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### Julia Calfee: Inside the Chelsea Hotel

On the advent of photographer Julia Calfee's first exhibition in Singapore, we find out more about her experience at the legendary residence, and her personal quest for freedom

BY ANNABELLE TEO, 25.SEP



*A Long Night On the First Floor*

To walk through Julia Calfee's exhibition *Inside the Chelsea Hotel* is to walk through not so much a space, but a feeling. Consisting of 14 large-print photographs shot inside the legendary New York City hotel, *Inside the Chelsea Hotel* is a visual capsule of the years Calfee spent living there, from 2003 to 2008.

The monochromatic series captures a gritty atmosphere saturated with raw emotion, heavy with a sense of creative decadence that the Chelsea Hotel has become so synonymous with.

Artists such as Jimi Hendrix, William S. Burroughs, Stanley Kubrick, Mark Twain, and Bob Dylan have passed through its doors, while Arthur C. Clarke wrote the screenplay for *2001: A Space Odyssey* during his stay there.

But contrary to popular perception, the Chelsea Hotel was somewhat of an incubator for creativity, rather than an address for the rich and famous, as Calfee believes. "There were no famous people at the Chelsea Hotel," she says. "People became famous because they were given the possibility of having this physical, mental, and creative space."

Calfee herself has built up a rich body of work spanning various media, from photography to writing, film, and sound, which often meet to form multi-layered projects. Her project *The Last Songs of the Glaciers*, for example, married photography with sound recordings of melting ice in the Swiss Alps, as a way to document the changes in glaciers due to global warming. The spirit of the Chelsea Hotel as experienced by Calfee was largely lost with the ousting of former manager Stanley Bard due to mismanagement, in 2007, and the hotel is currently closed for renovations. That this former inner sanctum has been disrupted is perhaps what makes *Inside the Chelsea Hotel* evoke a sense of poignancy. We speak to Calfee about the quest for freedom, creativity, and everything in between seemingly empty space.



*Julia Calfee*

**Asia Tatler: The Chelsea Hotel as you've known it is now closed – do you think a place like that can ever exist again?**

**Julia Calfee:** Can it ever exist again in New York City? I think we know the answer to that. The Chelsea Hotel was supported by one person, [Stanley Bard], who could afford to say to most people, 'You can pay when you have some money'. There were no famous people at the Chelsea Hotel. They came to the hotel when they had nothing else. They were given intellectual and physical space to create their work. And then when they became "famous" and had some money, rarely would they stay on in the hotel. People became famous because they were given the possibility of having this physical, mental and creative space. Stanley Bard was the patron of all these artists [in the hotel]. I think that mentality of being a patron, of supporting these artists and their lifestyle no matter what, so that they can create and work – it doesn't exist so much in our world.



*Paranoia I*

**AT: Is there a common thread that runs through all your work?**

**JC:** It's my own personal quest to find places where there is a sense of freedom. The Chelsea Hotel was for me a living, microscopic example. It was not so much about the particular residence, but about how it is to be in a place where there's a lot of creativity; how these people live and get along. I'm always hoping to find this place of ultimate freedom and it leads me to some fascinating places.

**AT: Are you somewhat of a nomad yourself?**

**JC:** I'm certainly someone who has no desire to have a large house and a gardener and all that, because that would prevent me from being able to go out and live in the places where I think there's something important to be done.

**AT: Do you have any favourite destinations?**

**JC:** If I stay in a place, it is because it is, at that time, my favourite place. For example, Singapore – I've grown so fond of Singapore since I've started coming here and working with the gallery. One of the reasons for that is not only do the people ask such good questions, but they take the time to listen, which in today's world is very rare.

**AT: What are you currently working on?**

**JC:** *Messages from Another World*, which I started more than a year ago, in Bali, is a project about what people really see in spaces. For example, 100 years ago, we would've thought that there was only empty space between us. But of course, various discoveries in science have taught us that there is no empty space between you and I; there are atoms and neurons and all the things I can't even name. It's only through our minds that we know there's no empty space.

**AT: You work with other media besides photography – which is your favourite?**

**JC:** My favourite medium outside of photography is strict recording – not video, but recording sound. I did a project that was supported by the Swiss government called *The Last Song of the Glaciers*, which was about global warming. They flew me up in a container, by helicopter, and placed it at the bottom of a glacier. I used that container as a home base for six months, and recorded all those sounds – so many of them sounded like heartbeats, helicopters, very metallic sometimes. In Bali too: for *Messages from Another World*, I also have done an amazing series of recordings that I now put with my photography

**AT: How would you like to be remembered as an artist?**

**JC:** I would like to be remembered as someone who took risks, made decisions based on only her own love and passion, and who had a vision that is particularly personal.

*Inside the Chelsea Hotel is on now until October 12, 2012 at Art Plural Gallery, 38 Armenia Street*