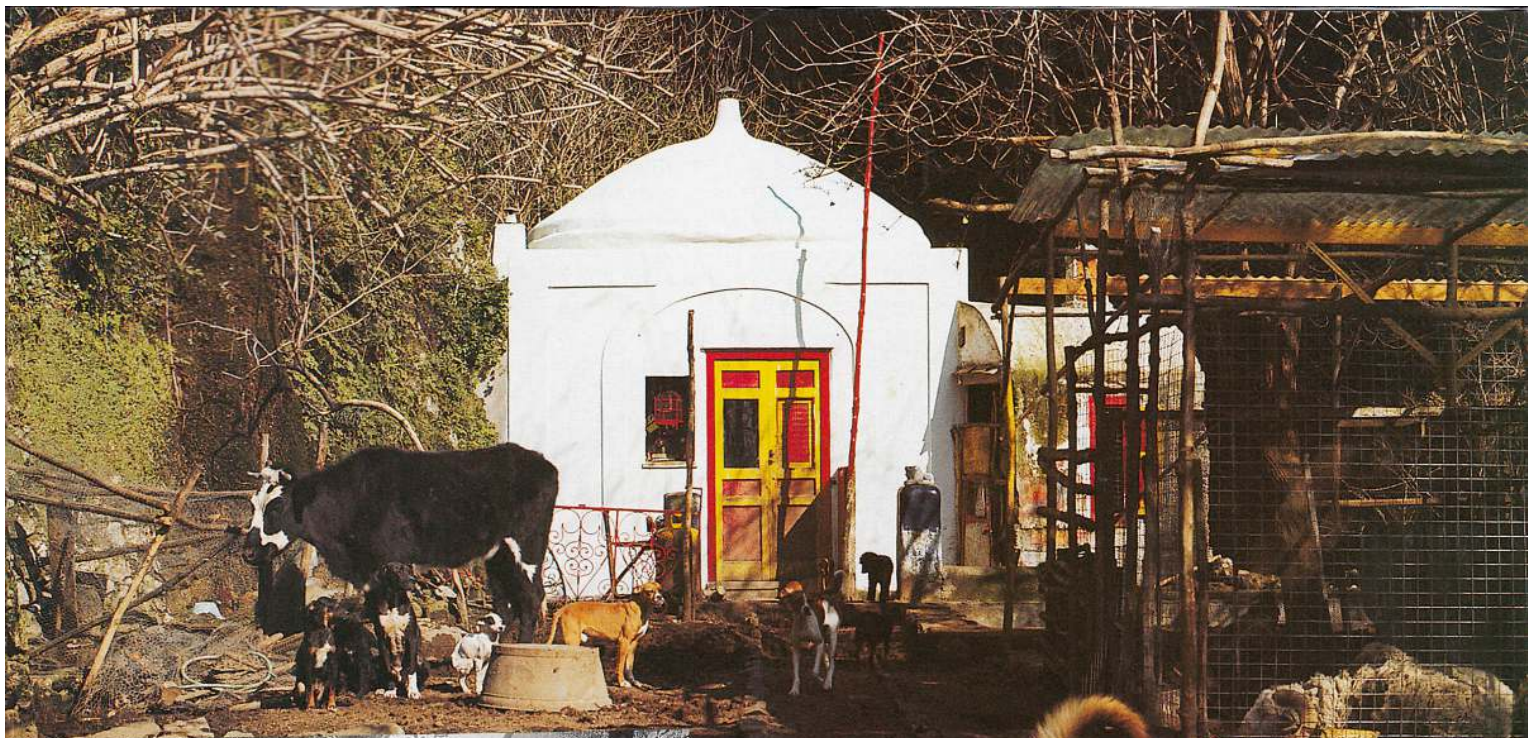
ni casuali e sontuose di abiti usati, che per prima andava a cercare sulle bancarelle di Resina a Ercolano, indossandoli come una sovrana. «Era un'amazzone, una creatura indomita, nomade nell'anima, stoica e spartana. Uno spirito pagano, tellurico, originario. Aveva il dono di entrare come nessuno nella natura, di capirne i segreti e la ritmica più arcaica, di parlare con gli animali. Era la regina della Valle del Porto. I suoi antenati provenivano dalle Highlands scozzesi, ne portavano impresso il codice genetico riottoso e irriducibile. Vali, fin da quel lontano 1971, mi ha cambiato l'esistenza. Avevo diciott'anni, mi sentivo giovane e antichissimo, venivo da studi di sanscrito e di filosofie orientali all'Università di Napoli, ero giainista. La conobbi attraverso un suo amico che mi aveva presentato un lama tibetano». Un incontro catartico, predestinato. «Le sono stato vicino», seguita Menichetti, «fino alla sua partenza per un altro mondo, avvenuta dopo una breve malattia a Melbourne, nel febbraio 2003. A settant'anni pareva straordinariamente giovane. Per me è sempre viva: il suo sangue scorre nelle mie vene». Gianni, origini toscane, poeta in lingua inglese, continua tra mille difficoltà la battaglia per mantenere l'integrità dell'oasi naturalistica e faunistica nel Vallone Porto, a Positano, avuta in concessione per i fatidici novantanove anni nei lontani '60 da Vali e dall'allora di lei compagno Rudi Rappold, architetto viennese che per lei aveva lasciato tutto. Gianni non vive immerso nella natura, sem-



