

the world

If I make the lashes dark  
And the eyes more bright  
And the lips more scarlet,  
Or ask if all be right  
From mirror after mirror,  
No vanity's displayed:  
I'm looking for the face I had  
Before the world was made.

— W.B. Yeats

Vali Myers greets us with a lively "Hello love!" as we enter her studio on the seventh floor of the Nicolas Building on Swanston Street in downtown Melbourne. Her colloquial tone — Aussie Sheila to the bone — belies her crazy old-Gypsy looks in the same way her commercially organized space contradicts expectations of a sensual anarchy more in keeping with her long and wild life.

She offers us raki, a Turkish drink with a milky haze and a cold, aniseed flavor that bites the throat. "I hope it's not too early," she says, toasting the midday sun with her shot glass. It seems the civilized thing to join her.

Like so many larger-than-life figures, Myers is surprisingly short. Not that height alone could deny her traffic-stopping originality, from the tattooed face, leonine hair and witchy-wild clothes of her faintly precocious presence to the elaborate, swirling symbolism that identifies her artwork and the strangely enduring mystique that accompanies it.

At 69 years old, Myers remains the archetype for bohemian life in the second half of the 20th century. There's just too much to pack in, except perhaps as an Impressionistic telegram: modern ballet dancer, postwar Paris icon, friend of Jean Cocteau, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Genet, opium addiction, early drawings, underground fame, problems with Interpol, marriage to a Hungarian architect, retreat to a mountain valley near Positano in Italy, life in a ménage à trois, animist and pagan obsessions, immersal in painting, discovery by *The Paris Review*, visits from Tennessee Williams, Marianne Faithfull and Mick Jagger, a shift to New York's Chelsea Hotel, Deborah Harry, Warhol, Dali, the fight (and triumph) to establish her mountain valley home as a wildlife reserve, international gallery shows, documentaries, an oddball evasion of the conventional arts scene, a triple aneurysm that almost killed her, learning to walk and talk again and finally a return home to Australia after 40 years, where "the big skies made me feel like I could breathe again."

Oh yes, Myers has lived an artist's life. And then some.

There's a photo of the idiosyncratic painter up on her studio wall. She's pictured in an amber-colored queen's dress dotted with fairy lights, her orange hair spilling out everywhere like



a wild fairy bride: at once feral, Baroque and out of this world.

It could be something from a Passion play or a performance art moment, but knowing Myers, it seems more appropriate to ask her if it's a shot from her wedding.

"Nah," she laughs, shaking her head. "I'm married to myself. All artists are. You're married to your spirit."

According to Myers, "Artists and writers, they're shamans. They're singing their song. And the suffering — you've got to give it a voice. Shamans were the artists of their tribe. And if they couldn't give it a voice, they'd get sick and die." As a metaphor for the artist, she adds that the shamanistic condition affected the likes of "Kafka, who was a neurotic. Rimsky-Korsakov, he had breakdowns

all over the place. The whole bang lot of them were all nuts," she assures me.

At one point in our conversation, she will accordingly pull me aside and shake me up a little when she says, "You have that haunted look, you know. It's very Australian." I get the feeling she is looking right through me, asking me in some cryptic fashion what I am looking for as a human being.

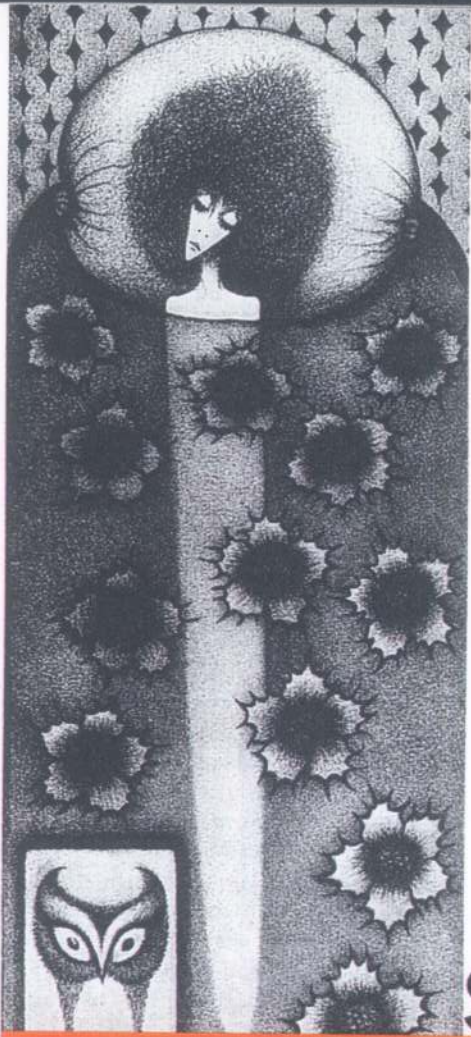
It's hard to answer her, though easy to hear her words when she states, "Vali Myers? Who is she, anyway? There's a no-man's land inside of me, and I love that. It's the Australian in me."

