

# APR 20 LISA BLAS + KSENIA NOURIL [THE PRINT CENTER]

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Lisa Blas portrait by TK. All images courtesy of the artist and The Print Center, except where noted.



Ksenia Nouril portrait by Matt Rencher. All images courtesy of the artist and The Print Center, except where noted.

## FIT TO PRINT

**LANA NAUPHAL:** *Lisa, you first conceived the idea for the group exhibition Fit to Print, which explores the use of newspapers in art through a variety of multimedia pieces. What inspired this project for you?*

**LISA BLAS:** The print exhibition springboarded off of the weekly RSS feed on my website, entitled “Monday’s Image.” Since 2015, I take the front page of the newspaper of the city where I am on that Monday, and I make a pairing between that front page and a work of art from a museum collection. That project is about making a connection between the vast repository of images we come in contact with every day through the newspaper and then trying to think about the afterlife of art.

"Monday's Image" really is my passion—to discover works that I am unfamiliar with and possibly the public is unfamiliar with, and try to give those images exposures and afterlives that they wouldn't necessarily have in another context.

**LANA:** *What prompted you to approach Ksenia at The Print Center in Philadelphia to come on board as curator for the exhibit?*

**LISA:** I met Ksenia in 2017, at the Drawing Center. Soon afterward Ksenia came to my studio in New York, and we started to have conversations about art. Ever since then, I've been watching her projects as the Chief Curator at The Print Center in Philadelphia and seeing her expansive point of view vis-à-vis curating and pedagogy in the landscape of contemporary print and photography, I just thought Ksenia was the person to propose this idea to. And it's really been quite a revelation in terms of our discussions about the project. It started during 2020, and so perhaps that time period speaks to the urgency of what it is to form a project in virtual space—to try to put forth these kinds of ideas and create content that the public is able to then access in these ways. It seemed a kind of constellation of perfect moments and ideas that both Ksenia and I have been thinking about on parallel lines.



Lisa Blas, *First(s), Monday's image, v. 2, 2021*

**KSENIYA NOURIL:** To piggyback on what Lisa just said—she approached me with [*Fit to Print*] as a virtual project. That's very interesting because throughout 2020, I had been juggling projects that were once in reality that had to become virtual, but I've also been creating virtual projects from scratch. There are intrinsic differences, I think, [between] moving from reality to the virtual [and] just only living in the virtual. We've approached the exhibition very consciously, thinking about: what is the user's experience? What is the end experience of this 'virtual show'? And that's somewhat liberating, because on one hand we can think about the show in this iteration, and then we can also think about potential 'afterlives' for this show, which I think, given Lisa's long-term engagement with the theme, could potentially be possible.

**LANA:** *Ksenia, what drew you to sign on to Lisa's project? What did you want to contribute?*

**KSENIYA:** I was very attracted by this idea because I've been at The Print Center since January 2019, but I've been curating solo in that time, As the Jensen Bryan Curator. I am the only curator there. Lisa's idea opened up an opportunity for collaboration, which is really an intrinsic part of my curatorial vision—Rome wasn't built in a day, nor was it built by one person. Having had that relationship with Lisa

and really respecting her as an artist, a thinker, and a scholar in her own right, I was excited by the opportunity— this ability to, at this time of great isolation, feel like you're working with somebody and you're on the same page. I was very interested in the armatures of the exhibition. *Fit to Print* addresses how artists work with the medium of newsprint as a nexus where the studio and current events meet. But I was also interested in how that could be materially envisioned in the show, and we've come up with these three sections: circuits of prints, print as transposition, and print interventions. As a curator of a medium-specific institution dedicated to photography and printmaking, my role can be parsing out how these media are extrapolated in these sections.



Laura Fields, *The New York Times*, December 24, 2020, 2021, spread from the book *Front Pages with Pictures of Women Fighting COVID*. Photo by Dado Galdieri for *The New York Times*

**LANA:** As you mentioned, *Fit to Print* will be opening online as a virtual exhibit. Is it a frustrating experience for you, as an artist and curator, to see virtual exhibits replace physical spaces, or have you noticed new freedoms or approaches being born out of that restriction?

**KSENIA:** On a very practical level, The Print Center is in a historic carriage house that has been converted into a white cube gallery. Our building has approximately 2,000 square feet of exhibition space. I can't fit every artwork in the world in that building. Virtual exhibitions are able to exhibit works that I might not be able to physically exhibit in my space for whatever reason. It gives us more opportunities to invite more artists, to give more artists that exposure, and to bring them into conversation with our topic. Same thing with public programs. All our exhibitions are free, but they are only accessible to anyone who can come to Philadelphia. Now we have people tuning in from several continents, multiple time zones. The experience of the exhibition itself is more equitable. If you go to the website in New York or

London or Hong Kong, you're going to see the same exhibition; you're going to be able to access the same amount of information. That increases accessibility and increases engagement.