Il Porto
 A visionary drawing of Rudi surrounded by fantastic creatures, a stream, and a small white house in the mountains.



Vali Myers





plicemente ne è parte integrante. Quando riesco finalmente a parlargli (non utilizza elettricità, acqua corrente e gas, in meravigliosa contiguità con una poliforme e amatissima comunità di animali-amici, cani, gatti, gallinelle, tortore, ognuno con un nome, oltre alla tartaruga centenaria Winnie), è felice perché ancora una volta, con l'aiuto del Wwf e di Italia Nostra, è riuscito fortunatamente a fermare ogni assalto capace di distruggere il paradiso perduto in cui abita e di cui è custode. Nel 1952 Vali arriva a Positano, provenendo da una fase parigina molto tormentata e da una dipendenza dall'oppio cui Rudi la sottrae. Nel 1958, dopo un'acte caprese, lei e Rudi decidono di vivere nella piccola casa diroccata nella valle, che a poco a poco restaurano, abbracciando una forma di ecologia radicale, astenendosi dal cibarsi di carne, circondati da un caotico e innocente eden in cui si mescolano torme di cani, gatti, polli, asini, pecore, la scrofa Ramona. Solo l'adorata volpe Foxy è tenuta separata. Il suono di una cascata echeggia dal bosco sottostante. Protetti dal sindaco positane dell'epoca, l'illuminato marchese Paolo Sersale, Vali e Rudi affrontano più volte il duro attacco dei benpensanti e l'ombra lunga della speculazione edilizia. Quando Sersale deve lasciare la carica di primo cittadino, il nuovo sindaco inizia contro di loro e contro quanto rappresentano una persecuzione che termina solo con l'intervento di un parlamentare (*continua*) F.M. Dall'alto. Rudi Rappold. La casetta, con volta a botte; in primo piano, l'abbeveratoio per gli animali. Nella pagina accanto. Vali sul soppalco della casa. Nelle foto piccole: il vallone (dal volume "Vali Myers: Drawings 1949-79", Londra, Open House, 1980, da cui sono tratti anche i disegni presenti nel servizio); la statua della Madonna Addolorata. Nelle pagine precedenti. Dall'alto a sinistra, in senso orario. "Queen of thorns", dedicato a Golda Meir. La casa ancora priva di decorazioni. Lo spiazzo antistante. La casa con il fronte decorato da Rudi in stile moresco. "Blue fox". "Lammas tide". "Il Porto". Nelle pagine di apertura. Da sinistra: Vali e Rudi; Vali interpreta Sherazade, uno dei personaggi da lei più amati, figura ricorrente anche nei disegni. Nelle foto piccole, dall'alto: l'anfiteatro di rocce che chiude la valle; gli animali; lo spiazzo; l'abitazione; all'interno della casa, sul tavolo, un vaso Yantra di Ettore Sottsass, donato a Vali dall'amica fotografa Francesca De Col Tana, che ha scattato le immagini del servizio fra il 1968 e il 1969. Tutte le fotografie sono rimaste finora inedite (valimyers.com).