Myers extends this notion to embrace the duality, the emptiness and freedom she sees entwined in the physical reality of her own home continent. She describes Australia as "a Mad Hatter's sort of a country" and fantasizes at one point about abandoning her paintings altogether out there in the middle of it: "Sometimes I just feel like going out into the desert and letting them go with the wind. What's so precious about them anyway?"

A superficial glance at Myers' artwork can be very deceiving. Intensely elaborate, her paintings can seem, at a glance, like standard hallucinogenic sixties counterculture art. Acid-flashback album cover material. Look closer, though, and you'll find that every detail is consummately rendered with a considerable and highly articulate delicacy. To appreciate Myers, you really have to go into the paintings. You'll be surprised by what you'll find.

In a 1989 Australian documentary called *The Tightrope Dancer*, she talks about a work called *Passion*, which she sometimes refers to as *Possession*. The picture tells the story of two donkeys in her mountainous valley home, Il Porto, near Positano, Italy. Her donkeys loved each other, she explains, but one fell over a cliff and was "smashed to >





Photos from *The Paris Review*, #18, 10'58



## STILL DANCING

HAVING TRAVELED FROM POSTWAR PARIS WHERE SHE HAD FRIENDSHIPS WITH COCTEAU AND GENET, TO THE CHELSEA HOTEL WHERE DALÍ AND WARHOL CAME CALLING, VALI MYERS HAS LED AN ARTIST'S LIFE. MARK MORDUE VISITS HER MELBOURNE STUDIO TO DISCUSS THE JOYS AND SORROWS OF HER TRIP. PORTRAIT BY TONY NOTARBERARDINO.



pieces." The other one wouldn't eat for a week and called out hopelessly all the time to her lost partner. "What do you want to make out of that?" Myers asked. "It's passion. It burns you out. Maybe it kills you."

Another work, *Madonna dell'Arco*, is named after a holy statue in the little town of St. Anastasia, outside Naples. On Easter Monday each year, Catholics from all over Italy travel

to see the Madonna dell'Arco, falling into cathartic spasms, calling out their sins and woes and demons to be forgiven and released. It's an oddly primitive ritual. "I've always thought that women were too kept down," says Myers. "And I don't even know what a feminist is. But it's like the Madonna dell'Arco: She can eat all the sorrows. That's like the old religions. The women, you know, can eat the suffering of the world and turn it into something."

Her compelling *Mary Magdalene*, with its masked aching, is similarly reverent in tone. "She's full of compassion. Like a good whore. In those days, to be a whore was not a put-down. The old saying was 'a woman of compassion.' It's like what Saint Theresa said [about her] — she'd die of love."

These kind of insights — usually pagan or animist, and embraced as a form of self-portraiture in a similar vein to Frida Kahlo's work — can be luridly intense, yet highly subtle in their intricacy. Myers describes her paintings as a cross between "the *Book of Kells* and Indian miniature," while critics have also observed connections to other illuminated manuscripts of medieval art, Aubrey Beardsley and the 19th-century French engraver Rodolphe Bresdin.

She works with the finest English pen nib (Gillot's "crowquill" no. 659) set on a goose feather, using diluted black Chinese, burnt sienna and sepia inks, as well as Winsor & Newton watercolors. Myers also procures 18-karat rolled gold for her more elaborate detailing from a Neapolitan jeweler. She draws on handmade rag paper from Ferdinando Armatruda's paper mill on the Amalfi Coast, which has made



fine-textured paper since the Middle Ages. The works can take Myers months or even years to complete and are surprisingly small and much softer in their physical light and tone than reproductions might suggest.

