

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

October 18, 2006

FAQ: advice regarding MFA degree

Filed under: [education](#), [FAQ's](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:06 am

In the last week I've been asked three times for advice about grad school. As much as I'd like to offer up some sage words, I know very little about that world. I didn't get an MFA and haven't taught at a grad school. I have some preconceptions about various programs, but I'm honestly pretty ignorant.

One should be wary of taking advice from Mark Kostabi, but this is how he answered the MFA question in his perversely calculating (but equally entertaining) [Artnet Column](#):

Dear Mark: I am a sculptor living in New York and have an unusual background. "Unusual" meaning that I didn't go to grad school. And without the proper connections in the art world, I have struggled. I missed out on the opportunity to benefit from the practice of "art studentism," as you call it. But lately I have been invited to better and better shows and seemed to be on the verge of something, and I thought the pain was over. My good friend, who is a pretty successful artist, "confessed" to me she really thinks everyone thinks an artist with no MFA on the bio looks sloppy. I would love to go to grad school but I can't afford it. Is there no other way?
signed 'Anonymous'

Dear Anonymous: Sometimes I wonder if I had gone to grad school, would I now have billions, instead of mere millions, in the bank? But then I remember that I'm often asked to lecture to grad students, so in a way I am in grad school. I'm definitely not against formal education — I went to art school and loved it, but I didn't get any kind of degree, except a high school diploma. I was taught, at Cal State Fullerton in 1980, that a degree didn't matter to make it in the art world. So before finishing college, I left California and enrolled in the New York art world, which was like going back to high school, with all its cliques and social games about whom you're seen with and what dinners and parties you're invited to.

But that was then and this is now. Except for occasional reverent musings about guru John Baldessari at Cal Arts, few people in the 1980s ever talked about the importance of art school or which school you went to. That was contrary to the opulent '80s party mood. To put the words "Basquiat" and "Yale" in the same sentence would have been like writing gibberish in two completely different languages.

Today, however, I'd say that you should arm yourself with anything you can to make you, your art and your resume as impressive as possible. The climate has changed. Collectors and dealers now respond to words like "Yale," "Columbia" and "Hunter." But it's not mandatory. Ultimately collectors are not hanging your diploma. It's

true we all know that John Currin went to Yale, but how many people can tell you what school Picasso, de Chirico or Caravaggio went to?

Artists are ultimately remembered for their original artistic achievement, not for the prestige of their degree. Art Studentism really isn't the only way to enter the art market. Since you're already in shows and can't afford grad school, focus on those shows. Build on those relationships and the successes you already have. Talk to the people who are already supporting your art and let them know you'd like to work together to amplify the business — but not just for you — help them succeed with your work too.

8 Comments

1. The biggest issue I've faced regarding not having an MFA is being turned away from even applying for a teaching job.
Teaching is one of the better ways to earn a living if you're an artist- until you make millions or billions as the case may be...

Comment by [ford](#) — October 18, 2006 @ [11:17 am](#)

2. The issue that I seem to be grappling with is the debt. For those of us who are not trust fund children, getting into the better institutions is not the problem. The problem is figuring out how to pay off the massive debt and determining if that school's program is worth the investment. Lately, I feel like I am becoming a professional graduate school tour taker.

Comment by [Steve Miller](#) — October 18, 2006 @ [4:23 pm](#)

3. Great answer. I agree with the idea of going into New York art world headfirst, because the opportunities for stimuli are perhaps equal to that of a concentrated environment like Grad school. That's not to say I'm not interested in Grad school. It would be nice to have an MFA and have a greater chance for a position in teaching.

But I'm not in NYC to teach. You can do that elsewhere. I'm here to put things up on a wall as a tribute to the ideas in my head. That's art in my opinion. Don't worry about a degree, they're easy to get.

Ari

Comment by [Ari](#) — October 18, 2006 @ [11:21 pm](#)

4. Thank you so much for this post. I almost emailed you this week for your advice as well. Must be that time of year. I find that I am in the same boat as Steve Miller. (btw, great work Mr. Miller in this months group-show.com.) In the end the question is do you want to teach right now and/or do you want the possibility of riding the wave of interest in the "hot young artist." Grad school and the connections make exhibiting in more prolific exhibitions easier because all of the people who need to see the work are right there but it's certainly not necessary as in Mr. Soth's case. I haven't decided what I will do this year but a successful Yale MFA grad gave me this advice when I graduated from undergrad. Wait a few years before going to any program. You need the distance, you need to develop your own backbone and figure out what you want before entering into the pit that is grad school. Otherwise, you will not get the most out of the experience and be left with a lot of debt and not be much further along than you already were. Thanks again for the great blog!

Comment by [Jason Hanasik](#) — October 19, 2006 @ [1:24 pm](#)

5. Some good food for thought for those considering grad school:

<http://www.nyfa.org/level4.asp?id=174&fid=1&sid=51&tid=169>

Comment by [Ed](#) — November 11, 2006 @ [6:20 pm](#)

6. With a tight portfolio, a bit of research, and a willingness to relocate, you can go to grad school for free. I received my MFA from an expensive name-brand school with a very demanding and intense program... and paid not one penny of the \$100k bill.

Comment by [Allyson](#) — January 27, 2007 @ [11:07 am](#)

7. Graduate school is like giving yourself a two year grant (though you may be paying for it on a 20 year plan.) You are paying a group of people to care enough about what you are doing to give

their impressions, criticisms, and blessings. Once I realized that I sought an audience for my work, I began to care about how it might communicate to spectators. That seemed like a good reason to go and I did find the experience pretty useful and rewarding. But for every MFA I encounter that is better for having the degree, Ive met one that felt the time was somehow wasted, stifling, or anticlimactic. I believe that grad degree is not a foregone conclusion. Is it worth spending money you dont have to get it? Is your motivation for making your personal work such that that money might be better spent furthering your art in ways that require money? Analogous to your life as an artist, could it be more interesting to pursue a masters in Botany, Molecular Genetics, or English Literature?

Comment by [Joe](#) — June 3, 2007 @ [2:54 am](#)

8. Hmm, I wished I'd known, as Allyson claims, how to go to graduate school for free. Too late. Here's my thoughts on the matter:

<http://steveatch.com/>

Comment by [Steve Veatch](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [11:35 am](#)