

POSTURE

MAGAZINE

D

THE CREATIVE  
EXPLORATION  
OF IDENTITY

# NANCY NIENBERG + JENNIFER LISEO

BY NICK SANTA-DONATO

**Nancy Nienberg** of 'wUNDERground' and **Jennifer Liseo** of 'LISEO+CO' are a couple and often times co-workers. Not only do they defy the negative stigma usually associated with mixing career and relationship, but they also compliment each other in creativity and difference. Nancy, an interior designer and architect, approaches her work as one might expect - logistically, taking into consideration her client's needs and the mathematical constraints of every project. Yet Nancy has an evident fearlessness to challenge herself creatively and keeps an open mind to new ideas and techniques. Jennifer, an artist and photographer insists that unlike Nancy, creativity over technique drives her work. While clearly two very independent, career - driven women, both Nancy and Jennifer are quick to acknowledge the ways in which they each have benefitted from and been nurtured by the others perspective over the course of their 15-year relationship.



PHOTOS BY JENNIFER LISEO



ARCHITECTURE BY wUNDERground, NANCY NIENBERG  
 INTERIOR DESIGN BY DAMON LISS  
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY TREVOR TONDRO

I asked them about how their relationship interacts with their work and how (and if) their work espouses notions of gender and queer space. Providing equally thought-provoking yet simultaneously varied views on each subject I brought up, both Jennifer and Nancy have found ways to integrate a forward-thinking mindset into their work. What strikes me is not their independently developed and hyper-nuanced talents, which are evident in their expansive portfolios, but the significance they both find in taking the advice, guidance, and influence of the other. Therein lies the making of a perfect, creative, New York team.

**Can you talk a little about your backgrounds? How did you begin in the fields of design and photography? What inspired you to choose this specifically?**

**N:** I chose architecture as a kid in high school. I did well in math and science and I love art. I thought architecture would be a good professional marriage of those. Happily, much of my schooling was - and my practice is - very much focused on design. Of course the math and science are important, as are organization and coordination skills, in bringing all of the ideas and contributors together for a great final project.

**J:** I was 9 years old and thrilled to borrow my mom's 110 format film camera while we were visiting Epcot in Disney World. We went to "It's a Small World" and I took over a dozen photos of all of the sets as we traveled the world on a little indoor boat canal. Turns out the whole roll of film was of my eyeball, because I was holding the camera backwards. I was devastated. Many years later I found all of these photos and now Nancy has one framed in our house. I suppose it's my first ever "selfie." To this day I would say my artistic ability overrides my technical ability, and luckily these fancy cameras make it hard for me to hold backwards.

From there I took a zig-zaggy road to becoming a professional photographer. When I moved to NYC

after studying graphic design and multi-media theater in college, I became interested in Printmaking and started making artwork on paper - mostly screen prints and solar plate etchings. One thing that has always informed my artwork is photography. Sometimes it plays a direct role and sometimes indirect.

I still wanted to make a living doing something that supported my creativity and so I made the decision to be more serious about photography. I took various classes, volunteered at a high-end print lab, watched and read tons of tutorials, assisted teaching at International Center of Photography and carried my camera everywhere. I built up a decent portfolio and I slowly started getting more and more jobs. I've always felt good with a camera in my hand as it has always been a tool for discovering new things. The act of making something, connecting with people and sharing ideas continues to inspire me everyday.

**When/where did you meet?**

**N:** Over 15 years ago - at Henrietta's!

**J:** Ha! At a bar in the west village. The rest is history. For the first couple years we had a long distance relationship; Queens/Brooklyn. Then 10 years ago we decided to trade in our little studios for one larger apartment. After 15 years together, we officially tied the knot in September 2014! It was an epic celebration with all of the people we love.