Her thematic obsessions are often highly literary as well as personal, with strong inspiration from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* as well as the writings of W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde, Edith Sitwell, Emily Brontë and Thomas Chatterton. Her current obsession is with "the Russians and their emotions, which are not European at all," she says, pulling out a dog-eared copy of Yevgeni Zamyatin's *The Dragon: Fifteen Stories*.

Myers may look like a sixties head trip come to life, with her flowing clothes and Gypsy bracelets, her black kohl-lined eyes and her wild orange hair. Let alone the lyre-like pattern tattooed around her chin and top lip "like a spiritual mustache" and the series of dots etched on her cheeks by a Nigerian nomad. But despite the theatrical appearance, she has her wits about her as an artist, a businesswoman and a judge of character. "I usually learn a lot more about other people when they see me than they do about me." She's also fond of paraphrasing Oscar Wilde to explain herself: "The biggest affectation in the world is to be natural."

Inevitably, Myers attracts some strange and sometimes unwanted figures. On the day we present ourselves at the studio to meet her, a spaced-out woman visitor who looks like a cross between an old Goth and a glam biker pops in to babble on at her. Myers accepts the visit tolerantly, but professes later, "Three of those in one week and you're ready to go home and bury yourself alive."

As for the mistaken notion that she is some acid-blown child of the Age of Aquarius, think again. "I don't like hippies. They're too lovey-dovey. They always want to hug you. I want to kick them in the balls. I'm not into being hugged, love," she says, making a squirming, pushing away motion. "They hug me and say, 'Oh, you're so wonderful and good, Vali.' No, I'm not! I'm a little demon!"

Myers' speaking voice captures these contradictory elements perfectly, peppered with fifties Parisian beatnik slang and sixties hippie-speak, but strained through an incredibly old-fashioned forties Australian suburban earthiness. There's certainly a roughness to Myers, and a sad toughness, too, from her fascination for lowlifes and the criminal element to a primal absolutism that leads her to observe, "People for some reason seem to think their lives should be better than animals'."

She thinks animals can teach us a lot about our best and worst natures. It's why she prefers their company to that of human beings. "Too much exposure to people kills you. I like people — but they eat you up."

"Happiness for me isn't so important. I prefer little moments of joy. Or, as a Puerto Rican poetess once said, 'I gamble everything to be what I am.' That's how I feel."

A dyslexic child alienated from school, Myers played in the Australian bush, where she relished the solitary company of animals and birds, and first developed the self-taught drawing skills that would eventually lead her to become a significant painter and international cause célèbre. >



"VALI CAME TO FRANCE JUST AFTER THE WAR. STILL UNDER TWENTY SHE BECAME AT ONCE THE SYMBOL AND PLAYTHING OF THE RESTLESS, CONFUSED, VICE-ENTHRALLED, DEMI-MONDE THAT POPULATED CERTAIN OF THE CAFÉS AND BOÎTES OF THE LEFT BANK."

GEORGE PLIMPTON IN *THE PARIS REVIEW*, 1958.



Opposite page. From top: *Bullroarer* (1978-1979), 425 x 340mm, pen, burnt sienna and black ink; *Magdalene* (1975), 340 x 225mm, pen, burnt sienna, black ink and pencil.  
This page. *Lady and Hare* (1974), 220 x 175mm, pen, burnt sienna, black ink and watercolor.



She fled home and conventional domestic expectations at age 14 to work in factories — variously making paper flowers, bicycle parts and cheap garments — then charging off for classes with the Melbourne Modern Ballet Company of Daisy Pirnitzer and Hanny Kolm (former members of the Viennese Wiesenthal Group). When Myers left Melbourne for Paris in 1949 with the dance company, she was 19 years old and had £7 in her pocket.

She dropped out of that dance group and quickly became enmeshed in the Left Bank scene of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the Latin Quarter, her increasingly exaggerated behavior and exotic appearance leading her to become the erotic existential icon of postwar Paris. A wild-child contemporary of Genet, Cocteau and Sartre, she danced for money in the local cafés, often with Africans who “taught me to dance from the inside out.”

The Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsken would idolize her in his now classic book of photos about that time, *Love on the Left Bank* (first published in 1954 and reprinted by Dewi Lewis Publishers in November, 1999). A besotted George Plimpton would also feature her drawings in 1958 in *The Paris Review*'s issue #18. Myers gaily recalls Plimpton “like a nobleman chasing a fox all over town. He used to think my accent was exotic,” she laughs. “The way I talk!” she scoffs, exaggerating the vernacular working-class squawk of her Aussie voice.

