

Helina Metaferia
2015 Student Commencement Speech

Thank you to our dedicated faculty, staff, members of the SMFA community, family and friends for sharing this day with us.

To the graduating class of 2015: We. Did. It. We are here.

There was nothing as paradoxically simple and challenging as our decision to come to this institution in order to embark on a career in the arts. It's simple because being an artist is something that came natural to many of us. And yet it is challenging because it's a field without a clear professional path that we can follow upon graduation. When we think about practicality and stability, I'm not sure anyone's thinking "art." The creative path has many rewards, but certainty is not one of them.

In order to be here and survive our studies, we had to have had an ounce of the only thing that we can ever be certain of. It's something that no one else could give us — not our teachers, or our family, or our peers. Not the financial aid office, or the library staff. Not our celebrated guest lecturers or the museum itself. In order to be here today, we needed a relentless faith in ourselves and in our process. We needed trust in our ability to fail and pick ourselves back up many times over until we get it right. We needed resilience.

When we stepped into this institution during our student orientation, no one could foresee the hurdles ahead. The critiques that would go well and those that made us cringe. The tears — oh yes the tears — the sweat and even the laughter. And you know what: Good. Because the not knowing was part of the growing. And, as we step into the next part of our lives, I stand before you to remind you to keep going and keep growing, no matter what.

Some of us entered the Museum School as painters and became performance artists. Some of us entered as photographers and began to sculpt. Some of us swore that we would never pull an all-night session in the studios and there we were, at 4am, making the final edits on a video art project. And none of us knew who would become the friends and allies that we would have on this day, the relationships that would form, and the maturation that would happen.

I am not going to pretend that art school is an amazing place where all good can come. In 2015, in the time of both Obama and Ferguson, 81% of arts graduates are non-Hispanic whites. 95% of the art on display in museums were made by male artists. We currently have a national student loan debt of 1.2 trillion dollars. The tuition to get in these school doors is a huge investment that makes art school education appear impossible to many.

I don't say these things because you aren't aware of this. I say these things because as future forces in the art world I want to let you know that it is your responsibility and duty to help make some noise, make some change, and not just replicate a system that is outdated. As you get your museum shows and your gallery positions, as you become curators and influencers and sit on boards of trustees, it is your duty to realize how privileged you are as artists who get to practice their craft and contribute to cultural production. And with this privilege comes a responsibility to help see a better art world, and a better world at large. Making art is not a selfish practice. It's a revolutionary act of service.

Success is determined by sustained effort and commitment to your future. Goals are achieved by the audacity to believe in them and the guts to do something about them. We came to graduate school to fulfill our dreams of being professional artists and to let our voices be heard. This is not without sacrifice and not without humbling moments. However, through dedication, consistency, and a bit of chance, we can achieve anything imaginable.

So go out there. Leave your mark. Make some noise. Make some work. Make some bad work. Make some good work. Do your thing. And do it well.