

Ms.

ON THE ARTS

ART

VALI: BEAUTY
AND THE BEASTS

ROSE HARTMAN

"I am a bit of a pagan," declares Vali Myers, an extraordinary-looking woman with masses of red hair, kohl-rimmed gray eyes, tattoos on her face, hands, and feet, assorted amulets and crosses around her neck. She possesses an illuminating quality that makes strangers stop her on the street to ask for love potions or tarot card readings. A self-taught artist, she

is in New York to arrange an exhibit of her fantastic surreal drawings. While I interview her at the Chelsea Hotel, Vali dances

around the room like a wild animal. The phone rings constantly. Old friends invite her to parties. Refusing, she saves her energy for the tiring mechanics of dealing with galleries and photographers. Surprisingly, Vali says she can't deal with the frenzied pace of New York for more than a month: "I feel so claustrophobic, like an animal with a leash around its neck."



"Moby Dick," 1974: 11 inches by 16 inches, ink and water color on paper.

Vali misses the simple life of the isolated mountain valley in Italy where she's lived for the last 18 years with her Viennese husband Rudi Rappold.

Her home is a small, beautiful pavilion surrounded by thick walls, built centuries ago by a Neapolitan king. Outside the walls is a view of the Mediterranean. In earlier years Vali welcomed visitors and she and Rudi used to go into the town of Positano to dance every night. Everyone stared at her face, her clothes made from brightly colored materials, her jewelry, and—most of all—her mystical aura. Today she prefers to put her energy into her art. Except for two or three visitors a year, her daily life is a step into the 18th century.

There is neither electricity nor running water. The only sign of modern existence in her house is a battery-run radio that pipes in music from Libya; and letters from friends, magazines, and newspapers are her only contacts with the outside world.

Awake at 6 A.M., she shares a breakfast of goat's milk with Rudi and Giani Menichetti, a young poet who has lived with the couple for the past three years. Originally, Giani came to care for the animals whenever Vali and Rudi traveled. Now Vali concedes that both men are "like the marrow in my bones." Occasionally, this unusual relationship causes strain between the two men although Vali knows intuitively that "Neither would ever leave me." As an afterthought, "I'd be happy to be married to five brothers simultaneously, although I know the arrangement would never work; each man would think he owned me."

The caring and feeding of one hundred animals (mostly goats, chickens, and pigs) occupies most of the day. When provisions are needed, Vali sends one of the men to town. She no longer seeks any distractions. At 46, she prefers the calm of her home. An overriding concern is having enough time to record her intense experiences.

Vali (left): love potions and tarot cards?

Vali hands me one of her personal journals filled with fantasies, travels, and daily events as well as old magazine photos of Indian families, funeral processions, and wild flowers. Poetic descriptions of Vali's pain and pleasure cover page after page in childlike writing. A recurring theme is her immense desire for children, thwarted by numerous miscarriages (she would like to adopt a redheaded child).

When Vali isn't writing in her journal, she spends evenings working on her drawings with brilliant watercolor and black ink until their rich surfaces and delicate outlines resemble Persian miniatures. They are filled with legendary Sicilian bandits, five-petaled flowers, past and present lovers, mournful owls, elongated whales, and seductive self-portraits. The fascination of these works lies in the relationship of the various elements that make up Vali's subjective universe.

Born in Sydney, Australia, the daughter of a ship's officer and a symphony orchestra violinist, Vali felt stifled by traditional schooling; only drawing and dance interested her. Since her middle-class family refused to pay for dance lessons, she began working in a glove factory at 13. Even then Vali dressed eccentrically: bright purple lipstick and tiger lilies in her hair.

After World War II, Vali's curiosity about the rest of the world led her to the streets of Paris where she survived mainly on coffee, and she would only come out at night to dance frenetically in small cafés. Her idol was Thomas Chatterton, an 18th-century poet with flowing red hair who died in his twenties. Her strange drawings were too far removed from the hard edge art of the period; her journals were too personal to be salable. Many of her contemporaries killed themselves with drugs or died in jail. An instinct for self-preservation and a need for tranquility turned a brief visit to Italy into a permanent change of location in the mid-1950s.

After years of financial struggle, lessened by occasional sales to pri-

vate collectors, a film of Vali's life and art by Ed van der Elsen shown on Dutch television in 1971 led to two successful gallery exhibits in Amsterdam. During March, a one-woman show of her paintings was held at New York's Bodley Gallery and WNET (New York City's public television station) recently aired the Dutch film, with an introduction by George Plimpton, an old friend and collector of Vali's work. Plimpton describes her as "the symbol of the restless demi-monde that populated the Left Bank. . . . I'm amazed that she has survived; although she seemed torn and loose, like a cat she always managed to land on four feet." Not surprising for a woman who can honestly say, "The only thing I fear is lightning."

Rose Hartman has written about the New York art scene for "The Soho Weekly News," "Changes," "The Feminist Art Journal," "Communications for the Arts," and "Viva."



TV

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE DYING

HONOR MOORE

After my mother died of cancer, friends said to me, "You faced it so courageously." I was willing to accept that I had been courageous, but they had not watched her die, and I knew my courage was nothing compared to hers. Michael Roemer's film, "Dying," which will be televised by Public Broadcasting Service stations on April 29, is a film about dying "from the dying person's point of view." This perspective is what had been missing in our society's dealings with death, and its absence has, I think, contributed to our collective death phobia.

It's a truism that American society ignores death; it would be more