**LISA:** I think that I never realized, actually, the potential of the online format. As an artist, you're focused on working towards exhibitions in spaces [and the] different ways in which your work interacts in the physical world. More and more, I feel as if this ability to connect globally is really happening through web-based formats, where you feel as if there's this connection that would never really happen between your work and some other person, in another place. Again, I think this goes back to the impetus of "Monday's Image," where I try to foreground images that I feel are under-shown, and under-known. Putting them into a digital format gives the opportunity for engagement with that art that might not happen otherwise. I think we've just scratched the surface of the potential of [virtual spaces].



Donna Ruff, *After Irma (Miami Herald)*, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist, Rick Wester Fine Art and The Print Center. Photo by Pedro Wazzan.

**KSENIA:** I remember back in March and April [2020], thinking—what is the role of a curator? Everything that I did— go to studios, arrange shipping, hang work, think about physical space layout and crowd flow— is different [now]. I receive works, but they're files—they aren't crated, they aren't shipped. It just took a minute to recalibrate and pivot, but you know, that was liberating. Suddenly you realize you can do the same thing in a whole different way. If you stick to your mission—which, as an institution, is to serve artists and to serve the public—that's your North Star. What Lisa has brought us is the opportunity to welcome artists who are often from underrepresented populations, genders, communities, and geographical locations. The artist list is very diverse. And so if we're doing that, then I can at least say, "Okay, yes, I still am a curator; I still am doing my job."

**LANA:** *With both of you present, we are in a unique position to reflect on the relationship between artist and curator. How would you describe your collaborative process with one another? Given that Lisa is also acting as an advisor on the show, has it differed from previous artist/curator relationships you've engaged in?*

**LISA:** For me, it's just been an incredible meeting of the minds. Normally when you're working with a curator, it's quite a different experience, because the curator is working either with you and your work or you [along with] a group of artists and their work. In this case, we're meeting at this mid-point. There are so many things that I



learned from her because of her training, her background, and it's quite eye-opening. The collaboration aspect is very timely for this period of isolation. It's opened up a wellspring of excitement.

**KSENIA:** I just laughed because I was thinking—what did I teach Lisa? Probably a lot of very bureaucratic, troublesome, and worrisome things. I'm a curator, working institutionally, and Lisa's coming on to the project extra-institutionally, working independently. And yet [we're able] to still work together very seamlessly. I credit that to The Print Center, being the institution that it is—incredibly nimble, open-minded, and responsive. We have that luxury. With Lisa [coming on as an advisor]—in terms of what should she be called, what shouldn't she be called. To call Lisa a co-curator brings up some responsibility that she may or may not want as an artist. I don't want to censor her or pigeon-hole her in any way—she should be able to speak as freely as any of the other artists in the show. It was an interesting conversation for us over a number of weeks, on how to conceptualize her responsibilities and her roles and therefore her freedoms too, in making statements as an artist, which she identifies as first and foremost.

**LISA:** Absolutely. And being an artist with this esteemed group, for me—the horizontality of your peers is very important, as opposed to some hierarchal relationship as curator. It's very important to me in terms of representation also. As Ksenia mentioned previously, [we are] foregrounding artists who are not as well-known to the general public—women artists or artists of different genders, races et cetera. And that is really important in terms of peer structure, and as a reflection of the real world.

**KSENIA:** To go back to what curating means: it means to take care. Curators are diplomats, translators, mediators, liaisons. And so yes, of course, I have my ideas and they are very strong, but it's these dialogues that come to the fore in different relationships with artists. Why not turn to that?

**LANA:** *A number of public programs are planned in conjunction with Fit to Print. Tell me more about what these programs will entail, and why it was important for you to implement them in the context of The Print Center's long history of community outreach.*

**KSENIA:** All of our exhibitions, all of our public programs are free. We are a nonprofit, and our mission is educational. So I always like to schedule at least two, maybe three public programs per exhibition. It's a given to do a curatorial walk-through; we're thinking about a panel



Rita Maas, *January 7 - January 13, 2021, 2021*, from the series *Today I Got Up.*

discussion; [and we] had been thinking about [doing] a workshop program virtually. We understand that people come to our shows with different capabilities, different interests, and we want to make sure we deliver, because our mission is about community outreach as well.