Plimpton described Myers in *The Paris Review*: “In Paris, where she lives, she goes under other names: bartenders in the little boîtes where she dances call her *le chat*; concierges refer to her as *le bête*; she is also called variously *l'enfant du feu* for her flaming copper-red almost orange hair, and *la morte vive* for her corpse-white face and heavy eye-shadow — a cosmetic oddity which started an existentialist fashion that enjoyed a minor vogue a few years ago. She is Australian by birth. Her father is a sailor and her mother a violinist in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Vali came to France just after the war. Still under twenty she became at once the symbol and plaything of the restless, confused, vice-enthralled, demi-monde that populated certain of the cafés and boîtes of the Left Bank — *La Petite Source*, *Le Mabillon*, *Le Café Metro*, *La Chope Gauloise*, *Le Monaco*.”

Her artwork at the time was all black-and-white, in a style Myers called “nigredo.” Its opiated, slightly voodooish tone, filled with gaunt deathbed images, hotel-room floral patterns and otherworldly owls, portrayed her bohemian Parisian life in pen and black ink, a perpetual lights-out world.

In *The Tightrope Dancer*, Plimpton remarks that Myers was part of a “truly fast-line set” back then in Paris. Myers herself would later talk of her “years asleep” and her “death trip.” Leafing proudly and sadly through Ed van der Elsken's book she now recalls the obliterated spirit of her friends, the way “they were just washed-up kids after the war. I was strong because I was brought up in Australia. Most of them died. They were like nihilists. They didn't believe in anything anymore. It had been too much.”

Recalling Plimpton's interest in her and that of another angry, possessive lover at the time, she throws back a raki and points to a shot of “my boyfriend, a Moroccan. He was really rough. He wanted to kill George.” She also recalls the way

her Moroccan lover was attacked: “A girl bit his ear off and spat it on the table,” she says. “There was nothing romantic about this life. It was tough as hell.”

Generally, Myers is reluctant to speak about Paris, partly out of boredom with reliving the past, partly because it became such a destructive time. Exiled from France in 1951, she returned to the country four years later, after marrying Rudi Rappold, a Hungarian architect of Gypsy spirit whom she met in Vienna. Her return to Paris was not an entirely positive move. Although her art practice was flourishing under the dark influences, she and Rappold became virtually housebound for three years, due to their opium abuse. During that time she was tended to by Céleste Albaret, who ran the hotel she was living in and who was Proust's



Wu Man (1970), 340 x 220mm, fine pen, black ink and watercolor.

concierge in his latter years while writing *Remembrance of Things Past*. According to Plimpton, who visited her there, Albaret referred to Myers as “the strange one, my favorite jewel.”

Eventually, Myers and Rappold would flee both the law and the addictive spirit of Paris. In 1958 the couple re-established themselves in the wild canyon they called Il Porto. Among the 1,000-foot cliffs and escarpments, in a one-room stone cottage centuries old, she and Rappold would later be joined by Gianni Menichetti, who wandered in from an Etruscan village and decided to stay. The three would share the mountains in a ménage à trois with some 50 dogs, a pig called Ruby, a red goat called Beshlie and Vali's beloved fox, Foxy.



In *Vali*, a 1965 documentary by the American filmmaker Sheldon Rochlin, she's caught in a summer swoon describing how, "when the animals come on heat, you come on heat. All the dogs are fucking and you're fucking. It's beautiful."

In this environment, Myers set about developing her formerly dark etchings into full-blown color works, mingling pagan and personal mysticism into a storybook style. It was the height of the sixties, and while Myers worked late at night locked in a cage of her own devising, visitors like Marianne Faithfull, Mick Jagger and Donovan would sit waiting for her. Tennessee Williams became a good friend and based the character Carol on her in his play *Orpheus Descending*. "Tennessee used to say to me, 'You and I are the fugitive kind, Vali. We always run.'"

By the seventies, she was moving back and forth between Positano and the Chelsea Hotel, where she started selling her works to the likes of singer Deborah Harry, actor Peter Weller and poet Ira Cohen. Warhol advised selling prints instead; Dalí suggested a show in Holland. Of course, there was George Plimpton, too, "who still always throws a party for me when I'm in town." On one visit, she was introduced to poet-singer Patti Smith, upon whose knee she tattooed a lightning bolt (in honor of Crazy Horse). She also survived an early affair with yippie revolutionary Abbie Hoffman, who won her heart with the immortal line "'Gee I like your pullover.' That's what he said when he first saw me," she giggles. "He wanted to punch George in the nose, too."

