

THE LO-DOWN

My LES: Wendy White



Photo by Alex Smith

For our regular feature spotlighting the people who live and work on the Lower East Side, we talked with artist [Wendy White](#). She is a visual artist who has called the Lower East Side home for the better part of the last decade. White is constantly putting out new work and is currently part of a group show at [bitforms](#) Gallery (131 Allen St.) called "Temporary Highs" which runs through July 31. Her solo show, "Santa Cruz," at [Eric Firestone Loft](#), (4 Great Jones) opened June 21st and runs through July 31. We caught up with Wendy over lunch to talk about her home, her art and living in the L.E.S.

How long have you lived in the Lower East Side?

9 years in Chinatown. Well, Two Bridges.

Why did you move to this neighborhood?

I was just lucky enough to get an apartment down here. A co-worker recommended that my husband put his name on the waiting list and we were lucky enough to get selected.

So you live in one of those NYC gem apartments?

Yep, one of those.

You weren't born here?

I'm from CT. I'm from a really small town called Deep River. It's near where the Connecticut River and Long Island Sound meet. Our town's motto was, "Scruffy but proud".

Why did you move to NYC?

Because I wanted to be an artist. After undergrad, I moved here for a year and got this weird night job and had this really strange roommate that I found in a [New York] Times ad who wound up stealing my identity. I moved back to Atlanta for a few years. I had a rough first time here, and then the second time stuck.

What do you do?

I usually say I'm a painter because obviously an artist can be a musician or performer, so I tend to be little more specific and say I'm a painter-sculptor. I make really large scale paintings that verge on sculpture, things extending outside the frame. A lot of times I move towards installation in the way that I present them. They hang really low to the floor and take up a sculptural space. I'm a painter with an object-based intent.

Tell us about your apartment—the good bad and the ugly.

The good: It's affordable, it's the perfect location, you can walk anywhere. You can be in SoHo, FiDi or the Lower East Side in 10 minutes.

The bad: The 10 year waiting list for a 2 bedroom, but I'm 8 years in now, so hopefully I'm on the home stretch.

The ugly: I've seen a lot of things in our neighborhood—old men barfing into storm drains and visceral things that are hard to see. But I've also really been inspired by the visual layering of the neighborhood.

What's your favorite spot on the LES?

I'm pretty into Eastwood because they have a really good bartender and they play a lot of vinyl. My guilty pleasure is the Seaport. I'm not sure if that's considered the LES or not. I think it's kind of its own thing. But I feel like no one really pays attention to it. I also love the Paris Café.

Favorite cheap eats?

I used to love Prosperity Dumpling but they closed because of some stupid health code thing.

Favorite place for a special night?

I have a kid so I don't do special nights. Haha!

Favorite place to hang out with your kid?

Pretty much every afternoon we can be found at Tanahey playground on the corner of Cherry and Catherine. The skate park is pretty great, too. Most people who live around here have never even heard of Cherry or Catherine street.

How have you seen the neighborhood change?

I saw a guy walking with a tote bag with a baguette sticking out of it and that's when I knew it was over. There are galleries popping up, there are new restaurants opening, there's more foot traffic. The energy has changed in the 9 years that I've been here. It's a little scary but it's really great. I feel very confident about the future of this neighborhood. But it's still gritty.

What do you miss from the old LES?

I don't know if I know the old LES, not as a resident anyway. It's sort of sad to see places like Mars Bar close but it's not like I was there all the time. Everyone has their college-aged New York that they keep pining for but there's been a million New Yorks and I think it's a waste of time to complain about what used to be here instead of moving forward. That's what New York is, it's ruthlessly moving forward. That's what it's always been. That being said, I do miss Doyers Restaurant. Their shrimp on rice vermicelli haunts me to this day. It was the absolute best in the neighborhood. That place was a treasure.

Is there a new arrival you love?

I'm so psyched to see what happens on Monroe Street, the new restaurant across from the Skate park and the fact that there will be a coffee shop next door ([that coffee shop, Little Chair, is now open](#)).

What drives you crazy about your neighborhood?

It's too far from the subway. That's probably what also keeps it a little bit of a hidden gem.

What's the strangest thing you've ever seen on the LES?

Did I mention the old man barfing into a storm drain? One time, I saw a guy rolling down the sidewalk, chanting "Jesus loves me". I think I've repressed a lot of it and I think I've sort of gotten used to it. I'm really proud of the LES. It's the last bastion of New York grit and I'm proud to live down here and I'm proud to tell people where I live.

Who's the best neighborhood character you've met?

Oh, there's this guy, I don't even know his name but he's like the mayor of my block. He's always sitting outside of St. Joseph's (church) and he says hi to everybody. One day I discovered he has a Facebook page. That ruined it a little.

Tell us your best LES memory.

My best memory was the night of the 2015 blizzard in New York City. The heaviest part of the blizzard was in the evening. Me and my husband and son plowed our way down to Paris Café and all these people from our building were there. They had co-opted the kitchen and we made grilled cheese and spent the whole night hiding out there. I met people in my building I'd never talked to before, and we got super drunk and jumped in snow drifts on the way home, did shots with our babysitter's dad. It was just a great, epic night.

Anything to add?

I made a whole body of work about Chinatown when I first moved here. Just walking around the neighborhood, I started getting really inspired by the signage styles and the way that the first layer of everything is completely fucked up and then above that it's left alone. I got inspired by street level and that's why I hang my paintings really low. I also dug into 5 points history and I saw how Chinatown is really shaped around 5 points which is just 2 blocks from Chatham Square. It actually influenced my work and continues to.