

# GIRL WITH BLACK BALLOONS

A film by **CORINNE VAN DER BORCH**

The Chelsea Hotel is a New York City icon – ever wondered who lives in it?

## Short synopsis version 1

Girl with Black Balloons is no ordinary character study but a multi-faceted portrait of Bettina – a reclusive, artist living within the confines of Manhattan’s legendary lodgings. Reflexive and tender, the film develops a dialogue between filmmaker and subject born out of mutual respect, blurring the roles of confidante and muse. The result provides a fascinating insight into a unique life and graceful meditation on the powers of memory, creativity, order and discord.

## Short synopsis version 2

Bettina is said to be the most beautiful woman to have ever lived in the legendary Chelsea Hotel in New York City, according to residents, yet has hidden herself away in her studio for over 40 years. She sleeps on a lawn-chair and surrounds herself with boxes stacked from floor to ceiling, filled with works of her art that have never seen the light of day. These boxes hide a stunning body of work - but it's come at a huge cost. Her life as a reclusive guardian over her creativity and artwork inspires us to think about the world that we have each chosen for ourselves, how we are captive of it or freed by it. During humorous, intimate and provocative moments, first-time Dutch director Corinne van der Borch develops a delicate friendship with Bettina and gradually unveils the life of one of New York's last true eccentrics.



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## Long Synopsis

The legendary Chelsea Hotel in New York hides many stories behind its more than 200 doors. Old ones and new ones. Dark chapters and happy endings. Everyday moments of magic and extraordinary turns of life. There is no other building in the city of which so many people think, when passing it: "If only these walls could talk."

Dutch filmmaker Corinne van der Borch has managed to open one door. Not just any Chelsea Hotel door, that is (if such a thing exists). It's the door that is answered – if you're lucky - by the most beautiful women to have ever lived in the Chelsea Hotel, according to residents. And they who know what they're talking about.

It is also fair to say that she is one of the most eccentric creatures, not just in the hotel, in the whole city of New York.

Her name is Bettina, her age stays unrevealed and she has taken refuge in her studio on the fifth floor since the sixties, surrounded – or better said: built in - by hundreds and hundreds of her stunningly beautiful art works, stacked from floor to ceiling. She sleeps on a lawn chair in a tiny corner. She can only reach it by maneuvering carefully through boxes, paintings and collages that have never seen the light of day.

Being in Bettina's studio is like being in her head. Van der Borch gained access to this incredible place, to the life of this reclusive woman who guards her creativity and her artwork with her... well, with her life. She is as much a prisoner as a freed soul.

The result of two years of visits by the filmmaker, just her and her camera, is a fascinating, endearing and sincere documentary.

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During humorous, intimate and provocative moments, first-time director Corinne van der Borch develops a delicate friendship with Bettina. She gradually opens the door to the world of one of New York's last true unconventional characters, until we get a view that's never seen before.



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Quotes

*"Girl With Black Balloons" is a beautifully conceived excavation -- part archeological, part psychological -- into the life and times of a truly authentic New York City character. It is a film of dialogues: between Bettina and the ghosts of the Chelsea hotel, between filmmaker and subject, between two women, between two cultures, and ultimately, between the unpredictable pushes and pulls of life and art."*

~Alan Berliner, filmmaker- Wide Awake (2006), The Sweetest Sound (2001), Nobody's Business (1996), Intimate Stranger (1991)-

*" You captured her soul "*

~Two-time Academy Award winning filmmaker Barbara Kopple, Harlan County USA (1976), American Dream (1991), Shut Up & Sing (2006)

*"Her story is as amazing as her art. She's the most eccentric, interesting and lost talent here, and her work should be seen."*

~Robert Lambert, artist & resident Chelsea Hotel New York City.

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## Directors Biography

Dutch Filmmaker Corinne van der Borch was born in Wimbledon in 1977. She is currently based in New York City where she graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 2009. Van der Borch studied with filmmaker Alan Berliner (*Wide Awake* (2006), *The Sweetest Sound* (2001), *Nobody's Business* (1996)) and with Amy Taubin, American film critic for *Sight & Sound* and *Film Comment*. She worked for Maysles Films in New York City.