**Have you ever collaborated on a project together in some way? If so, did you face any challenges in this regard?**

**N:** Jen's photographed a few of my projects (with more to come) and has been a part of or assisted on several of the shoots. I always enjoy seeing her play and experiment with different lenses, techniques, etc. We see things similarly from a creative standpoint, but it probably works best when one of us takes the lead and the other is differential. Maybe one of our toughest collaborations is our home! We're both designers, art lovers,

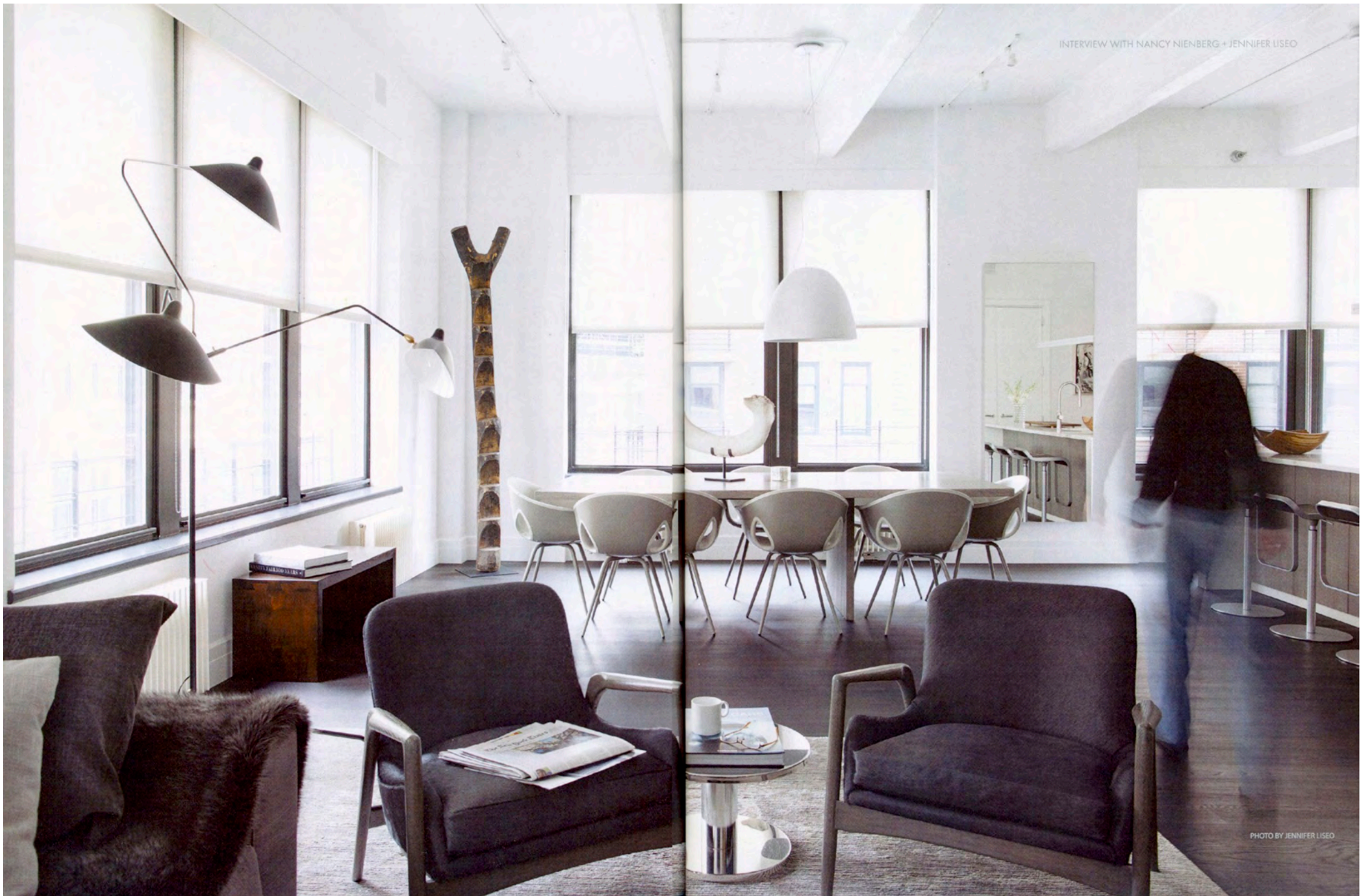




PHOTO BY JENNIFER LISEO

collectors – but we live in NYC, so space is at a premium and that requires aesthetic editing!

**J:** We've been talking about a print/drawing project that we want to collaborate on, which would be our first art project together. We just have to find some time to do it.

The idea is to create fictional architectural renderings while drawing inspiration from hundreds of architecture photos I've taken in the city over the years. It will be like Piranesi meets Candy Land in these urban dreamscapes. The newly formed 2D "structures" will explore the ideas of scale, perspective, and spatial relationships.

