



Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsen's proof sheet depicting Vali Myers during her time in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris, 1950-1954.

VALI girl

Genius artist, maverick tattooist and eccentric Vali Myers is poised to become fashion's latest underground muse, writes *CLARE PRESS*

It's true they don't make them like Australian artist Vali Myers anymore. If indeed they ever did. It is tricky to categorise this painter, diarist, dancer, eccentric, animal magnet and vagabond muse, although she was all these things and more. Myers was one in a million back when that meant something; before everyone got so busy referencing hipster-this and bohemian-that without really meaning it. You want boho? Myers will give you boho. She spent decades living in an Italian ravine with more than 30 dogs and scores of other animals. Her best friend of 14 years was a fox — a real one, which she carried over her shoulder like a living, breathing stole.

With her warm heart, kaleidoscope garb, tattooed moustache and those startling grey eyes rimmed heavily with kohl, Myers always stood out. Even floating through the now mythic corridors of Manhattan's favourite freak hangout, the Chelsea Hotel, she seemed wilder and more wonderful than most.

In a recent *Vanity Fair* article, rock-poet extraordinaire Patti Smith charges Myers with intoxicating her early creative soul. Smith recalls stumbling over a 1950s book of photos by the late Ed van der Elsen in which Myers stars. That book, *Love on the Left Bank*, and the images of Myers within it, spoke to Smith of freedom — and stuck in her head.

Its cinematic black-and-white images depict a gritty, postwar Paris and its cafe subculture, a world devoid of glamour, but laden with cool, and one in which Myers found herself after leaving Melbourne for Europe in 1949. Says Smith: "[Myers] mirrored what I aspired to aesthetically — to be unconscious of style, yet style itself."

Fast-forward to 1971, Smith is shackled up with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe in the Chelsea and — hey presto! — in walks the girl from the book. Only now she lives in an untamed valley outside Positano, Italy, with her lover, her friend Foxy and a menagerie of stray dogs, donkeys, and friendly eels and toads. She is a shaman woman, an earth mother who talks to the animals — and rock stars: Marianne Faithfull is a regular at

Vali's valley camp; Mick Jagger turned up but didn't make an impact. "People in the city," Myers said, "they get all screwed up." She is visiting Manhattan to sell her art. Writes Smith: "[Myers] was then a tattooist, among other things. Recognising the girl in the rain-pitted mirror, I gathered my courage and asked her to tattoo a lightning bolt on my knee."

How did Myers get there, this inimitable girl from Sydney's suburbs? Her journey was as wild as her eyes.

Myers was born in 1930 in Sydney's Canterbury, to a violinist mother and a sailor father. She was a misfit who hated school. As she says in Ruth Cullen's short film *Painted Lady*: "I couldn't stand it — I could draw and I could dance; everything else was a bloody drag." Vali was 11 when the family moved to conservative Melbourne: back then, to go out without your hat in that town was to risk public scorn. At 14, Myers left home, found a room in a St Kilda boarding house and worked as an artist's model to pay for dance classes.

"She would get on the tram in nothing but leotards," recalls curator Tracy Spinks, who is planning the first major retrospective of her friend's paintings at Melbourne's La Trobe University Museum of Art, slated for 2013. Adds

"I don't think [Myers] was doing it to shock people, although of course it did. She was simply in her own world, a free spirit. Try as she might, she was unable to be orthodox."

Spinks: "I don't think she was doing it to shock people, although of course it did. She was simply in her own world, a free spirit. Try as she might, she was unable to be orthodox. Melbourne didn't understand her, so she left looking for somewhere that did."

Cullen, who became friends with Myers while making the 1990 documentary *The Tightrope Dancer*, has a photo of a glamorous, red-lipped Myers aboard the steamer that took her to Europe in 1949.

Myers was dreaming of romance and dancing in the Paris of Cocteau and Toulouse-Lautrec, but the war had put out the lights; the city that lay waiting was bleak. In Myers' own words: "I got broke within a week and I lived on the streets for years. There was nothing for it but to fight it out. ▶

ED VAN DER ELSKEN



Vali Myers posing as a Christmas Madonna of the Chelsea Hotel, New York, 1989, photographed by Carol Beckwith.



