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### The Chelsea Hotel: only for the free-spirited

By: Elaine Huang

Hearing that an angel stayed on the ninth floor of the **Chelsea Hotel** in New York didn't deter **Julia Calfee** from staying on for 4 years, she tells *UrbanWire*.



Her love for the now defunct landmark has been captured in 15 monochromatic photographs taken by the American-born photographer, multi-media artist, writer and animator, during her stay at the site where many penniless but promising artists could somehow feel accepted.

She will be exhibiting them in Singapore from Sep 12.

Julia Calfee, an avid traveller and elected member of New York Chapter of the Explorers Club, has published a total of seven books. The book on this subject, *INSIDE, THE CHELSEA HOTEL PHOTOGRAPHED BY JULIA CALFEE*, was published in 2008. The photographs have also been exhibited in museums and galleries in France, United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, Spain and the United States.

More than just a historic building, it's almost a museum of the ghosts of many notable residents such as **Mark Twain**, **Charles Bukowski**, **Rufus Wainwright** and **Iggy Pop** whose lives exhibited great creativity. She recounts the first couple of days in the 250-unit, 12-storey red brick building cheerily, though admitting that the hotel was extremely dysfunctional, with fights breaking out often.



“When I first came to the Chelsea Hotel, I had no intention of living there,” says Calfee, who is currently based in New York, Zurich and Brussels. She lived there from 2003 to 2008, when the then-managing partner, Stanley Bard, was eventually ousted for mismanagement of funds. However, the warmth and acceptance provided by the residents made Julia feel welcome; people weren’t being judged for what they did, but respected for just being themselves.

As Calfee describes on her official website, “When I photographed at the Chelsea Hotel, I would stay in a space or situation for hours. Time would pass and my presence would become less and less visible. Sometimes I would even disappear.”

Just imagine how wondrous it might have been, standing in the middle of a building which is more than a century old, and clicking that shutter. You start to meld into all the happenings around and be totally unnoticed. It is to take a huge step back and enjoying all that is unfolding before your eyes as you capture it in film.



If not for the fact that the new owner, Joseph Chetrit, officially closed the 128-year old hotel for renovations in August 2011, one could simply show up without a credit card and still score a room. Bard had been known to allow certain residents to stay without paying rent for a period of time if he found them particularly talented.

However, the former Chelsea manager wasn’t an entirely free spirit unlike his guests. He did have his rules about who’s allowed inside this artistic palace, as Calfee tells *UrbanWire*, “Children are absolutely sacred. If one dares to upset a child in the hotel, you’ll be (chased) out (before) the next morning.”



On whether locals here can relate to this Big Apple institution, she answers, “I think it is very well-received. Don’t you? I feel the same way bringing this to Singapore as bringing it to Paris.”

Unfortunately, only selected photographs will be on sale. Prices are on application.

The photo exhibition by Julia Calfee titled *Inside the Chelsea Hotel* can be found in **Art Plural Gallery** from September 12 to October 12.

*Photos courtesy of Julia Calfee.*

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Photo Exhibition details

*Inside the Chelsea Hotel*

12 September – 12 October, 2012

Art Plural Gallery

38 Armenian Street

Monday – Saturday (11 am – 7 pm)

Julia Calfee’s website: <http://www.juliacalfee.com/>

Art Plural Gallery’s website: <http://www.artpluralgallery.com/>