**LISA:** And also the public programming will bring as diverse a list of speakers as the artists who will be in the exhibition, which is very exciting. The forthcoming workshop will take it into the realm of everyday culture, not just art, and that opens the door to so many viewers and people's experiences of the medium of the

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news paper.

**LISA:** In light of Print's emphasis on the news, do you believe art has an intrinsic connection to—of responsibility for—truth-telling and justice?



**LISA:** Whether it's overt or a subtext, I feel that in many ways artists are asking the question about news and the form of it because how it's delivered, how it's presented, is very much about its truth. The contextualization of images on a front page with the captions presents the point of view of that newspaper to the public; and so we have to parse out the semiotics of both the language and the images on a daily basis. Digitally, when we encounter the news, those feeds are changing and being updated every minute because of the way breaking news has become so much a part of our lives. So that frenetic pace of reading and ingesting so much information, I think, is something artists are very interested in. And then how does that filter out into our everyday life? How do we respond to it in the studio? To me, it is just such a porous field of possibility, which I think echoes throughout our entire exhibition.

**KSENIA:** And to take it one step further—for an audience member to come and see this show and to think about what they see in the news and who they see in the news—is it a reflection of them, of their reality and lived experience? I think there's this concept of the news being responsive— it reflects what's happening in one's city or country. And that's true to some extent. But similar questions that we've asked in the art world: "who are we seeing on museum walls? Am I seeing myself, am I seeing my community?" I think you could ask the same questions of the news. If a visitor comes to the show and then questions what they're seeing in the news, maybe they will push for better representation.

**LISA:** That's such an important point, Ksenia, in terms of representation. I think all of us are asking these questions. We walk through modern life and say, 'modern life looks like X,' but then we look at our government and the government looks like Z. We're trying to constantly navigate between these two parallel universes.





Soledad Salamé, *Untitled*, 2019-2020, from the series *Layered News*. Courtesy the artist, Goya Contemporary Gallery and The Print Center. Photo by Michael Koryta.

**KSENIA:** These newspapers appear like authorities but, you know, you have to always question authority. For me, that goes back to a more historical precedent, around newspapers as propaganda, but also as activism. The show is rooted in a kind of material understanding of the newspaper as print, but [activism] is the thread that moves through the show. My curatorial vision at the Print Center can be summed up as this idea of the graphic conscience. What is the consciousness of print? What does print have within it innately that allows us to not only have it circulate within our everyday lives seamlessly but also to react and respond to things in critical ways? This idea of the graphic conscience definitely underpins *Fit to Print* and speaks to your question of responsibility. Print has a huge responsibility; it is everywhere in our lives. It was Martin Luther's 95 Theses nailed to the door of the church back in 1400, and it is the posters on the walls [today] that say 'Wear a Mask.'

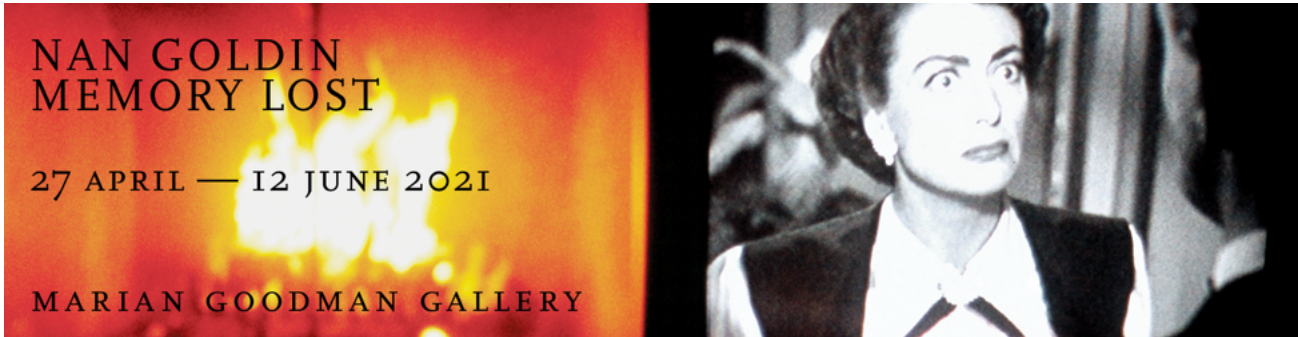
**LISA:** It's really going to be something that we'll think about even more in this virtual world, which we're probably going to be in for a while. All of these questions are very urgent and important in terms of how we are looking at the news, how it's digested by the public. What is the representation? How is my community being represented?





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