Incantava e atterrava con quella sua bellezza imprendibile, ipnotica, l'aria aggressiva, quei capelli fiammanti. Il suo modo di vestire da gitana, l'accrocchio magnifico, quei suoi leggings realizzati con broccati ecclesiastici, precorrevano l'ondata hippie di almeno un decennio. Faceva disegni stupendi, stregati, intrisi di apparizioni e voli lisergici



South Italy 1958. On the Amalfi coast, not far from the village of Positano, we found a wild green valley called St. Spirito with towering cliffs and a cascading mountain stream. Here we discovered a small pavilion in an abandoned garden enclosed by a high wall. This was to become my Kingdom by the sea.



VALI MYERS. THE GARDEN OF EDEN (page 142) There are people who are unique, absolutely individual, as if they were suspended above the passage of time. Nevertheless, they provide the key to understanding an entire world, an interpretative project devoted to freedom and independent thinking. They are figures that acquire a powerful symbolic value that goes beyond their life and mission. Vali Myers was one such person. Born in Sydney in 1930, she was a quiet inward-looking child, who had difficulty reading and writing, she preferred to express herself in dance and drawing. When she reached Paris in the postwar years, she took to the bohemian way of life, associating with many of the intellectuals and artists on the city's lively cultural scene, including Django Reinhardt, Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, and Jean-Paul Sartre. She was also in the cellars of the Latin quarter, but not as one of the existentialists. Being instinctive and anarchical, she did not enjoy mixing with the intellectual eggheads. "She was too proud, different and autonomous to accept definitions", explains Gianni Menichetti, a poet first and foremost, a writer and for thirty-nine years Vali's life companion; she was his only woman and he has portrayed her in an intense biography entitled "Vali Myers: A memoir". "She hated labels and denominations, they were always fatally tight for her. She was a Leo with a Leo ascendant and she was just like a lion". With a fire-red mane, savage rather than just wild; with tattoos, some of them tribal, even on her face; with casual and sumptuous layers of second-hand clothes, which she was the first to seek out among the stalls of Resina at Ercolano and wore them like a sovereign. "She was an Amazon, an indomitable creature, a stoic and Spartan nomad soul. A primeval, telluric, pagan spirit. She had a unique gift for being at one with nature, understanding its secrets and arcane rhythms, speaking with the animals. She was the queen of the Valle del Porto. Her ancestors came from the Scottish Highlands, they had rebellion and relentlessness written in their DNA. From the first moment, long ago in 1971, Vali changed my existence. I was eighteen years old, I felt both young and ancient, I had studied Sanskrit and Oriental Philosophy at Naples University and I was a Jainist. I met her through a friend of hers who had been introduced to me by a Tibetan Lama". It was a cathartic, predestined encounter. "I was by her side", Menichetti continues, "until her departure from this world, which occurred after a brief illness in Melbourne, in February 2003. At seventy years of age she seemed extraordinarily young. For me she is still alive: her blood is running in my veins". Gianni, originally from Tuscany, is an English-language poet, against a thousand difficulties he continues his battle to preserve the integrity of the natural wildlife oasis in Il Porto Valley, near Positano. Vali and her companion at the time Rudi Rappold, an Austrian architect who left everything to be with her, acquired the Valley on a 99-year concession in 1950. Gianni does not live steeped in nature, he is simply an integral part of it. When I finally managed to speak with

him (he does not use electricity, running water or gas, and lives in his extraordinarily diverse and beloved community of animal-friends, dogs, cats, hens, doves, each with a name, including Winnie, the centenarian tortoise), he was happy because once again he had managed, with the help of the WWF and Italia Nostra, to block any assault that could damage the lost paradise where he lives and of which he is the custodian. In 1952 Vali arrived in Positano, after a highly tormented Parisian phase and an opium addiction from which Rudy had managed to rescue her. In 1958, after an interlude on Capri, Vali and Rudy decided to live in the little run-down house in the valley which they restored, embracing a radical form of ecological life style, abstaining from eating meat, surrounding themselves with a chaotic and innocent Eden crowded with dogs, cats, hens, donkeys, sheep and a sow called Ramona. Only Foxy, the beloved fox, was kept separately. The sound of a waterfall could be heard from the woods below. Under the protection of Positano's mayor, the illuminated Marquis Paolo Sersale, several times Vali and Rudy had to ward off the attacks of self-righteous locals and the dark threat of property developers. When Sersale had to leave the office of first citizen, the new mayor launched a persecution campaign against them and all they stood for, which only ended when the issue was raised in the national parliament by a local politician. Proudly, yet tenderly, Gianni Menichetti defines himself as portuense and not positanese. He is on the alert for anything that could threaten Il Porto, a microcosm of rare botanical species and animal life of pre-historical origin, frogs, toads and salamanders – the lead players in his recent exhibition of drawings entitled "Amphibia" (Amphibians) –, ferns, caves, ancient trees, streams that bring life to the rocks, a breathtaking view over the sea and a coastline of sculpted cliffs. Surprisingly, all of this is a stone's throw from Positano and the hustle and bustle of