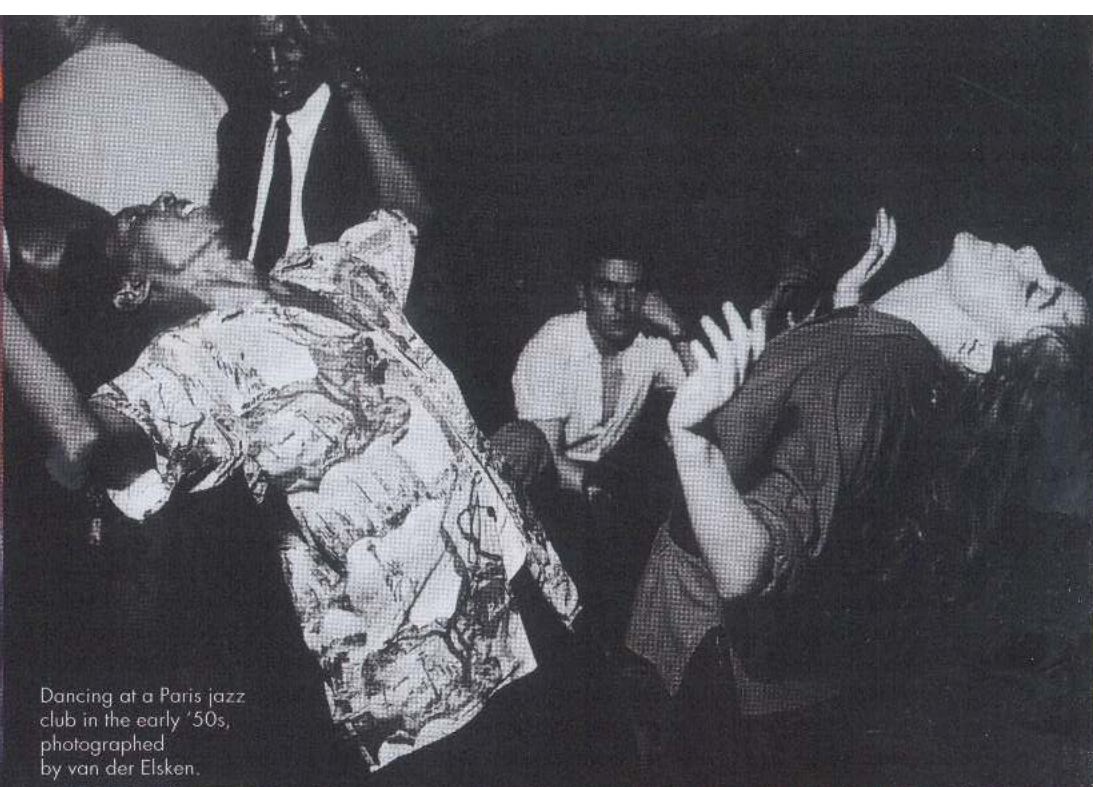
With director Ruth Cullen (right) during the making of *The Tightrope Dancer*, a documentary on Myers' life.



Myers in Paris in the early 1950s, photographed by Ed van der Elsen.



With best friend Foxy in Il Porto, Positano, Italy, 1952, photographed by Rudi Appold.



Dancing at a Paris jazz club in the early '50s, photographed by van der Elsen.

I wasn't going to come home with my tail between my legs." Food and jobs were scarce and the pictures in van der Elsen's book show the young jazz set living by their wits, stealing bread and sleeping wherever they found a chair. These characters are constantly dodging the law. The photographer ends up in prison. When he gets out, Myers (or Ann, as she is called in the book) "has gone off hitchhiking to Vienna".

Which is just what Myers did in real life. There, she embarked on a marriage to Austrian architect Rudi Rappold and became an opium addict.

Spinks reckons Myers must have seen paintings by Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, among others, in Vienna. "Her work reveals a debt to the Pre-Raphaelites, artists such as Aubrey Beardsley and the Viennese Fantastic Realists."

In *The Tightrope Dancer*, the artist will say only that her work is "a bit like a cross between Indian miniature [paintings] and *The Book of Kells*". Lord knows how she did it when she was sozzled. As she tells it: "When you're really tired and you're smashed on the booze, you're like a broken vessel, and then you can really start to work; it's beautiful. Then your spirit starts going on walkabout. And I work until about four in the morning, very fine work. It's something else. I don't know where it comes from."

Wherever it came from, it is the art that is the most astonishing thing about Myers. Her small, exquisitely detailed ink and watercolour drawings could take months, even years to complete. Many explore dreamlike vistas of the sacred feminine that were way ahead of their time. She drew the magic of nature, animal totems and the struggle of the female spirit.

