

The Chapters: The captivating life of Vali Myers

Tess McLaughlan:

State Library Victoria acknowledges the traditional lands of all the Victorian Aboriginal clans and their cultural practices and knowledge systems. We recognise that our collections hold traditional cultural knowledge belonging to Indigenous communities in Victoria and around the country. We support communities to protect the integrity of this information, gathered from their ancestors in the colonial period. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present, who have handed down these systems of practice to each new generation for millennia.

The sun glistens over picturesque Positano in 1960s Italy. Locals and tourists alike wander the streets, taking in the coastal views, but above the coastal town, a very different story is unfolding.

Nestled in the mountain that overlooks Positano is a deep canyon, an oasis hidden from the bustling crowds below. In the middle of the valley, there's a small domed house. Its stark white facade is painted with multicoloured murals. The entrance to the home features sculptures of animals nestled high on rocks and depict some of the animals that call this wild canyon home. Amongst the animals is a fox, small and sleek. This much-loved fox provides the inspiration for the only person in sight, an artist drawing in her rose pavilion in the middle of the valley. She hums to herself as she draws, swaying in time with the trees that dance in the breeze around her. Her style is bohemian, and her presence is ethereal. With fine facial tattoos, her gaze meets that of her subject, her piercing blue eyes capturing the detail of the fox's form.

Growing up in Melbourne, this artist has always lived an independent life as a free spirit, and here, hidden in the hills of portside Italy, her world comes to life. The locals call her the witch of Positano. Salvador Dali lauds her as an excellent and original painter. Countless writers and photographers celebrate her as their muse. Her name is Vali Myers, and she is as unique and brilliant as they come. This is her story.

Welcome to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. Now, you probably know about State Library Victoria's beautiful reading rooms and galleries. You may have even come to see Ned Kelly's armour on display, but this show is about the stories that are hidden at the Library, the ones that you may never have heard of, and the librarians who

discover them. I'm your host Tess McLaughlan, and I'm lucky enough to spend my days exploring State Library Victoria's rich collection, and – in partnership with our talented librarians – bring its stories to you.

She was a flame-haired bohemian with a fox as her companion, and a passion for drawing and dance. Vali Myers was an Australian artist who defied convention and created her own original vision. Her work was colourful and intricate, depicting animal motifs and her environment at Il Porto, self-portraits and spiritual symbols. She expressed her inner world through her art, which was influenced by her travels, her dreams, her passion for literature and her love of nature. She was also a charismatic figure who helped capture the attention of many famous artists, writers and musicians. She was photographed and filmed by Ed van der Elsken, painted by Albert Tucker and George Plimpton, and befriended by Tennessee Williams and Patti Smith. Vali sure was a trailblazer. Today we're joined by Fiona Jeffery, one of the librarians at State Library Victoria, who wrote a captivating blog about Vali Myers on the Library website. In this episode, you'll hear how Vali Myers lived her life as an artist and a free spirit. So, let's open another chapter.

So, Fiona, welcome to the show.

Fiona Jeffery:

Thank you, Tess.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, Vali is a reasonably famous person. What made you decide to take this deep dive into her life?

Fiona Jeffery:

I was in the privileged position of working on her amazing archive of personal items. So, I had access to her diaries and her drawings and her personal papers. Basically, the whole contents of her studio, which included her brass bed, so everything, and through this work of working really closely with her personal items and her drawings and the research they undertook when I was cataloguing them, I began to find out she had such a big fanbase - she had touched so many people. She was well known internationally, but perhaps not widely known in her own country. It seemed that her magnetic personality, and her unique and captivating appearance, and the details of her life may have overshadowed her art, and I knew from reading her diaries that her drawings were really so important to her. I felt her life and work should be shared and celebrated by a new generation, and particularly by women who would find her inspiring.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, Vali's story begins in Australia. She was originally born in Sydney in 1930, before moving to Box Hill in Melbourne's eastern suburbs in 1941. Vali left home at the age of 14, and by the age of 19 she was the leading dancer for the Melbourne Modern Ballet Company. But, in a theme that recurs throughout her story, Vali would make a bold move to a new location. In 1950, Vali moved to Paris to forge an independent life. So, I asked Fiona what she thought inspired this decision.