mass tourism. He has left this place only once in almost four decades, he does not want to travel, and indeed no longer can. Vali's ecological and artistic ideals, her oneiric spirit have become Gianni's own and he has generously devoted his entire life to it – "She considered herself a squatter", he points out, "and so do I". "It is not easy", he continues, "to find a person who can live a life like hers. I have no desire to see or know anything else". In Vali's little house, which was transformed into a tiny Moorish pavilion, the bed was on a raised loft. Here she would also meditate and draw using a very sharp goose feather on handmade Amalfi paper, preferably at night. Her world was devoted to horror vacui, filled up with objects, memoirs, votive offerings and papers. Necklaces and festoons made of lace hung from a lamp. In one corner a Madonna of Sorrows, her heart pierced by swords, bore witness to her bizarre syncretic mysticism. It was the cave of a Gypsy sorceress, a lavish and ragged Alcina. "She could not go unnoticed", remarks Raimonda Gaetani, the internationally renowned stage designer who was a friend of hers. "She charmed, even frightened them with her elusive, hypnotic beauty and transgressive aura, her flaming red hair and all those intricate tattoos, even around her mouth, her eyes made up with eye shadow, surrounded by a pack of dogs. Her gypsy style of dress, that magnificent hotchpotch, her leggings made of clerical brocade, she anticipated the hippy movement by at least a decade. She did superb, bewitched drawings, full of apparitions and lysergic flights. Paolo Sersale often invited Vali to dance on the terrace of the hotel Le Sirenuse. She wanted to teach me to dance too, she called me 'my naughty baby'. Her relationship with the people in the village was somewhat controversial, a part of the inhabitants of Positano accepted her, but others scorned and condemned her. She could communicate directly with the animals, it was as if she could speak their language. Rudy, on the other hand, was a sophisticated child of the Viennese Secession. In the 50s Positano was different, innocent, it had not yet fallen into vulgarity. It was a luminous village bathed in Mediterranean sunlight, a refuge for intellectuals, poets, flâneurs and artists from all parts of the world. It was a real village not a holiday resort. Irene Kowalska would make her ceramics in the mountains; and while the first hippies began to come from Bowles' Morocco and San Francisco, Mark Rothko himself would come during the 60s to teach painting at the American School of Art, founded and run by two old American ladies". Vali was a great inspiration to the young Patti Smith, she collected her works and photographic portraits. In 1973, in New York, Vali tattooed Patti Smith, as recorded in the documentary "Patti and Vali", by Sandra Dailey. Her figure appears in other documentary-films too: "Death in the Port Jackson Hotel", by Ed van der Elsken (1972), "The Tightrope Dancer", by the Australian Ruth Cullen (1989), and "A Painted Lady", always by Cullen (2002). To get to know Vali's heritage, the enchantment of the places in Il Porto that are imbued with her presence and

Gianni Menichetti's delicate, joyful poetic mystery in words and painting, one must see the most recent film "His Savage Mistress", by Danny Fitzgerald and Lina Eve dating from 2009 (easily found on YouTube). Tennessee Williams, who met Vali at Positano, took inspiration from her for the character of Carol in "Orpheus Descending" (1957), and Marianne Faithfull speaks of her with great admiration in her autobiography. These are hard times for those who claim their uniqueness and relentless autonomy from all conformity and cliché. Nevertheless, as Gianni Menichetti suggests, perhaps all is not lost: "So-called normality is my nightmare. However, as long as eccentrics exist, and thanks be to heaven there are still some, we can place our hopes in the future". *Federico Maturi*