

A woman with curly hair and glasses is sitting on a wooden chair. She is wearing a colorful, patterned jacket over a white top and blue jeans. To her left is a large, leafy tree in a decorative, golden-brown ceramic pot. The background is a bright, sunlit room with a wooden floor and a white wall.

INTERVIEW:

WENDY FRIEDMAN

By Joe Fassler | Photos by JJ Sulin



Wendy Friedman's office door is one of a kind. If you look closely, you'll see tiny streams of words sandblasted on the icy, opaque glass. "Those are my one-liners," she explains, little phrases that come to her at night just before sleep or during morning's first groggy moments. Some are prophetic or profound, others are nonsensical. One way or another, she always makes sure to write them down. As an artist, her work often explores the realm between the conscious and unconscious. That, she says, is "where the really good ideas happen."

Her biggest idea came twelve years ago when she founded SohoSoleil, a beautiful location for photo shoots. It's a tremendous space: there are expansive blonde hardwood floors and unbeatable views of the city. Long stretches of 6x8' windows made from mottled 19th-century glass let in gentle light from the southwest.

Today, SohoSoleil has developed into a network of specialized photo production sites throughout New York City. Wendy's original loft, now called CornerLight, still sees the most traffic, but she offers clients a wide range of other options. FireLight, for instance, is a traditional 1902 Sophie's Choice-style home in Prospect Heights, with wide staircases, old-fashioned mantels, and stained-glass windows. SurgicalSite, a doctor's office with a fully functional operating room, is a favorite with both fashion and medicine industry clients. Wendy says that business is good these days. Everyone from Platon to People, from SlimFast to The Strokes has come through her phrase-covered doors.

Resource sat down with Wendy to talk about SohoSoleil, what it's like to work with living legends like David Bowie and Neil Young, the importance of light, and how to balance business and pleasure.

Before you went into the studio business, you worked in publishing. Has that helped your work with SoHoSoleil?

I had done design work at Hearst and Conde Nast. I had hired photographers and been on photo shoots, so I knew what that was about. It helped me with knowing what a photographer's needs are, and to understand that when someone rents a space, it's their space for the day. You have to have it clean and make things nice and neat for them, supply what they need... yet also know how to stay out of the way.

What first drew you to what became your original studio space, the CornerLight location in SoHo?

When I was looking for a loft to buy, I was told this place had really nice light, southwest light. Arthur Elgort is a floor above me, and I thought, "If the light's good enough for him, it's good enough for me!"

You've worked with some pretty high-profile clients in the past. Got any good anecdotes?

When Platon was here shooting Neil Young for Rolling Stone, everyone was very stressed because Neil just did not want to come to another shoot. He had said he would only stay five minutes. He'd done too many shoots- he'd had it! Right when he came out of his car, someone was using the elevator. So I ran downstairs to greet him because I knew he'd had a brain aneurysm, and I wanted to wait with him and make sure he took the elevator. But he said, "Oh, no, no, let's take the stairs. Exercise is a gift." When we got halfway up he said, "OK, the blood pressure medicine is kicking in," but he loved the old stairwells and didn't want to quit. When we got upstairs he said, "This isn't a regular old studio! This is someone's home!" I gave him a tour, and he cheered right up and stayed for two hours. Everyone was so relieved. His manager wrote me a nice note after, saying it was one of the best shoots they'd had in twenty years!

What was Salman Rushdie doing here?

A Canadian newspaper was interviewing him. They photographed him in the diner booth we used to have, and on the fire escape. They also wanted a more colorful background so they rented some of my paintings.

David Bowie was also photographed here.

I found him really kind. They were shooting with a famous photographer, Ellen Von Unwerth. He was really kind of quiet and shy, and very sweet with his daughter. His wife was really warm - what we call in Jewish, hamisha, kinda cuddly. He's such a legend that everyone kind of stayed away a little bit... Kate Moss was with him on that shoot, and she was just running around with her top off and everything. I think it was before the whole cocaine thing.

Since you've opened CornerLight, you've represented a lot of other locations. What do you look for in a location?

I look for something that's different from all the other ones. For something that people are asking for that I don't already have. I look for high ceilings because people always ask for high ceilings. The main thing is to have [owners] with whom you can work well.



What do you offer that other places can't?

There are a lot of different photo studios out there, with services and equipment that we don't have. We offer locations that are different than photo studios and more personalized. The reason we get so many celebrities is because the locations are private. They are in private lofts and paparazzi can't find them. A client just came in earlier today and said, "I didn't know this building was so big, it has so many different parts. It's like a well-kept secret." Even though we have some famous photographers in the building, they've never tried to make the building look nice from the outside because people want it to be private. It's a friendly atmosphere and on a bright sunny day, the space itself just makes you feel good. If you're in a place where there are a lot of windows, you don't feel locked in. I love it when people come in here on a bright, sunny day and they're awed by the space.

Surgical Site, one of the locations you manage, has a fully functional operating room. What is this used for?

A lot of advertisements want that kind of look, but fashion clients too because they can do really funky things in the chair! It is a real Park Avenue plastic surgeon's office. The doctor who works there really loves the idea of it. He'll even pose, too!

You advertise that some of your rooms have pianos. How much action do they see?

Dolly Parton played at MeetingSite. That was for a BBC program. Some of the corporate events that go into the evening may have someone playing the piano, and for product launches they're often used too. We had a shoe company come in recently where they were projecting slides onto the white brick wall, with someone playing '40s standards on the piano.

Light is a crucial factor.

Light is really important to me. Most lofts are long and narrow; they only have windows at one end and get darker as you go back. CornerLight is rectangular, so you don't get that effect. It just makes me happy to be in here, even on a snowy or rainy day.

With all you do for SoHoSoleil, do you have time for your own artistic work these days?

It's the core part of me. Managing locations is fun and interesting, and I'm proud that I was able to develop this business, but it's not my very first love. At night I revert back to being an artist.