**Do your roles ever interact and influence each other? Nancy, does the way Jen photographs a space ever make you see your own work differently?**

**N:** We definitely talk about layering – in the way I craft space and in the way Jen portrays it. It's about seeing where you are but also what's

next, what's related, what's beyond – foreground / background. I think about this a lot when I'm designing. Jen is inherently more about color than I am – I tend to appreciate the subtleties in neutral tones and material textures. I'd say she continually pushes me to expand my palette.

**J:** Nancy's profession and passion has certainly influenced me. I'd say the biggest thing is that she has helped me form a more critical eye and I think my work is better because of it. She's also more of a perfectionist than I am, so while it drives me crazy sometimes, it also drives me to always strive for better. I also think about space and our relationship to it more, both in my creative work and everyday life.

**As two people who often capture and create environments, what do you think of as 'queer space'? Does it exist?**

**N:** I spent a good bit of effort in grad school with an agenda of supporting literature and discussion that was heavily focused on the idea of

queer space. The professor and all of the other students were male, and the topics seemed to revolve around ideas like the deformation of the status quo, perversion, performance, exhibitionism, and voyeurism – things that as a woman, I had a hard time embracing as my own agenda. I think my realization at that point was that we could probably create a space for any agenda – but I'd say that a conditioned or receptive audience is necessary for it to be effectively realized. If a user doesn't understand the subtle perversions, then for them the queer spaces don't fully exist.

**J:** This is something I've never thought about before. To me, adjectives to queer that immediately come to mind would be contrasting, offbeat, colorful, and strange. I suppose there are spaces that feel like more of this than not. I enjoy those spaces. I think they're more vulnerable and alive.

**Is there a distinct queer female and queer male perspective in design and photography? If so, where do you stand on the spectrum?**

**N:** Architecture has historically, and until relatively recently, been a male-dominated profession. Whether or not there is a distinctly queer female approach to spatial design, I'd say that my work is neither masculine nor overtly feminine; it's just responsive to the particular clients and tries to be comfortable and meaningful for them. One thing that's always bothered me about architectural representation is the reliance on a singular image – it is just an impossible way to tell a complete story. To me, spaces are layered and complex and connected and sensory. Interestingly, Jen and I have both gravitated toward showing our work in streams. On my web site, it's intentionally impossible to look at one project image alone – there's a sliding stream of multiple images for each project – including before and after comparisons – always coupled with the plan or the project story. On Jen's site, her presentation begins straight away with a horizontal display of images overlaid by the words "visual stories".

**J:** I don't believe there is one thing that defines both a queer female or a queer male, thus there is no distinct perspective from my understanding.

**"If a user doesn't understand the subtle perversions, then for them the queer spaces don't fully exist." – Nancy Nienberg**

With that said, if I felt a vibe that was reminiscent of those adjectives listed above, I would innately ponder from what sexual orientation that story is being told. I can relate to those descriptive words, so no matter whose perspective it came from, I would most likely connect with it.

**Is there something specific about architecture (vs. art) that you think is related to the way we perceive or live gender?**

**N:** When you ask someone for historical examples of architecture, the list is likely comprised of great monumental structures, but there's also a history of poetic, experiential, introspective, built spaces that defies recognition by a singular image. I'm drawn to the complexity of the latter.

**J:** I think art helps us think outside the box – it helps poke at different senses and when we allow ourselves to experience it, it has the potential to enable empathy. This in turn affects the way we perceive and live everything.

**How do you get to know your clients to determine the style they are looking for?**

**N:** I always try to meet with new clients in their current space. We talk about their aspirations for aesthetic style as well as

the patterns of how they live their lives or do their work. I try to understand what spaces are programmatically important and what qualities, relationships and sensory cues make those spaces meaningful for them. To a large degree, when I visit, I'm also vetting issues with their current spaces, seeing what isn't working, what's not accommodated, what part of their spaces aren't manageable or working for them.

**J:** In terms of the style of the end product, they usually come to me because they've seen previous work and appreciate it. However, there are different ways to participate in a project and I allow myself to be flexible in this regard. Some clients need someone who is bold and will take charge, some need someone more relaxed and some have more of a collaborative spirit. I'm open to being all of those people.

**Nancy, what is your ultimate goal in designing for a client? How do you want them to feel in their space? And Jen, what is your preferred way of photographing humans in their environment?**

**N:** While I'm always working to solve visual and spatial problems, I really strive to create spaces that my clients can connect to and feel a part of.

