

DESIGN STUDIES DEPARTMENT

# **MASTERS OF FINE ART PROGRAM HANDBOOK**

(Draft: Feb 23 2017)

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# MFA PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The focus of the MFA degree is on creative performance in design. Its goals are to promote strong and creative conceptual thinking, exploration, interpretation, innovation, and overall excellence in design execution. The course of study requires the completion of a minimum of 60 credits and includes a substantial studio work component. The curriculum seeks to create a foundation with flexibility to fit student needs.

Students generally focus their work in one of two general areas: Textile and Fashion Design, or Interior Architecture. Some students choose to work across these areas or have even more idiosyncratic integrative focus. Students focusing in Interior Architecture typically concentrate on the innovative application of aesthetic, conceptual and expressive design strategies in interior environments. Textile and Fashion Design students focus on the conceptual, technical and aesthetic possibilities of textiles and clothing. In every case, students formulate a plan of study to suit their individual needs.

# MFA DEGREE REQUIREMENTS

1. Pre-MFA Preparation Courses (credits vary)
2. Methods and Theory in Design and Culture (6 cr.)
3. Seminar Courses (6 cr.)
4. History and Criticism (6 cr.)
5. Non-Studio Academic Coursework (2-3 cr.)
6. General Studio Work (9 cr.)
7. Focus Area Studio Work (12-13 cr.)
8. Interim MFA Qualifier (3 cr.)
9. Preparation of Final Thesis (9 cr. Research and Thesis)
10. Final Thesis (6 cr.)

MFA students must complete a minimum of 60 credits. Of these, 21 credits will be academic coursework in structured courses that include Studio Based Research Methods and Theory, History and Criticism Courses, and Non-Studio Academic Coursework. The remaining 39 credits will be fulfilled through General Studio Work, Focus Area Studio Work, independent studies (i.e. to prepare for Interim MFA Qualifier), or Research and Thesis credits. At least 50% of credits (30 of 60 total credits) applied toward the MFA degree must be from courses designed for graduate work; courses numbered 700 and above or courses numbered 300-699 that assess graduate students separately from undergraduate students generally satisfy this requirement. Students must maintain a 3.3-grade point average to remain in good standing.

The Minimum Graduate Residence Requirement for MFA degrees is 32 credits.

MFA students may enroll for a maximum of 12 credits per term.

## 1. Pre-MFA Preparation Courses

Particularly in the Interior Architecture track, students may have graduated from an undergraduate program that did not comprehensively prepare them for the level of studio work in the MFA program. However, promising applicants who do not have sufficient educational background may be admitted, under the condition that he or she take pre-MFA preparation courses; if the student satisfactorily completes a pre-MFA series of courses with a 3.3 GPA or above, the student may subsequently advance to full MFA student status. Students will work closely with their major faculty advisor to determine appropriate pre-MFA preparation courses. Pre-MFA preparation courses vary by area of study and may include, but are not limited to, the following courses:

Textile and Fashion Design

- Textile and/or Fashion History (1 course)

## Interior Architecture

- DS 241 Visual Communication 1
- Color Theory (1 course)
- DS 222 Interior Design I
- DS 322 Interior Design II

## 2. Core Courses

(20-21 credits)

The MFA Core Course curriculum offers an opportunity for all Design Studies students to establish a body of knowledge in theories, creative practices, and seminars relevant to studio based inquiry.

The core curriculum also includes specialized training in instruction and pedagogy; this is requisite for graduate teaching assistant duties (often a source of MFA student funding), and useful for students who wish to pursue academic careers. A student who is assigned to a teaching assistantship at the time of admission may take the course(s) during their first semester while fulfilling teaching assistant duties.

As much as possible within their first two years, all MFA students will be expected to enroll in 20-21 credits distributed among the following Core Courses:

Methods and Theories in Design, Art, and Culture (6 cr.)

- DS764 Dimensions of Material Culture (3 Credits, required for all MFA students)

Choose at least one additional course. Suggestions include:

- DS 642 Taste (recommended)
- Art 700 Introduction to Graduate Studies
- Art History 703 Curatorial Studies Colloquium

Seminar Courses (6 cr.)

- DS920 Seminar in Design Studies – Studio Emphasis (1 credit per year, for 3 credits total)
- At least one additional seminar course

History and Criticism Courses (6 cr.)

