

Photography by Degrees

How to select a graduate school for an MFA in photography

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Two of the most important professional decisions facing the student photographer are: 1.) Whether or not to attend graduate college for an MFA degree and 2.) If so, which university? Those three letters cost a great deal – in years as well as cash – but do not necessarily have high value. Yet in spite of the gamble involved (stakes vs. pay-off) I am constantly astonished at the seemingly lackadaisical way in which most students drift into graduate schools, without careful and deliberate consideration of the costs and consequences. For a few individuals the MFA degree is not only desirable but essential; for the majority, it is irrelevant.

1.) The one essential point to bear in mind in any discussion on graduate education is this: the MFA is a professional qualification. And the primary profession for which it qualifies you is teaching, at a college or university. (To a much lesser extent it might also qualify you for a position in a gallery or at a museum/library collection, although in these cases an MA/PhD in art history is often more appropriate.)

So, the bottom line is quite clear: if you are committed to the idea of teaching in academia, at some point in the future, then it may be worth gaining the necessary qualifications before life's obligations make it more difficult to do so at a later time. I say "may" be worth it, because there are several caveats.

Just because you have the qualifications does not mean you will be hired at a teaching institution. An increasing number of schools are flooding the market with MFAs at a time when vacancies at colleges and universities are diminishing. There are a lot of qualified photographers out there, with many years of experience after graduate school, who are struggling along, teaching part-time at pitiful wages or living a sort-of-life as photo-nomads, picking up visiting positions on a semester by semester basis. This is your competition. So be realistic.

You have a better shot at a teaching position if you are a woman or a minority in one of the "protected classes." That's not a value judgment; that's a fact of life.

Just because you have the qualifications does not mean you have the training. Teaching is an honorable profession which demands not only a special set of personality characteristics but also its own range of skills – of which photographic ability is low down on the list of priorities. Yet few graduate schools address these skills. This

means that you will not understand whether or not you can, or want to, teach until after you have spent three to four years and a lot of money gaining the credentials to do so.

Just because you have the qualifications does not mean that your creative work has been validated with a “seal of approval” from the field. The MFA degree is not a measure of merit. An underlying feeling, rarely expressed, among graduate students is that the degree is a rating – those with it are better than those without it. It is worth pointing out, therefore, a sobering fact: the vast majority of photographers whose work is projected as slides for the edification of students would not be qualified to teach at that institution and, in many cases, would not be acceptable as fellow graduates. Another fact: it is very, very rare for a graduate student, once accepted into the program, to leave without an MFA. (Does this mean that the faculty making the selections of incoming graduates several years earlier never makes mistakes?) My point is that quality has little to do with qualification.

Just because you have the qualifications does not mean that you have to use them professionally as a teacher. I agree that graduate school can be a life-enriching experience, of value for its own sake irrespective of future career plans. If you have the free time and surplus money, there is probably no more pleasant and rewarding a place to spend a few years and thousands of dollars than at a university campus, mixing with like-minded individuals in an atmosphere of learning and shared focus. Like coals in a brazier, students can generate a lot of “heat” when in close proximity – and cool rapidly when isolated from that environment.

For photographers who are self-motivated, and who do not need either surrounding stimuli or qualifications for teaching, carefully chosen workshops with the right individuals will provide a more efficient (and cheaper) access to knowledge and experience.

2.) The previous words were not written to dissuade you from attending graduate school but to urge you to consider the ramifications before making such a costly decision. Assuming that you have carefully examined the consequences and you are determined to pursue an MFA degree, to which institutions should you direct your efforts? The most important point to bear in mind is that not all MFAs were created equal. The degrees from some institutions carry a lot more “weight” in the field than others. Therefore, where you received your MFA is as important (as far as your job prospects are concerned) as the qualification itself.

But, you might ask, if the MFA is a professional qualification, then which institution awards it is irrelevant, right? Wrong. There are two misconceptions implicit in the question.

In most academic areas of the university (from quantum physics to art history) the terminal degree signals to the field that the graduating student has specialized

knowledge and skills in commonly agreed areas. In this sense all PhDs in a given field of concentration are approximately equal, no matter the awarding institution, because the programs of study are very similar throughout the country. This is not true for MFAs. Graduate schools in photography are very different from each other and do not share common areas of essential knowledge. (Indeed, it would probably be a mistake to expect it, given the subjective nature of the arts). Each MFA program in photography, therefore, varies widely in its emphasis and rigor. Prospective employers are usually well aware of the nature of these differences.

