

Graduate School (for artists)
and
Other Post-Graduation Artistic and Educational Opportunities

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After undergraduate school:

It will be an adjustment. You are accustomed to having deadlines, feedback and an understandable process to follow in making your work. Hopefully, before you leave undergraduate school you will have already worked toward finding a sustainable process. The key is to continue 'making' in whatever capacity is possible. Regardless of future plans, 'making' as a daily practice will help to make it a habit, a part of your life rather than something you'll 'get to' when you have the time. That time never comes if you don't make it a priority.

1. Find space to work even if not ideal.
2. Schedule studio time. Short but frequent sessions.
3. Find a job that will not discourage doing artwork.
4. Network- find other artists to speak with, possibly critique, share ideas, share new work, etc.
5. Stay current with art being made, thoughts being explored- see as much as you can.
6. Look into residencies, workshops, etc.
7. Attend drawing or other open sessions in your community.

Residencies, Workshops, etc.:

Artists' communities are professionally run organizations that provide time, space, and support for artists' creative research and risk-taking in environments rich in stimulation and fellowship. Whether they are located in pastoral settings or in the middle of urban warehouse districts... (from Alliance of Artists Communities)

Residencies/artists' communities can be an excellent way to get feedback on your work after you have left school while also providing time and space to focus on your work outside of your everyday obligations. They sometimes will provide scholarships or work-study opportunities and vary quite widely in what they offer in terms of facilities, visiting artists, etc. Workshops are another, usually shorter in length, way of pushing your work. They are as varied as the individuals/groups who host them.

Finding work while making work:

Ask what job situation will work for you? This will be different for everyone. The main thing is to reserve some energy in order to be able to keep your artwork going (or drink a lot of caffeine). Two types:

1. Work that is artistic in nature: will feed artistic tendency and lead into personal studio or graphic work (design firms, museums, galleries, teaching art, etc.).
2. Work that is not artistic in nature: will not sap artistic energy, leaving it intact for personal studio or graphic work (construction work, waiting tables, office work, etc.).

Is graduate school the right next step?

This may not be for everyone. And many people wisely take time off between undergrad and grad in order to make work independently for a while (or permanently). This may help you to solidify what you really want your work to be asking/doing before subjecting it to the rigorous environment of graduate critiques, etc. As graduate programs are looking for what you have to say through your work, if you don't yet have a thesis or thrust that you are well into in the work, time off may be the best thing. You will need to be self-disciplined and really continue to push your work/ideas.

The majority of graduate students are in their mid to late twenties when they enter MFA programs while others continue straight from their undergraduate programs. Your readiness is something that you will have to assess.

What graduate programs offer:

1. Intensive community of professors and fellow artists.
2. Work tends to grow, beyond expectation, through this process.
3. You will earn the terminal degree in your field, Masters of Fine Arts (this is required in order to teach on the college level).
4. You will begin to form a network of fellow artists who will know your work like few others. There will be an important and informal exchange of information that you would not otherwise have access to, from places to show to grants to challenging ideas, etc. Things happen when you are there. Personally, artistically and professionally.
5. It will make you more attractive to galleries, etc. both due to earning the degree itself and because of the experience behind the degree.

What to expect in graduate school:

1. Intensive work environment with others also engaged in pushing their work/community.
2. Teaching opportunities (in some schools).

3. Focus on your work with space, resources and input.

How to choose the right school- things to look for, questions to ask, etc.

Graduate programs vary greatly in philosophy, structure, facilities, teaching opportunities and so on. In order to know which school is best for you, look first at your work and the needs that it presents. Then:

1. Look at faculty work
2. Look at student work
 - A. Look for the quality of the effort and the quality of the thought over the 'type' of work being done. Presumably and hopefully, the actual work will change from year to year and from student to student, but if it is work that is interesting, mature and challenging, this is a good indication that the program is doing something well.
 - B. The work being done can indicate types of programs. For instance, if work by several different students looks very similar, it may be a program that does not encourage deviation but, as a strength, may offer an in-depth investigation of that narrow field. Or, if the work tends to not be medium-specific, that may indicate a certain departmental cross-disciplinary philosophy, etc.
3. Talk to other graduate students.
4. Visit schools, if possible.
5. Look at location.
6. Compare facilities.
7. Ask about financial aid/scholarships/teaching assistantships.

What graduate programs are generally looking for:

The most important thing is to have a strong body of work.

They will be looking for someone interesting to work with, someone with ideas of their own to add to the dynamic of their graduate community. They are looking for a particular point of view, not necessarily for someone who is already there in the work but for someone with strong and interesting possibilities and questions revealed in the work.

They will assume that you already know the basic skills or those that are responsive to the needs of your work/thesis. It is not advisable to include earlier, less mature work or work that has nothing to do with your main thrust just because it shows a certain skill or ability. Rather, it is recommended to submit a body of work that has some line through it, has some thought that comes through. The method should support or come from/through this thrust.

It may help to have some lines (exhibitions, etc.) on your resume but it is generally the work itself that will get you into a program.

Materials graduate programs generally request:

1. From 10 to 30 images (digital) of your work (most often a sheet of 20).
2. Personal essay/statement (they will sometimes ask specific questions).
3. Letters of recommendation from your professors (generally three).
4. Application Form and Application Fee.
6. Some schools are now requiring that students take the GRE.
7. Other items specific to each program.

How to choose a solid set of slides/images.

Think of this grouping of slides as a piece in itself or as if you are curating an exhibition. The particular arrangement may make all the difference in your ideas coming through. Take your time in this step, traditionally using a light table to try various groupings, currently try setting them up as thumbnails on a page. Keep in mind that they need to read strongly both when simply held up to a light or light table as well as when projected on a screen. Most often, those with two-dimensional work will include one slide per piece, those with three-dimensional work can include details or alternative views. Consider the importance of varied views versus being able to show more work.

Things to address in the essay/statement.

The statement should be personal and particular to you and your work but should be written formally. It should include the philosophy or thrust behind your work and how graduate school will benefit you and your work. Explain why this is the next necessary step for you. Some programs will also ask specific questions which you should address directly.

Other advice:

As an artist, rejection is part of the process. If you are passionate about what you are doing, keep trying. It sometimes takes time to find the right match in terms of graduate school, audience for your work, exhibitions, etc. The important thing is that you keep making the work that challenges you— through disappointments as well as through successes.