Fiona Jeffery:

Well, Melbourne in the 1940s was really conservative, and it was pretty intolerant of any individual expression, and Vali was really into that, she was like a free spirit. Her mother had even nicknamed her the Wild Goose. She had a desire still to escape what was really small-mindedness in Melbourne, where she felt this sort of self-start appearance that she had really stood out in the streets. She actually reflected that it was 'unbearable to feel people's eyes drilling into me as I walked past'. So, I think she had this kind of naive idea that Paris would be an escape from that.

Tess McLaughlan:

Now, of course, this was in the years shortly following the Second World War. So, Vali actually lived on the streets of Paris for several years. What was life like for Vali in Paris?

Fiona Jeffery:

She was aged 19 when she left Melbourne. As a foreigner unable to obtain employment, she was spending all this time living on the streets of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés Quarter of the Left Bank. She danced in the nightclubs and bars for money, wearing an oversized shirt, with her beehive falling apart, and her dark kohl eyeshadow around her eyes, mixing with the jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, and many other well-known figures of the 20th century who were there at the time - people like Jean Genet, Jean-Paul Sartre and Tennessee Williams. From 1955 to 1958, Vali also lived in a hotel. It was a hotel, Alsace-Lorraine, with the same concierge that Marcel Proust had during his last years. She called this her 'dark incubation period', where she rarely saw the light of day and she lived in what she called a dreamland of opium. She had the curtains drawn. She continued to work on her drawings during this period, but she rarely went outside. So, she became very thin and inward-looking.

Tess McLaughlan:

Despite Vali living in Paris during quite a tumultuous period of history, her career really started to take shape while she was there. In the 50s, she was the subject of a photo book and was written about in *The Paris Review*.

Fiona Jeffery:

Yeah, look, she came to the attention of a Dutch photographer called Ed van der Elsken. He made her the subject of this photo book, which he titled *Love on the Left Bank*, and it was published in 1956. The book documents Vali, and it really focuses on her, and this hipster set of this bohemian colony on the Left Bank that she was hanging out with. There are these amazing black and white closeups of Vali's amazing face, her incredible face, and reproductions of her drawings as well that she'd been doing, and in 1958, the editor of *The Paris Review*, George Plimpton, published her drawings.

He said, 'You saw in her the personification of something torn and loose and deep-down primitive in all of us. She became a symbol of the restless, confused, vice-enthralled demi-monde that populated certain cafes on the Left Bank'. So, it was through these publications that Vali came to represent the quintessential rebellious youth of love on the Left Bank. So, this lifestyle in Paris, where she spent time with artists as well – people like the Viennese artist Ernst Fuchs, who influenced the development of a drawing, as well as symbolist artists such as Aubrey Beardsley, who she had reproductions of their work.

Tess McLaughlan:

How do you think Vali's time in Paris went on to shape her life going forward?

Fiona Jeffery:

Well, it launched her career on an international stage with the publications that were circulating in London and New York and elsewhere. She received that recognition for her drawings, as well as this kind of cult celebrity status. She went on then to influence others – like Tennessee Williams based his character of Carol on Vali in *Orpheus Descending*, his play. So, there was all this interest in Vali from those Paris years. It led to 5 documentary films that were eventually made about her between 1965 right through to later in her life, right through to 2002, so it really did shape the direction of her life.

Tess McLaughlan:

But just as she started to find this international success, Vali moved on to her next chapter. In 1958, she moved to a valley in Positano, a small town on the Amalfi Coast in Italy.

Fiona Jeffery:

Vali moved to Il Porto, it was 1958, with her husband Rudi Rappold whom she'd married in Vienna in 1955, and they'd basically found this amazing, abandoned

property. It was in Il Porto, which was located in southern Italy, so it's a really breathtaking and beautiful location. It's overlooking the blue waters of the Mediterranean, out to the Bay of Positano and the Galli Islands, which kind of appear like a reclining figure of a woman, and it's a really idyllic setting. There's a cold water stream and a waterfall running through the property, and her home is like a small, beautiful pavilion surrounded by a walled garden with an entrance gate and sculptures as you go in. It was an abandoned nobleman's cottage, and it was built centuries ago. It's kind of Moorish in style, with a domed roof and a little gold tip on the top with a single room in a mezzanine level where she slept. It was richly painted inside and out. Inside, it's highly decorated by Vali with her objects, her statues and images and photographs. There's no electricity or plumbing, so it's almost an outdoor existence.

