



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

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."

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. ▶

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