Even in the PhD programs where uniformity of knowledge is presumed, some institutions will be respected more highly than others, primarily because of the reputations of the faculty whom the institution has been able to attract. This is true in MFA photography programs, although reputations in the arts depend less on solid achievements and more on a host of capricious and subjective factors. More about this later.

This is all very confusing for the student shopping for a graduate program in which to settle, especially as the choice of an institution plays such a large part in finding later employment.

The best advice I can give you is to ask as many teachers as possible for their recommendations. Most individuals engaged in photographic education will be aware of the “standings” of the different universities and, just as important, will be able to direct you to appropriate programs in the light of your own aptitudes, interests and career goals. Even among the best universities, the emphases will differ. A few programs, for example, are more academic than the rest, and these would be good choices for those with an interest in and aptitude for photographic history and critical theory; others offer broad ranges of courses so that the graduate can sample possible career options before leaving the program; others are very specific in their emphasis on a particular style of image-making, usually linked to a “star” faculty member’s way of working; others offer less instruction and more of a “do your own thing, with gusto” approach; others are more prone to skill-teaching, such as large-format camera use, book-making, electronic imagery, and so on.

Make use of the knowledge of photo-educators whom you know (and who know you) in compiling a short list of possible programs. Then, if at all feasible, personally visit the institutions, preferably in late January (as most programs make selections for the following fall admissions in February/March). I know this is expensive but the actual cost of travel is low in comparison to the fees wasted if you picked the wrong program for three years of study. Make appointments with as many of the faculty members as possible, well in advance of your visit. Also, take the time to contact graduates already in the program and, if possible, sit in on a graduate seminar.

This visit will perform two functions: it will introduce you to the faculty (you become a real person rather than a mere paper resume) and it allows you to “smell the air” of the program. Once you have breathed in the atmosphere you are better equipped to decide if you could feel comfortable working in it for an extended period of time.

And now to the most important factor of all, yet the most complex and difficult to discuss: the quality of the teaching. I think it is fair to say that the most successful graduates are those who have a “mentor” on the faculty, an individual teacher particularly involved in and empathetic with your own attitudes, ideas and images. A graduate student tends to work most closely with a single teacher. This relationship is a strange (even abnormal!) one but, when it works, it is the most productive and rewarding experience of the educational process, for both of you. But the factors which create this bond are impossible to define. Still, it is vital that you attempt to assess at least the possibility of such a relationship when you meet the faculty members. Although there are no sure signs, a good teacher will probably reveal his/her love of teaching, enthusiasm for the medium, concern about the students, loyalty to the program, sense of humor, patience with your questions and frankness in answering them, knowledge of photography, and general “friendliness.” Use your human instincts for assessing these traits.

Notice that the reputation of the teacher (as a photographer) is not at issue. Many of the very best teachers in graduate programs do not have any interest in self-aggrandizement or the acclaim of the gallery/art world. They are first and foremost image-makers and teachers. But the opposite is not necessarily true: “famous” names might or might not be good teachers. Reputations in the medium are merely irrelevant to good teaching.

The teachers to avoid at all costs are those who are stingy with their time for students, display irritability at your questions, tend to belittle or put down students and their work, show disrespect for your opinions or a reluctance to share their knowledge, take every opportunity for self-aggrandizement, talk inarticulately or vaguely, view the medium from a narrow self-righteous band of “correctness” in style or ideology, or refuse to see you because you are not yet one of “their” students.

Choose a professor with care and your graduate studies, and career options, will be that much more rewarding.

One last warning. Quality programs and teachers are rare and therefore the demand always exceeds the supply. The best graduate schools in photography have many more applicants than they can take and are very selective. So be forewarned that your first choice of a program may not accept you. Make contingency plans in the event of rejection – other possible schools, applying again to your first choice program semester after semester, or reconsidering your initial plans to compete for an MFA degree.

The medium badly needs a host of talents and skills. What it definitely does not need are more MFAs.

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