- Art 508 Colloquium in Art (at least 1 credit required for all students, to a maximum of 3)

Choose from among the following courses

- Any Art History or Design Studies course focusing on history, 500 level or above
- Art Hist 801 Historiography, Theory and Methods in Visual Culture
- Art Hist 802 Visual Cultures: Topics in Visual Culture
- Non-Studio Academic Coursework-Graduate Student Instructor Course (2-3 credits) Choose from:  
[www.delta.wisc.edu/Courses\\_and\\_Programs/courses\\_and\\_programs\\_overview.html](http://www.delta.wisc.edu/Courses_and_Programs/courses_and_programs_overview.html)

### 3. General Studio Work

(9 credits)

The general studio work provides students with an overview of studio practices that will be the foundation for their Focus Area Studio work, the Qualifier and the Thesis. Students are encouraged to take courses that are offered both inside and outside the Design Studies Department to develop an interdisciplinary framework for their MFA work.

The core curriculum also includes an independent study that will facilitate the production of the Interim MFA Qualifier.

MFA students are expected to develop a strong foundation in studio-based inquiry. Students in the Interior Architecture track are strongly encouraged to take both DS 424 Interior Design IV and DS 501 Interior Design V, with the addition of project components tailored to each student's Focus Area. All students are encouraged to take DS 501 Design and Fashion Event Practicum.

Required Courses (Interior Architecture concentration only. May be waived for students with substantial portfolios.)

- DS 424 Interior Design IV
- DS 501 Interior Design V

Recommended courses include:

- Art 409 Digital Fabrication
- Art 511 Art Performance
- Art 521 Installation and Environments
- Art 570 Adv Artists as Curators – Grad Section
- Art 660 Art and Technology
- Art History 506 Curatorial Studies Exhibition Practice
- Other courses at the 500 level or above in Art or Landscape Architecture

### 4. Focus Area Studio Work

(15-16 credits)

All MFA students, in consultation with their advisor, define a focus area that will help prepare them for their Interim MFA Qualifier and Thesis Proposal. This focus builds on their General Studio Work. Students often do studio work in their focus area as independent studies with appropriate faculty members.

### 5. Interim MFA Qualifier

(3 credits, counts as Core Course)

The Interim MFA Qualifier (Qualifier) is part of the Core Course requirements for every MFA student, and must be successfully completed prior to receiving final approval of the Thesis Proposal. The Qualifier provides students with an opportunity to create and present a studio-based project in their area of specialization in preparation for their Final Thesis. While limited in scope, the project should be comparable to the Final Thesis in terms of its creative and intellectual tone and quality. The project could be an exhibition that includes some elements that are integrated into a final thesis exhibition (most common for students in the Textile and Fashion Design track), or it could be a presentation and formal dissemination of a pilot design project that serves as a case study for the final thesis (most common for students in the Interior Architecture track). Students are encouraged to disseminate the project broadly, seeking out visibly prominent public venues, incorporating online versions, or presenting at conferences or in design competitions.

The Interim MFA Qualifier may be based on work completed as part of any UW graduate studio course, as well as from independent studies. Students typically enroll in an independent study with their major advisor to complete the Qualifier. The Qualifier must be reviewed and approved by the student's major advisor, in consultation with the student's Thesis Committee. The project must receive a passing grade in order for the student to receive final approval of their Thesis Proposal.

## 6. Thesis Proposal

Before beginning substantial work on their Thesis, all MFA students must receive approval of their Thesis Proposal from their MFA committee after satisfactorily completing at least three full time semesters of coursework and passing the MFA Interim Qualifier. The Thesis Proposal is intended to describe the creative work or project that will be at the core of the Thesis, to demonstrate the student's broad knowledge in areas that relate to their Thesis, to explain how their work or project relates to the work of other designers and artists, to demonstrate their awareness of relevant theories and methods as reflected in their literature review, to explain their methods and materials, and to outline a detailed schedule for the completion of the Thesis.

## 7. Preparation of Thesis

(9 credits)

Upon approval of their Thesis Proposal, students are expected to register for credits that will represent thesis writing and production. These credits are generally research and thesis credits, independent studies, or required seminars; they must be at the 500 level or above.

## 8. Group Review Sessions

All MFA students are required to present their work at least once per academic year in a Group Review Session attended by faculty and the other MFA students. First year students can present their work that they submitted for their application, or work from a course that they have taken. Second year students should present work from their Focus Area Student Work, or their advanced General Studio Work. Third year students should present their Thesis work in progress.

The Group Review Sessions have several goals.

- Enable MFA students to see what other MFA students are working on.
- Enable the MFA faculty as a whole to see what all of the MFA students are working on.
- Enable MFA students to receive constructive review of their work from all of the MFA faculty.
- Enable MFA students to gain experience critiquing and receiving critique.
- Enable MFA students to gain experience presenting their work.

## 9. Thesis

(6 credits)

All MFA students are required to successfully prepare and present a Thesis that includes a studio component, a written component, and an oral defense. These are Research and Thesis credits with the student's advisor.