When the works weren't self-portraits, says Spinks, they "portrayed figures endowed with those attributes she most admired — anti-authoritarian bandits, warrior women and the so called 'fallen' girls of the bible, Jezebel and Magdalene". Like Frida Kahlo's oeuvre, pain is a central theme — as Myers put it: "I'm not interested in happiness."

It seems incredible that the art isn't better known. Although some critics recognised their grace and scope — George Plimpton featured Myers in his *Paris Review* alongside Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti — her works are not represented in any public collection. Outré Gallery in Melbourne held a small Myers show in November 2010 and plans to publish a book of works and diary excerpts early next year, but her art is anything but overexposed.

Perhaps the clothes and the fox and the tattoos and the friends distracted from the paintings during her lifetime. As

Spinks says, her "charismatic personality — ever-present during her exhibitions — to some extent overshadowed the attentions her work might have enjoyed. She was such a work of art herself that her presence eclipsed her drawings."

Cullen says that unlike her famous friends and fans, including Smith, Debbie Harry, Andy Warhol and Salvador Dalí, Myers wasn't trying to create a market for herself — she was more concerned with living life. "She really only sold her paintings when she needed money to feed her animals."

But now the fashion world is taking notice. Renowned photographer Emma Summerton says: "Vali was an inspiration for so many reasons — too many to list — but for me firstly because she lived her life by her own rules. Everything was in support of her creative life: her dress, her homes; she lived it fully and was the real deal. Her paintings are like an extension of her, they are her children, and a record of her inner and outer worlds merged and put to paper in a most magical, powerful and incredibly skilled way. To meet her was to come face to face with a living goddess and true artist of our time." And Myers' name keeps cropping up in avant-garde style circles. Musician Devendra Banhart is a fan. Co-owner of hip new Manhattan boutique Change of Season Marco Querci names her as a muse, describing her as "a cross between Florence Welch, the CocoRosie sisters and Zandra Rhodes".

And locally, ManiaMania jewellery designers Tamila Purvis and Melanie Kamsler took Myers as inspiration for their new collection, *Rêve*, tangling bronze lightening bolts in their Patti ring in ode to the musician's tattoo, and casting their Vagabond cuff in wood-grain texture iced with a rocky hunk of smoky quartz that calls to mind the jagged hills above Myers' Positano sanctuary. The *Rêve* campaign features model-of-the-moment Abbey Lee in a free-spirited take on 1970s-era Myers. Says Purvis: "The fact that she was Australian is part of her attraction and beauty to us. It was Vali's approach to life, and her free-spirited way that invoked an interest — full of wild stories and originality."

Fashion, meanwhile, is full of contrived eccentricity thanks to the Lady Gaga effect, but the real deal, a genuine feel for the bizarre that comes from within as opposed to a mere outward expression of difference, is, by its very nature, rare.

If everyone tattooed their faces, wore a live fox stole and painted as if possessed even after a bottle of gin, it wouldn't be marvellous any more. I'm so glad it is. Fashion is finally having its Vali Myers moment. She certainly never asked for it, but I think she'd be amused, don't you? ■

© ED VAN DER ELSEN/NEDERLANDS FOTOMUSEUM ROTTERDAM; COURTESY OF ANNET GEINK GALLERY, AMSTERDAM; CAROL BECKWITH/THE VALI MYERS ART GALLERY TRUST; EMMA SUMMERTON; COURTESY OF RUTH CULLEN; COURTESY OF OUTRÉ GALLERY, MELBOURNE

