

ART & DESIGN

PUBLICATION

Bohemian rhapsody

BY FRANCES ATKINSON

IN LIFE, Vali Myers defied classification but that didn't stop critics, fans and fellow artists from searching for the right words to convey just how extraordinary she was. Bohemian, seer, warrior, muse, gypsy. All true, but one word alone could not define her.

Nine years after her death from cancer, there is still no word that captures the identity of a woman who left Melbourne as a teenager in 1949, lived on the streets of Paris with postwar refugees, and spent her nights dancing in the nightclubs of the Left Bank.

In Paris she was known as Vali St Germain-des-Pres. Like most of her friends, Myers had a life with hardships. Money was scarce and for three years she was addicted to opium. Eventually she would make a home with her partner, Gianni Menichetti, and a large collection of stray dogs and other animals in an isolated valley near Positano, Italy, she called Il Porto.

In 1993, 43 years after she left Melbourne, she returned. Her studio in the Nicholas Building in Swanston Street became a place

where friends and admirers could stop by and be greeted with "Hello, love". Her prints covered the walls, with exotic ornaments and teetering stacks of books everywhere.

By then she had been painted by Sidney Nolan and photographed time and again by Dutch photographer Ed Vander Elsken. Myers had danced on stage at the Royal Albert Hall for Donovan (for which she requested "one Nubian goat" as payment), and crossed paths with Salvador Dali, Tennessee Williams, John Lennon, Debbie Harry and Patti Smith. As a teenager, Smith had covered her bedroom walls with images of Myers, and in 1971 the pair met at the Chelsea Hotel in New York. They became friends, and later Smith would have a permanent reminder of their encounter — a lightning bolt tattoo on her knee. Myers had a way of "synching" with the creative pulse.

"But Vali always liked 'ordinary' people," says friend Nicole Karidis, a co-founder of the Vali Myers Trust. "She wasn't impressed by fame. The people she liked best were truckies, ordinary people, or people who wandered into the

studio who didn't know much about art or about her. Even when she was living in New York, she loved the firefighter or policeman."

Many people seem to have a story about Myers, as even chance encounters made a lasting impres-

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sion. "Once you met her, you never forgot her," Karidis says. "I still don't know why she isn't more well known. Maybe because she never conformed. She wasn't that interested in big galleries putting on shows; she was more interested in making sure her work was accessible to everyone."

During our interview, Karidis, who met the artist in the early 1990s, carefully lays out some of the 19 diaries Myers kept between 1950 and 2003. The books themselves are

unremarkable — one looks like an office ledger, another is a narrow address book — but inside, every bit of space is crowded with impeccably neat handwriting, finished with loops and flourishes. Scattered throughout are pictures of foxes (Myers cared for an orphan called Foxy for 14 years), self-portraits, poetry, photographs and articles from magazines and newspapers.

Nothing feels random; they are carefully curated moments of her life, dreams and fears. In one, she writes: "The small white flowers from the elderberry trees fallen down upon the backs of sheep and goats and Foxy growling, it being a funny mid-week kind of day."

"Vali stood out from the very beginning," Karidis says. "She came from a conservative family; her father was in the Merchant Navy and her mother was a violinist. As a teenager, she was already searching for kindred spirits and eventually found them in St Kilda.

"During the day, she worked in a factory, and the rest of her spare time, she danced. She didn't always fit in . . . she used to wear trousers and [said] people would stare."

In the years that followed, people would continue to stare; some in awe, others in fear. By her 30s,



Myers had appropriated a distinctive look she had been refining for decades: wild orange hair, Kohl-rimmed eyes, ornate jewellery and an elegant, Dali-inspired facial tattoo — a slim moustache. "If Vali taught me one thing," Karidis says, "it's that she was more herself than anyone I know. She had no choice but to be who she was.

"She couldn't conform and I think she sacrificed a lot along the way. It made her life difficult but she was always herself."

Central to Myers' life was her art. In death, her work continues to attract private collectors, at the



From left: A page from Vali Myers' diary, August 1977; *Moby Dick*, 1972-1974, pen, black ink, burnt sienna, watercolour and tempera, 30 x 40cm, private collection; Vali Myers, c. late 1960s, Chelsea Hotel, NYC © Joel Elskins.



AirLink

Focus on Vali Myers' face for more images. AirLink details: page 2, news.

same time as the mythology surrounding her life and art grows. In a new book, *Night Flower*, friends and critics contribute essays and recollections about Myers and her legacy. Reprinted for the first time are pages from the journals, along with her colourful, detailed works.

American art critic Carlo McCormick calls her "deeply personal" pen-and-ink drawings remarkable: "There is an abiding

sense that for all of its uniqueness, the strengths and vitality of Myers' art is in how it has sprung from a deeper lineage of visionary spiritual art." Karidis says it's impossible to separate the artist from her work.

"It's all so personal, and the work and who Vali is are connected. She used to say she was compelled to draw. She had to do it. She would not have survived without it."

■ *Night Flower: The Life and Art of Vali Myers*, edited by Martin McIntosh and Gemma Jones, Outre Gallery /Thames&Hudson, \$35, special edition hardback, \$70, is available next month. See a gallery of images on *The Age* iPad app.