# Progress to Degree

## Timeline by Year

### First Year, Fall Semester

- Attend fall orientation for SoHE Graduate Students
- Meet with advisor about general direction of inquiry, and plan preliminary course of study.
- Register for courses, focusing on the Core Courses but trying for at least one studio course
- Recommend 9 credits for the first semester, especially if working as a Teaching Assistant

### First Year, Spring Semester

- Meet with advisor and fine tune the general direction of inquiry
- Register for courses, focusing on the Core Courses, and beginning General Studio Work
- Begin the Literature Review for your Thesis Proposal. Collect references on relevant artists and designers. Look for precedents that you can use.

### First Year, Summer

- Continue to look for precedents and further develop your literature review.
- Write a draft of the introduction for your Thesis Proposal.
- Begin to identify a venue or format for your Interim MFA Qualifier

### Second Year, Fall Semester

- Meet with advisor and develop a more focused curriculum plan, based on your draft Thesis Proposal
- Register for courses, focusing on the Core Courses, General Studio Work, and beginning your Focused Studio Work.
- Identify committee members, and ask if they are willing to serve on your committee.
- Develop a proposal and schedule for your Interim MFA Qualifier. Identify and reserve a venue for the Qualifier.
- Have an informal committee meeting before the end of the semester, to discuss general direction and receive feedback on your Qualifier proposal.
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### Second Year, Spring Semester

- Meet with your advisor and review your plans for the Qualifier, your Thesis Proposal, and your course of study.
- Register for courses, with emphasis on Focused Studio Work and the Qualifier
- Complete your Thesis Proposal

- Meet with your committee to review your Qualifier, as well as your draft Thesis proposal. The Thesis Proposal should be substantially complete at this time, and it is suggested that you defend it if your committee believes that you are ready.
- Make arrangements for your exhibition or other venue for your Thesis.

#### Third Year, Fall Semester

- Complete any remaining required coursework.
- At the beginning of the semester, successfully defend your Thesis Proposal. Meet with your committee to ensure that you are on track to finish all of the requirements for the MFA.
- Make substantial progress on the written portion of your Thesis. This should incorporate portions of your Thesis Proposal.

#### Third Year, Spring Semester

- Focus on developing (or finalizing, or finishing) your Thesis.
- Notify the Graduate Committee Chair and the Graduate Program Coordinator that you intend to graduate, and they will notify the Graduate School.
- Schedule the date for your Defense
- Request a Degree Warrant at least six weeks in advance of your Defense, in order to ensure that your name is printed in the commencement program.
- Complete Thesis, including project and written component.
- After a successful Thesis defense, have the committee members sign the warrant. The student must give the signed warrant to the SoHE Graduate Program Coordinator, who transmits the warrant to the Graduate School.
- Degree awarded.

## Making satisfactory progress

An MFA student will be judged to be making satisfactory progress if they have satisfactorily achieved the milestones in the timeline above, and have maintained a 3.0 grade point average. The advisor should meet with the student once per semester to review the student's progress, and give notice if there is anything unsatisfactory.

An MFA student will be judged to be making unsatisfactory progress if they have not maintained a 3.0 grade point average, if they have not successfully passed their preliminary MFA qualifier, or if they do not successfully defend their thesis proposal. In addition, an MFA student will be judged to be making unsatisfactory progress if the student has not completed all degree requirements, including thesis and exhibition within 4 years of full time study.

Students who are judged not to be making satisfactory progress may be placed on probation and may lose eligibility for graduate funding awards such as scholarships and assistantships. Further, students who receive unsatisfactory progress ratings in two consecutive semesters may be dropped from the program.

Students may appeal a decision to be dropped from the program by submitting a written request to their advisor outlining the reasons they believe reconsideration is warranted in relation to established criteria for satisfactory progress. Students may also request a leave of absence from graduate study due to extenuating circumstances by submitting a letter to

their advisor. Such requests will then be considered by the DS Graduate Committee and if approved will be forwarded to the SoHE Associate Dean for formal action (and thus forwarded to the Graduate School if approved).

## Steps to Completing the MFA Thesis

MFA students are officially ready to complete their Thesis after completing the required coursework, submitting a satisfactory Interim MFA Qualifier, and successfully defending their Thesis Proposal. Steps to candidacy are outlined below.

### *Step one: Thesis topic*

A student must develop a thesis topic in consultation with the student's major faculty advisor prior to working on the Interim MFA Qualifier. The thesis topic should be a concise, one page description of the issues or ideas that are central to their work, their methods, their materials, and the outcomes of their work. The topic at this stage is preliminary in nature but will serve as a basis for developing the Interim MFA Qualifier, and for setting up a Thesis Committee.