In the meantime, Myers was struggling to establish Il Porto as a wildlife sanctuary. But this strange woman in the hills with two lovers and a menagerie of pets was not immediately well received by some Positano locals. At one stage, some of her favorite dogs were poisoned, a traumatic event for her. Out of grief, she tattooed the names of her lost dogs on her feet, then Beshlie, the name of her red goat, on her right hand. Her left hand she reserved for Foxy, who used to sleep with Myers and bury chicken bones in her hair. "There was something about foxes I loved. I guess I'm pretty foxy myself. I love everything wild." Myers was also becoming known on international flights for traveling with a large white rabbit under her arm.

Unfortunately, her relationship with Rappold was in severe decline because of his problems with alcohol. He would eventually die under unhappy circumstances. But Menichetti remains in the valley to this day. And despite her nomadic heart and ideals about a solitary artistic life, she heartily says "there's always got to be a man around" up there in the hills. Myers makes no bones about a vibrant carnality in her life and work, a drive that also leads her to flirt like an 18-year-old when you are in her company.

She's also triumphant about her role in finally getting Il Porto registered as a wildlife oasis with the World Wildlife Fund. It now has the largest population of white owls in southern Italy. And after five years of permanent residence in Melbourne, she is about to make Il Porto her home once again. It completes a recent circle that began when she fell to the floor of the Chelsea Hotel and almost died from a triple aneurysm back in 1991. She was forced to retreat at first to Il Porto for two years — where she literally had to learn to read and write again due to severe brain damage, or "blowing a fuse." It was this experience that led to her decision in 1991 to return to Melbourne for the first time in

more than 40 years. Now it's time to move again, and Myers is almost desperate to do so, describing herself as "a migrating bird returning home."

Before we head off down the road to Chloe's Bar at Young & Jackson's Hotel, one of Melbourne's most legendary drinking establishments, Myers poses for us in an Afghan chair draped with purple-dyed goat's wool sent from friends in Iceland. She assures us that her spirit "is sparkling, but I look like an old rag. I know how I look." However, you can't help but be amazed by the vitality of this woman, age 69, who will later be doing star kicks on the hotel dance floor to the seventies sounds of "Rock the Boat" and "Lonely Days (Lonely Nights)."

This may be why she is surrounded in her studio at the end of the day by a coterie of young admirers, all women. When it's time to leave for Chloe's Bar, she calls them all together with a cry of "OK, babies, lets go."

The group includes a writer and her twin sister, "both epileptics," Myers whispers to me; an extremely witty raven-looking prison psychologist who suffers from manic depression; a quiet Goth girl with an interest in political organization on the Web; and a Polish émigré of silent character who looks something like a younger version of Myers, although the old Yorkshire sailor who later joins our table insists the émigré has "murderous eyes." Myers wants to run away to Siberia with the sailor, who is deadset against the idea, till he relents and says, "Only if we go in the summer."

**"I DON'T LIKE HIPPIES. THEY'RE TOO LOVEY-DOVEY. THEY ALWAYS WANT TO HUG YOU. I WANT TO KICK THEM IN THE BALLS."**

Myers then draws my attention to the painting of Chloe, after whom the bar is named. It's a well-known Botticelli-style portrait, a full-standing nude of a woman painted by Jules Lefebvre at the start of the century. Apparently, Australian soldiers who were fighting in World War I would ask their mates to return and "tell Chloe I said hello," a euphemism to have a drink at the bar and remember them as they used to be in happier days.

"Funnily enough, I actually prefer the version in the mirror," says Myers. When I look across the room, I have to agree. The painting in the reflection acquires a shimmer that is just that little more otherworldly and strangely lit.

While Myers is up dancing, her female writer friend pulls me aside to explain why Myers likes coming to this odd old bar in the middle of Melbourne. "She can't go out to nightclubs because people make too much of a fuss over her and how she looks. She likes it here because everyone treats her just like she's an ordinary human being." In the glow of Chloe's mirror, I can see her crossing the room to ask if I want to dance. ¶

Contributing MADISON writer and copious raki drinker, Mark Mordue is working on a book project entitled *Snakes and Ladders*, which is slated for publication later this year.