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Art

“CHELSEA HOTEL THROUGH THE EYES OF PHOTOGRAPHERS”

125th Anniversary Photography
Chelsea Hotel Ballroom
222 West 23rd Street
May 9-11 from noon to 6 p.m.
(646-752-1528, lindatroeller.com)



“Vali Meyers, Chelsea Hotel,” Rose Hartman

125 years of Chelsea mornings, days and nights

By Abby Luby

Artists and former residents of the embattled Chelsea Hotel are honoring the landmark as an established Mecca of creative energy in the photo exhibition “Chelsea Hotel Through the Eyes of Photographers.”

The past year of management shake-ups and mounting efforts to “clean up” the Chelsea to change it from a laissez-faire artists’ community to a boutique hotel have been difficult. Several artists have moved out after fighting about unpaid back rent and the new hotel rules they find restrictive.

The show marks the 125th anniversary of the hotel, particularly the last 50 years when high- and low-profile artists visited and settled at the hotel, forming one of the most unique artist communities in New York City. The photographs in the show reflect the hotel as a prominent touchstone for the illustrious artists, writers, musicians and dancers who graced its rooms and started special friendships that formed the core of the Chelsea Hotel arts community.

“It’s the accumulation of history and culture and the proverbial artistic dream to have some time and a place to explore your ideas,” said photographer Linda Troeller, who curated the show with hotel heir David Elder. “The hotel is a point of reference for artists in New York. That’s why it is so vital.”

The 10-story building attracted artists and curators for the bright northern light filtering through the large windows. The thick plaster walls have allowed bands like the Grateful Dead to bang out practice sessions before a gig without disturbing other tenants or guests.

“Guys with guitars used to stay in the big suite to practice for a gig at the one of the clubs,” said Troeller. “We don’t really see that anymore.”

The thriving creative network at the Chelsea Hotel is what drew photographers to contribute to the show. “It was and is a community that feeds itself,” said Troeller. “It is not a formal artist colony where people are chosen to stay. People have to pay money to stay at the Chelsea Hotel. They are drawn to this place that seems to have its own vortex.”

Troeller, who still lives at the hotel, put out the word about the show last fall and has garnered an overwhelming response. “I received over 150 pictures from about 80 photographers,” she said. “I wanted to really connect with people who expressly came to the Chelsea to take pictures either on assignment, for a personal art reason or who lived at the hotel and created a body of work about it.”

Photographers featured in the show are from New York City, and the rest of the country as well as places like Finland, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Germany, France, England, Canada, and Mexico. Photos of higher profile artists include Virgil Thomson, Patti Smith and a picture of deceased Ramones bass player Dee Dee Ramone, shot by Keith Green. There is a picture taken 15 years ago by Brad Trent of artist George Chemeche, who “still has a beautiful apartment and is still an active curator and artist in the hotel.” Another picture is of composer Gerald Busby by Maggie Hopp. Troeller noted that although Hopp didn’t live at the Chelsea Hotel, her frequent visits produced a book of portraits. Other photographers in the show are Rita Barros, whose portrait book about the hotel has fallen out of print. Martine Barrat, a French photographer known for her portraits of Harlem, lives on one of the Chelsea Hotel’s top floors.

For Troeller, the pictures preserve a cohesive piece of the New York City history and re-establish the Chelsea Hotel as a central place of inspired energy, something she views as fast disappearing from Manhattan.

“Should the hotel go through even further gentrification, this would be a hard show to pull together,” said Troeller. “What I want most to say with this is that artists are a life blood of a city, and the gentrification process that is forcing artists to relocate is a mistake. The Chelsea Hotel is an example of the loaded art culture that it brings to this city.”