Tess McLaughlan:

Do you think Vali ever felt quite isolated or alone at Il Porto?

Fiona Jeffery:

I think she enjoyed the isolation, because it gave her the opportunity to focus on her drawing – she'd work through the night under a gaslight – because it was quite inaccessible. I think she enjoyed that sense of isolation because she still had, well, she had Gianni Menichetti who came in 1971, and she had a husband, Rudi Rappold, and she still had visitors, but it was hard for them to access Il Porto. So, I think it was like a good combination for her.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, you've touched on this a bit already, but Vali turned her home into a refuge for over a hundred animals. Can you tell us about her love for animals and, in particular, her connection with the fox?

Fiona Jeffery:

The environment and the animals became her greatest inspiration, really, and it featured in almost all of her drawings. You can see the motifs of Il Porto with the little dome pavilion, and you can often see the animals all around in the lower part of the drawing, and she had over a hundred animals. She had dogs and cats, she had a pig called Ramona, and she had Fanny the donkey, a monkey, a tortoise called Winnie, who lived till over a hundred and only recently passed away, and she had her most beloved, her pet fox called Foxy.

I can tell you a little bit about Foxy as well. She was a little pet vixen fox who lived for 14 years, and Vali adopted her in 1965. She wrote in a diary that 'Foxy came orphan

to me' and includes a very cute photo of this little baby Foxy in the diary. In fact, the diary is digitized if anyone's interested in viewing it, you can jump online to the Library's website and see it. Her mother had actually been shot in the mountains while out hunting for her babies. So Foxy was actually found by Vali starving outside a burrow, so that's where Vali was able to adopt her. Vali described her as 'gentle and loving, also fiercely proud and lonely. In spirit, she's shy and wild, untamable. Foxy is the most beloved of all my 100 animals.'

Tess McLaughlan:

In her time, Vali rubbed shoulders with many big names; Tennessee Williams, Salvador Dali, and Jean-Paul Sartre, just to name a few. I asked Fiona to expand on what Vali's reputation was like in the art world.

Fiona Jeffery:

She remained pretty wary of the mainstream gallery system. She preferred to organise and run her own solo exhibitions so she could have complete control. Mainstream galleries that she did approach found her small-scale drawings too personal, too domesticated, a criticism that many female artists face in a male-dominated art world. So since deciding to exhibit in 1968 with a solo show in Positano, which was between 1972 and 1999, she held 15 major solo shows and private viewings, which were in New York, Amsterdam, Italy, and Australia, and she curated those herself. So, her work was included in a group exhibition in New York, which was called Fantantric Art New York, and that was actually held at the Basel Art Fair, along with Mati Klarwein and her Paris days, and a very young Barbara Kruger. So, she did achieve those sorts of high-level group shows. However, she wasn't trusting her work to be on show for the 3-month period in particular of that exhibition, so she actually stole her work from the gallery walls, getting Rudi to distract the security while she took it from the gallery walls rather than staying there for 3 months. So, she was really wary of the gallery system, and she really stayed outside of that in the art world. In 1994, she was actually invited to participate in an exhibition which was titled *Unpainted to the Last: Moby Dick in American Art 1940-1990*, and that was at the Spencer Museum of Art, so that was some sort of acceptance within the mainstream art world, and she would go to New York to sell her drawings from 1970, and find her own buyers from people she knew and or private collectors. She found her drawings really hard to part with, identifying with each drawing as an extension of herself. Her early success she also attributed to Salvador Dali's advice to exhibit her work in Amsterdam.

Tess McLaughlan:

Vali would travel back and forth between Italy and New York during the time she lived in Positano. All told, she would spend nearly 50 years in her home on the Amalfi Coast.

But in 1993, Vali would move once more. She would come back to Melbourne.