For Van der Borch, the most important aspect of filmmaking is that she believes a relationship can be brought to life on screen. Her challenge is to create 'ordinary magic', by collecting visuals and stories from everyday life, which can easily go unseen.

Her next project revolves around the life of a New York City park-bench.

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## Editor Biography

Laura Minnear began her work in documentaries for series such as PBS-Frontline, NOVA and The History Channel, after completing studies in zoology, fine arts and dance. She finds the balancing act between art and science a compelling part of being a filmmaker/editor and the dance with collaborators is always interesting. Her recent projects include: "Blast!" as co-editor with director Paul Devlin which premiered at Hot Docs and on BBC Storyville; "Girl with Black Balloons," as editor with director Corinne van der Borch about a resident of the Chelsea Hotel named Bettina, one of New York's last true eccentrics; "The Lulu Sessions," as editor with director S. Casper Wong, chronicling the last 15 months of her best friend LuLu's life, a top cancer research scientist who was dying of breast cancer herself at the age of 42. She is also currently an editor for the investigative television news series Dan Rather Reports.

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## Artist Statement

I do what I do, because my camera gives me courage and tickles my curiosity. I like collecting visuals and stories from everyday life, which can easily go unseen.

My documentary project revolves around a lady I met, exactly two years ago in the Chelsea Hotel. Her name is Bettina. Ever since our first encounter on the stairwell I have been struggling to document her adventures, her moods and her surroundings; a rent stabilized, cluttered apartment in the Chelsea Hotel, in which she has spent half a lifetime of her artist life as a recluse. Bettina has surrounded herself with boxes, filled with works of art that have never left her studio. An artist's quest for acknowledgement can be extremely difficult. Living in the Chelsea Hotel doesn't necessarily mean fame and certainly not fortune. The Chelsea Hotel is her castle; behind bolted doors she sleeps on her throne, a gigantic key ring safely tied around her waist. She is said to be the most beautiful woman to have ever lived in the Hotel.

Why is it I want to tell this story? From the moment I moved from Amsterdam to New York, I noticed New Yorkers carry a certain kind of toughness. This intrigued me, because I feel that, to do my work well, it will need the exact balance between toughness and fragility.

When I saw Bettina on the staircase, I realized she was someone with both these traits. I wanted to investigate her. What made her so self-defensive? Her complexity made me curious. She sleeps on a chair, in her hallway, where a hot pipe runs to keep her warm in winter. From this chair she carefully guards her precious work. After her studio in Brooklyn caught fire, she had to re-do every single image of every single project that had burned all at once. In the years of living there, hidden away, she frantically re-produced a vast body of work, which has never been exhibited.

Her life as a reclusive guardian over her creativity and artwork inspires us to think about the world that we have each chosen for ourselves, how we are

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captive of it or freed by it. During these two years, I thought about the traces one leaves behind, trying to answer the question if it is of importance to get recognition for what you have set out to do in life.

My approach has been similar to that of Wiseman. I had not done any research prior to my first days of filming at the Chelsea Hotel. I used the camera as my notebook. I feel the notes slowly became sentences, which now tell a story.



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## CREDITS

Directed, Produced, Written & Camera by  
Corinne van der Borch

Presenting  
Bettina Bashyi

Edited by  
Laura Minnear, Corinne van der Borch

Co-produced & co-written by  
Laura Minnear

Original Music by  
Andres Subercaseaux

Mentor  
Albert Maysles

Consulting Producer/Editor  
Alan Berliner

Consulting Editors  
Grahame Weinbren, Chiel Aldershoff

Advisors  
Shelly Silver, Ed Bowes

Graphic Animation  
Einat Gavish

Sound Designer  
Eric Milano

HD mastering  
Jon Fordham  
Frame:Runner, Inc  
New York

Insight on Sight  
Bettina

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