

# The Art World at Home: Curator Ksenia Nouril Is Making Yorkshire Pudding and Researching How Photographers Depict Monuments

Nouril also tells us about her latest curatorial projects, and how she spends time with her French bulldog, Lambchop.

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Ksenia Nouril. Photo by Matt Rencher.

*The art world is slowly coming out of lockdown, but many decision-makers and creatives are still staying close to home. In this series, we check in with curators, historians, and other art-world professionals to get a peek into their day-to-day.*

Ksenia Nouril, the Jensen Bryan Curator at the Print Center in Philadelphia, barely had enough time to settle into her new role before the entire world changed.

A Rutgers University-trained art historian (Nouril earned her Ph.D. in 2018), she moved to Philadelphia from her native New York in January 2019 planning to organize seven exhibitions a year at the Print Center, and to oversee ANNUAL, its international competition, alongside its publications and events programs.

And although the space is still closed to visitors, there is still plenty to do from home.

We caught up with Nouril about her latest curatorial projects, what podcasts she's into, and how she spends time with her French bulldog, Lambchop.

### **What are you working on right now?**

I continue to work from home as the Print Center, a 105-year-old nonprofit institution in Philadelphia dedicated to expanding the understanding of photography and printmaking as vital contemporary arts, remains temporarily closed.

While I miss being in our galleries with art and visitors, I'm working remotely with colleagues on a number of exciting projects. This summer, we initiated "Windows on Latimer," a series of site-specific commissions by Philadelphia lens-based artists in our street-level bay window. It is a way for us to safely exhibit work and support local artists.

At the end of September, we are launching "(Un)Making Monuments," a virtual exhibition exploring how history is marked and mediated through photographic representations of power in public spaces. This topic, while very timely in the wake of recent protests for social justice, is perennial. I began working on this exhibition not long after I joined the Print Center, as my interest stems from my own doctoral research on monuments in post-Communist Eastern Europe.



Ksenia Nouril's dog, Lambchop. Courtesy Ksenia Nouril.

**Walk us through the when, where, and how of your approach to this project on a regular day.**

I'm a morning person. My family and friends know that I like to get up early, around 5 a.m. I was born in the morning, and I really think that set my internal clock, as I've never been a night owl. I like to use my mornings to read and write, catch up on personal emails, review my calendar, make to-do lists, and take walks with Lambchop, my French Bulldog.

While working through the pandemic has its challenges, it also has presented opportunities for my colleagues and me to stretch our skills and expectations. Not long after the Print Center closed in March, we started to produce video interviews with artists whose careers have been impacted our [ANNUAL International Competition](#), as well as how-to videos for our [Artists in Schools Program](#). I was surprised by how easy and fun it was to record and edit these clips using Zoom and iMovie. All it required was a change in perspective, an acknowledgment that things can't—and maybe shouldn't—happen how they used to. Perfection is relative. This, personally, was a big step toward reducing stress and increasing creativity during this time.

**What is bothering you right now (other than having to deal with these questions)?**

Zoom fatigue and the resulting frustration because, while the idea of tuning into virtual programming from all around the world sounds great, its reality is overwhelming. I sincerely want to attend all of your programs out there, but I simply can't. Forgive me!

**What was the last thing that made you laugh out loud?**

Probably a meme seen while scrolling through Instagram. I'm a sucker for memes, especially if they have to do with animals or the art world.

**Are there any movies, music, podcasts, publications, or works of art that have made a big impact on you recently? If so, why?**

On my morning walks, I try to catch up on news by listening to *The Daily* from the *New York Times*, my local NPR station, WHYY, or a podcast. I'm in the middle of *Nice White Parents*, also from the *New York Times*. It's about the racism ingrained in New York City's public school system through the lens of one Brooklyn school. Being a product of the New York City public school system, I wanted to learn and reflect on its history.



Ksenia Nouril's home office in Philadelphia. Courtesy Ksenia Nouril.

### **What is your favorite part of your house and why?**

Even before the pandemic, my office was my favorite room in my house. Before moving to Philadelphia, I never had the luxury of a home office. My desk was always in my bedroom. This separation is helpful especially these days, as it can be hard to create temporal boundaries. It's also the sunniest room in the house, so Lambchop, who moonlights as my not-so-helpful research assistant, takes most of his naps there.

