

Keeping house for Vali

The Melbourne studio of Vali Myers has been opened to the public as a tribute to the late artist. James Norman reports.

Tucked away on the seventh floor of the elegant Nicholas Building in Swanston Street, nestled among the grey humming clutter of Melbourne's CBD, the studio of Vali Myers stands like a portal to a bygone era.

The studio/gallery has been closed since the enigmatic Australian artist died of cancer last December in a Melbourne hospital, aged 72.

Myers, with her trademark devil-may-care attitude to life and tattooed face, hands and feet, always upheld an open-door policy to the studio.

"I remember when she first got this place, painted all the walls and put the carpet in," says Nicole Karidis, a studio volunteer.

"It was what she wanted — that her work should always be accessible to the people of Melbourne."

The large, well-lit bohemian studio, which still houses much of Myers's extensive catalogue of exquisite sketches, became something of a drop-in centre for all manner of people when it opened in 1993. Now it has re-opened its doors to the public.

"We don't want the memory of Vali Myers to die," Karidis says. "I mean, she's not the kind of artist you'll find endless websites about, but people know of her from word of mouth. She had the anti-establishment attitude; she wasn't interested in getting involved in the arts world. She was more interested in ordinary people off the street. In a way, Vali was the best living advertisement for her artwork because she stood out in a crowd so much. This is the last opportunity for people to get to know Vali."

In Myers's studio, the walls are crammed with hundreds of prints of her art. Her fine pen, ink, watercolour and gold leaf drawings display a fastidiously rendered depiction of a spirit world.

Although Myers frequently said that she hated labels, her work frequently combined human, animal and mythological motifs such as serpents and whales, and tapped into primeval themes of nature, death, women's spirituality and the interconnectedness of life.

The remainder of the studio is taken up with photographs from Myers's life and the people and animals that inhabited it — both in Australia and at her second home in Positano, Italy.

With walls painted pink, the ceiling decorated with giant green and orange daffodils, Tibetan-style rugs and cushioned seating — plus a menagerie of stuffed animals in one corner and kitsch touches such as plastic electronic swaying flowers) — Myers's studio



Volunteer Nicole Karidis, above, in the studio of the late artist Vali Myers, left.

PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

feels frozen in time, locked in a spell of the artist's own devising. "To me it's more than just a gallery space," Karidis says. "When Myers was here, people would just come in here and take some time out. This is the last opportunity for people to get to know her. She spent 10 years here — I mean, look at the trashy lights and gaudy stuff everywhere. That was very her, always the little girl, right to the end."

Born in Sydney on August 2, 1930, Myers moved with her family to Box Hill when she was 11. At the age of 19, Myers moved to Paris, living mainly on the streets and scraping together a living as a Left Bank dancer and artist, befriending writers such as Jean Cocteau and Jean Genet.

In the 1950s, struggling with opium addiction, Myers fled to Italy with her Hungarian gypsy husband, Rudi Rapport, where they bought a small property outside the Italian village of Positano on the Amalfi Coast.

Myers described the property as "something like my Garden of Eden" and lived there with a menagerie of animals, whom she frequently said she related to better than humans.

Right up until the early '90s, Myers lived between her property in Italy and her second home in the infamous Chelsea Hotel in New York, where her friends and patrons included Deborah Harry, Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull.

Specimens of Myers's work are held in collections all over the world, including the Stuyvesant collection in Holland, New York's Hurryman



Collection and the private collections of people such as the late George Plimpton, Jagger, and the estate of Tennessee Williams.

Given that her work has commanded up to \$US40,000 a piece in New York, the value of

the collection in her Melbourne studio is estimated to run into the millions.

Salvador Dali once described Myers's art as "excellent" and "original", and London publishers Thames & Hudson are currently compiling a collection

of her art and diaries to release in a new publication.

Australian filmmaker Ruth Cullen has produced two documentaries on Myers's life and work. The first, *Tightrope Dancer*, was completed in 1990, and the more recent *Painted Lady*, screened on SBS last July.

Tightrope Dancer traces Myer's life over four decades and includes early images of her as an erotically charged opium-dependent dancer, and her pantheistic lifestyle amid nature and scores of animals in Italy (including her pet eel), through

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JULIA INGLIS

to wild parties and art sales at the Chelsea Hotel in New York during the 1980s.

"I met Vali in 1984 at a party in New York and we became great friends," Cullen says. "She was a natural film subject. The reason I made the films about her in the first place was that I wanted to show someone who had stayed outside conventional society and flourished, rather than just died tragically."

"I think Vali was a strong inspiration for many people. Now that she's gone, there's her artwork and the studio — a whole environment that she created to keep that spirit alive."

"Hopefully she will get the sort of recognition she deserves

now. I mean, Van Gogh sold one painting when he was alive and that was to his brother. I think anybody that knew Vali would say that you just don't want her to disappear. I think her studio, and her work, is a real haven for people that don't fit in."

The studio will be open two days a week, although studio volunteer Julia Inglis says she hopes this may be extended in the future.

"It's really important, I think, for a lot of people in Melbourne that this studio stays open," she says.

Inglis says the studio is selling prints, postcards and films to the public, but she hopes people will feel welcome to just drop in and soak up the atmosphere.

"It's all decorated by Vali — all her books, music and photos are here — its her, it's like she's still here," she says.

"The thing that hits you as soon as you walk in the door is the colour of the place. People come in here and stand there with their mouths open because it takes quite a while to take it all in. Here you can see the remains of someone that lived her life without fear and really followed her dreams — that is a very powerful thing with which to be confronted. "It's just crammed full of Vali."

The Vali Myers studio, seventh floor, Nicholas Building, corner Flinders Lane and Swanston Street, is open on Wednesdays and Thursdays, 11am to 5.30pm.