### *Step two: Thesis committee*

MFA students form a four-person graduate advisory committee as soon as they develop a thesis topic. Minimum UW-Madison Graduate School requirement for graduate committee are:

- The chair or co-chair of the committee must be Graduate Faculty from the student's major program;
- MFA committees must have at least four members, three of whom must be UW Graduate Faculty or former UW Graduate Faculty up to one year after resignation or retirement.
- The members of the thesis committee must sign the SoHE form, indicating that they have agreed to be on the committee.

### *Step three: Scheduling Interim MFA Qualifier Review*

The student must work with their advisor and their MFA committee to schedule the Qualifier review. While an exhibition may continue for a week or more, it is still important to coordinate with the committee schedule, preferably at least three months in advance. Keep in mind that some venues may schedule a year or more in advance, so there is a much longer timeline for the venue than for the committee meeting.

### *Step four: Preparing and Evaluating the Interim MFA Qualifier*

The student must review their plans for the Qualifier with their committee, and receive approval to proceed. Then the student prepares the Qualifier. At least three weeks before the committee review, the student must submit a written document that follows the format of the final Thesis document. This document will be incorporated into the Thesis Proposal.

The committee will meet and review the qualifier, including the creative work and the written document. The committee will vote on whether the student should be approved to begin on the Thesis project.

If more than one committee member dissents, the student cannot proceed with the Thesis.

### *Step five: Thesis proposal defense*

Concurrently to working on the Interim MFA Qualifier, a student must complete a written thesis proposal and submit to the student's thesis committee for approval. The proposal defense might be scheduled for the beginning of the third year fall semester, in order to give the student the opportunity to incorporate feedback from the Interim MFA Qualifier. The proposal should at minimum have these components (adjusted if necessary to apply to their specific project).

- 1) Proposed title
- 2) Thesis summary
- 3) Literature and precedent review
- 4) Discussion of general topics questions related to the area of creative inquiry
  - i) Current theories and/or trends in the applicable area of creative inquiry
  - ii) Perceived need for, or expected contribution of the creative inquiry
- 5) Parameters of the thesis project
  - a) Statement of the problem
    - (1) Objectives/ideas
    - (2) Working (operational) definitions
  - b) Procedures
  - c) Materials
  - d) Techniques
  - e) Expected physical outcomes
- 6) --Time schedule broken into target dates
- 7) Bibliography
- 8) Resources required and statement of availability (e.g., studio, laboratory, equipment, supplies, etc.)

### *Step six: Thesis and Final Defense*

A thesis is required of all MFA students at UW-Madison. An MFA thesis demonstrates the student's ability to use studio-based work as a way to explore larger ideas and problems. The thesis also demonstrates that the student can place their work in the context of others working on similar projects, and that they can explain why their work is meaningful in a universal or global context. The thesis consists of the following elements:

1. A copy of the thesis proposal
2. Copies of the personal statement and any other written materials from an exhibition

3. Visual documentation of the work (this can be in various forms, pre-approved by the committee—CD, slides, etc.)
4. The student's written response (reflection, report) about the project. This may be a comparison of what transpired relative to the proposed or expected outcomes, new insights that emerged, areas for future investigation, etc.

During the process of completing the thesis, the student should remain in close contact with his or her faculty advisor and the other members of the committee. The thesis defense procedure is:

1. Students must be enrolled for credit during the semester in which they plan to graduate. It is the responsibility of the student to be aware of Graduate School credit requirements and deadlines. See the Graduate School website.
2. In consultation with committee members, the degree candidate sets a date and time for the thesis defense. For physically-based projects, the show should be fully installed at the time of the defense. Students should be aware that most faculty members are on 9-month appointments and summer graduations are not always possible because of faculty schedules. Determine the availability of your committee well in advance.
3. Complete thesis and turn in completed written thesis project component/and or exhibition statement to all committee members at least three weeks in advance of defense date.
4. Student requests warrant from DS department administrator a minimum of three weeks before defense or the degree deadline for that semester.
5. SoHE Graduate Coordinator prepares warrant request and sends it to the graduate school.
6. Degree warrant is returned to the SoHE Graduate Program Coordinator and is placed in the front of the student's file.
7. On the date of the defense, the student requests the warrant from their file in the SoHE office, carries it to the defense meeting and has it signed by committee members after a successful defense.
8. Student gives warrant to department administrator so a copy can be made for the student's file.
9. Student walks warrant to the graduate school (217 Bascom Hall).

Student must provide copies of their written thesis, including documentary photos and/or drawings, to each committee member. A copy must also be filed with the Design Studies Department.