**J:** It all depends on the end goal. If I am taking an environmental portrait of someone, I like to encourage the person to do what they would be doing if I wasn't there. I move around them and try to capture the essence of who they are in that space. When I see a beautiful moment or interaction with light, I zoom in on it. It's the simple gestures of humans that make each photograph unique.

**What/who are some of your major inspirations and why?**

**N:** From the past, I'm drawn to the experiential and playful nature of the details and juxtapositions in Carlos Scarpa's work. I'm also drawn to the poetry and materiality of Louis Kahn. In contemporary architecture, Tod Williams/Billie Tsien are amazing for their spatial poetry, material explorations and ability to really re-think



the problems they're confronted with. I appreciate the work of Marion Weiss (and Michael Manfredi) for bringing a real female perspective to making forms and spaces. Jen and I are both big long-time fans of artist Ann Hamilton.

**J:** When I was 19 I learned about Laurie Anderson's multi-media performance art and it opened up this new perspective on telling stories. I love the layering and visceral aspect of her performance work.

Ann Hamilton is another artist who has inspired me in her approach to creating a piece – she listens to the space that already exists – not unlike Nancy does when she is called to transform an existing space. Ann calls herself a maker and I appreciate her thoughtfulness with words. I love her courage to dream up these physically massive projects and her attention to detail that can make that large space feel so intimate. One example is the installation, *The Event Of A Thread* at the NYC Armory in December 2012. It was so grand, yet playful and poetic.

I admire the way Joseph Campbell absorbed and understood the evolution and universality of myths through the course of human existence and the role they play in modern society. His storytelling is amazing and he seemed to experience the world through a panoramic lens, understanding the connectivity of us all – something I aspire to do, be and share. I believe both myths and art to have a similar power of explaining the human condition and making it feel more manageable.

**What have been your personal favorite projects so far? Nancy, what has been your favorite project of Jen's? Jen what is your favorite project Nancy has worked on?**

**N:** My own favorite projects are some of the lofts where the clients have strong opinions and complex lives and where the existing spaces

gave me a series of square framed images that I absolutely love. It's a series of details of the tops of the plumbing vent pipes on the roofs in our block. The beauty she garnered from these mundane, even abject, objects is real evidence of her artistic eye – and a great reminder to look again at the things around us.

**J**: My favorite personal project so far has been a multi-media installation project called *Silhouettes Of Us* in which I collaborated with two friends on. It took place in the roofless Tobacco Warehouse in Brooklyn Bridge Park for a weekend in the fall of 2012. I documented the project with both stills and video.

As far as photo projects, I recently did a portrait series of artist So Yoon Lym and we experimented with slow shutter speeds, movement of light and came up with some beautiful images that were indicative of her personality and work.

I also had the honor of shooting some beautiful weddings this past year. I love being in new environments and exploring with fresh eyes, no matter what the subject is.

My favorite project that Nancy has worked on is probably one of her most recently finished projects which is a 9th Avenue duplex apartment on the west side of Manhattan. She took two existing spaces and transformed it into one big apartment. She really took into consideration the way the family lives and created a space that was conducive to their lifestyle. The flow of the space feels like a beautiful lofty modern house in suburbia but it's smack in the middle of Manhattan. I admire the way she can make a space both practical and poetic at the same time. I never thought I would be one to get excited over a staircase, but the one she designed in this house is super sexy!

**What's next? Any upcoming projects in the works?**

**N**: In my studio, we're spreading our reach – we're evolving to do larger projects in Manhattan and starting to do a lot more work in Brooklyn

"I believe both myths and art to have a similar power of explaining the human condition and making it feel more manageable."

- Jen Liseo

and beyond. With Jen, we just photographed a recently completed Dumbo loft combination and are excited to have her helping to document details on two of our forthcoming construction projects.

**J**: One on-going project that I'm working on is a storybook/cookbook, collaborating with elderly immigrants in NYC. The book will share family recipes and celebrate the multi-heritage roots that make up the fabric of this great city. This project combines so many of my passions and I'm very excited to get it off the ground.

I'm also working on my first documentary video project with a talented artist/friend, to be released in October.

And the biggest upcoming project for the both of us will begin July 2015 when we will become MOMS! A lot on the horizon for sure!