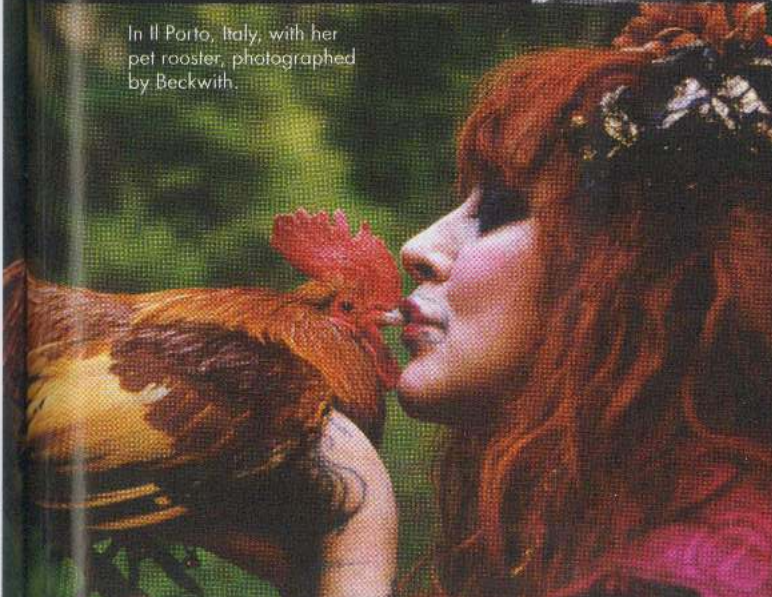


In Paris, 1954, photographed by van der Elsen.

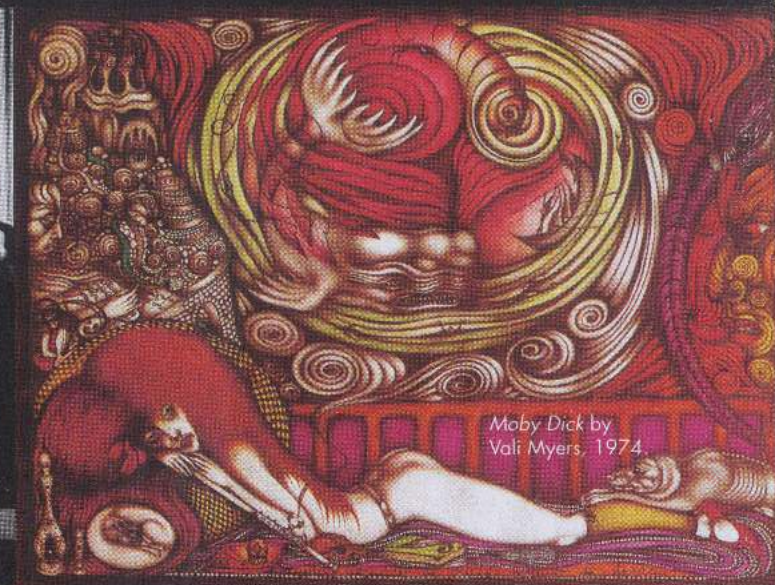


Kissing fellow bohemian Pierre Feuilleto in Paris in the early '50s, photographed by van der Elsen.

With friend Auguste Hommel at café Chez Molneau, Paris, photographed by van der Elsen.

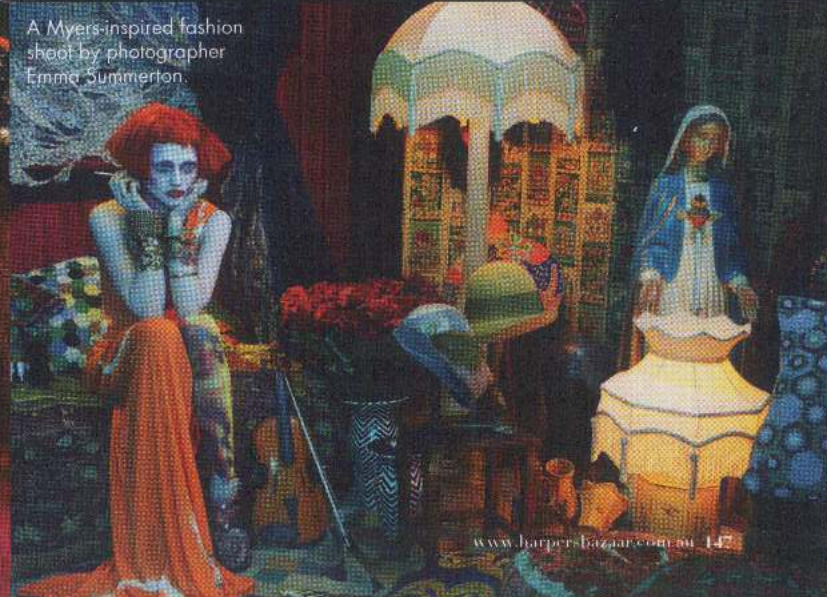


In Il Porto, Italy, with her pet rooster, photographed by Beckwith.



Moby Dick by Vali Myers, 1974.

"She was such a work of art herself that her presence eclipsed her drawings."



A Myers-inspired fashion shoot by photographer Emma Summerton.