### **What's your favorite work of art in the house and why? (Please include a picture)**

It's hard to choose, but seeing Didier William's *Godforsaken Asylum (We Will Win)* every day gives me hope and strength. Printed in 2019 by Tammy Nguyen of Passenger Pigeon Press, it is a benefit print for the Center for Book Arts in New York. I love everything about this work. It's by Didier, a great and generous Philadelphia-based artist. It's a print pulled at one of the coolest presses active today. It's being sold to support an organization that, in turn, supports artists by exhibiting, critically framing, and promoting their work. Working for a modest but mighty nonprofit myself, I feel a deep kinship with institutions like the Center for Book Arts. Most of all, I love the message of the work: "We Will Win." This phrase is a rhetorical device with a long history. Within the 20th century alone, it has been adopted and adapted by numerous groups with divergent agendas, from athletes in the Civil Rights era to students in the US Naval Academy. It is a motto of the Black Lives Matter movement and has been a rallying cry for politicians, including Donald Trump. So, what does "winning" actually mean? How do people unite and divide in winning and losing? This work raised a lot of urgent questions in 2019, when I exhibited it in "The Politics of Rhetoric" along with Didier's complementary painting from 2017. I think this print is ever more prescient as we battle this pandemic and face November's election.



Didier William's *Godforsaken Asylum (We Will Win)* (2019). Courtesy Ksenia Nouril.

**Are there any causes you support that you would like to share? If so, what, and why is it/are they important?**

Local, grassroots fundraising has exploded since March in support of those affected by COVID-19 and victims of social injustice. A few that stood out include [Pictures for Elmhurst](#), which supported PPE for a New York City hospital, and [Art for Philadelphia](#), which supported a local bail fund, a inside/outside prison advocacy group for transgender people, and a law center. Being a native of Queens, New York, now living in Philadelphia, they resonated deeply because they directly aided my communities in a time of great need. Also in Philadelphia, [the Black Futures Campaign to save the historic Dox Thrash House](#) just reached its goal of \$100,000. The house will be transformed into a multi-disciplinary cultural hub that serves the community and honors the legacy of Black printmaker Dox Thrash.

**What is your guilty pleasure?**

The cause-and-effect of watching reality television then diving into the black hole that is celebrity gossip news. I just wrapped up *Selling Sunset* on the heels of *Too Hot To Handle* and *Indian Matchmaker*. While watching, it's hard for me not to spoil the show by Googling whether or not everyone lives happily ever after.

**What's going on in the kitchen these days? Any projects? And triumphs or tragedies?**

I made an apple crumble a few weeks ago. You also can't go wrong with a roast chicken with Yorkshire pudding saturated in gravy. In the kitchen, I am all about the basics. I usually don't cook with too many special ingredients. It's annoying when a recipe calls for a spice that I buy and only use once.



Yorkshire puddings and roasted chicken whipped up by Ksenia Nouril. Courtesy Ksenia Nouril.

**Which two fellow art-world people, living or dead, would you like to convene for dinner, and why?**

Another tough choice! What qualifies someone as an “art-world” person? With a hearty dose of healthy skepticism for such hierarchies, I would be honored to dine with the Venus of Willendorf and Angela Davis. The Venus of Willendorf is one of my earliest memories from Art History 101. And while that canon is (thankfully) being critically rewritten by brilliant colleagues in the field, the Venus of Willendorf is a mainstay in art history textbooks as an early depiction of the female form and fertility symbol. More recent scholarship has posited the figure as a self-portrait. It is empowering to read this work as made by a woman artist. The writings and activism of Angela Davis are also empowering. She is the subject of a number of activities this year that shed light on different aspects of her life and work, including a chapter on her time in Berlin in Paul M. Farber’s *A Wall of Our Own: An American History of the Berlin Wall* and two upcoming exhibitions, “A Million Roses for Angela Davis” and “Angela Davis: Seize the Time” at Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and the Zimmerli Art Museum, respectively.

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