Fiona Jeffery:

Well, Vali returned to Melbourne in 1993, and she'd been away for 43 years. People had recently seen the film *The Tightrope Dancer* by Ruth Cullen, and Vali found that even at Tullamarine Airport people recognised her, which was exciting to her. She set up a studio in the Nicholas Building, which was like a bohemian oasis in the heart of the city. It's been called the creative heart of Melbourne. It's got this really long history of housing all of these artists and designers, and people from button sellers through to artists. So, her studio was this bohemian oasis, it was very colourful, the walls she painted pink with sunflower motifs. There was furniture including carved Indian chairs and a silver table and her brass bed, and soft furnishings and cushions, and all of these items we now have at the State Library, in her archive. She returned to Australia with this international reputation as an artist, and there were many visitors to her studio gallery where fans and the curious came to meet Vali and view her work.

She sold posters and postcards and reproductions of her work, as Andy Warhol had actually recommended her to do in New York in the 70s. There was a real joy for her return. She really loved the reaction she got from people and felt Melbourne had changed and were accepting of her. She said, 'I'm so happy, I don't know what to do. Here in Australia, it's all okay. Ned Kelly, who was born in Victoria, lived up bush here, and they have his famous armour here in the city. Big seagulls are in the city in St Kilda. My old stamping ground has hardly changed, and only to the better. The people are wonderful and mind their own business yet are shy and friendly. My family are sweethearts, all of them. Thank the stars that I survived to come back like a true blue boomerang'.

She found that it had changed, and it wasn't the conservative place that it was where she was being judged. She was accepted. She said, 'I do adore it here, I haven't felt so good in years. It seems I've become a legend in the meantime. I've become impatient with a cramped feeling of Europe, and the same in New York. I feel like a bird that had spread its wings, finally, it's a miracle'.

Tess McLaughlan:

Seems I've become a legend. That's such a good line.

Fiona Jeffery:

The other thing that happened too was she conducted television interviews. There was a lot of interest in her life, and she appeared on TV on *Dateline*, *Today Tonight*, *Good Morning Australia* with Bert Newton, he interviewed her, and she was also interviewed by a range of journalists for articles published in newspapers and

magazines. There were films about her life shown in cinemas in Melbourne as well.

So, there was a lot of interest, and you can see that in her archive. She's kept this scrapbook of all of the newspaper clippings. In 1993, at the end of that year, she had a first exhibition back in Melbourne at the Emerald Hill Gallery, true to her word, and she was really fascinated by people's reaction. She was wanting to be there; she curated her own shows. She said, 'I love to watch what happens to people when they look at my work, because often it breaks them open. Some people are afraid, which to me is very strange. Some people love it, some people even cry. Some people see the pain in it. I love to see people opening up to my drawings'.

Tess McLaughlan:

Now, one way to learn about stories like Vali's is to listen to a podcast like this, but you can also come to the Library. If someone listening has a person they want to learn some more about, who should they ask?

Fiona Jeffery:

Well, the Library's Ask a Librarian service on our website is a great place to start with any follow-up questions people might have. The Library's online catalogue also has a detailed finding aid to the Vali Myers Archive and the papers of Vali Myers. There are almost a hundred digitised items there now, which include Vali's early diaries and all of the original drawings held by the Library. Excitingly, they can be viewed and zoomed in at high resolution so you can read every word and see every picture from her diaries from 1963, and soon they'll be all digitised right through to her last diary in 2002, which we're really excited about.

Tess McLaughlan:

Well, Fiona, thanks so much for joining us on the show.

Fiona Jeffery:

Thank you so much, Tess. It's been a pleasure.

Tess McLaughlan:

You've been listening to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. If you are interested in finding out more about today's topic, you can read the article that this episode was based on, which you can find in the show notes. For more information about State Library Victoria's collections, events and services, head over to the Library's website at slv.vic.gov.au, or visit us in person. This show was recorded in the podcast studios of State Library Victoria, and it was produced in partnership with Wavelength Creative. To make sure you don't miss an episode of *The Chapters*, be sure to subscribe to or

follow the show in your podcast app, and while you're there, leave us a five-star review. It really helps others find the show. I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'll see you in our next episode as we open another chapter.

This podcast was recorded by State Library Victoria on the lands of the Wurundjeri People.