

# A Graduate Experience



Zach Tate working in his studio during the second semester of 2012.

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## *Zach Tate relates his experience at Texas Tech University*

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*As I begin to test the waters of the real world, armed with my skills and education, I realise more than ever, that it is up to me.*

I HAVE REALISED THAT MY LIFE AS AN ARTIST HAS been constantly filled with various anxieties, unknowns, growing pains and logical steps to take: each one seemingly more forbidding than the previous until I am past it. I am currently in my last year of my graduate career at Texas Tech University. To be more accurate, I am in my last semester. Recently I gave my public thesis defence and had my oral examination with my MFA Committee. I am pleased to say that I passed. With that out of the way, my last five months of school seem fairly clear: teach, put together my MFA thesis exhibition and apply to jobs. Regardless what happens next... then what? As this reality and subsequent anxiety sets in I realise that the support system of academia that I have become so dependent on for encouragement, will not be there in the capacity that I have come to expect. And the last time I checked life does not pass out a pamphlet to guide you through the next phase. There are no advisers: just you.

When I began my graduate career in 2010, the US was at the height of the Great Recession and several people were going back to school for their MFAs. I was fortunate enough to have choices when deciding what school to attend. Of the five schools that I applied to, I was accepted into four. As great of a blessing as this was, for me it was also a curse.



*Father (HW), Son (W) and Holy Spirit (Ronnie). 2012. Ceramic, handbuilt, multi-fired with oxides, underglazes, glaze and lustre. Photo by Zach Tate.*

The anxiety of which school is the best hit me hard. “You only get your MFA once” I was told and I did not want to miss out on something great by making the wrong choice.

After much deliberation I decided to attend Texas Tech University. The tipping point for me in this decision was their newly renovated Clay Palace (as we have named it) and for the faculty that I would be working with: Von Venhuizen and Juan Granados. I was not sure what I was going to do when I got to Lubbock, except to work. Being a hopeless romantic I had lofty goals, expectations and angst for my upcoming graduate experience. Just like any program does, Texas Tech had its upsides and downsides. The town of Lubbock, Texas is not exactly a Mecca for visual inspiration when you are used to the Midwest. But to look at it in a positive light, there are not a lot of distractions. Lubbock is a large city with a small town feeling to it. This leaves a young artist, like me, with few options except to purely concentrate on the studio.

Before deciding on which program to attend I talked with numerous graduate students from various schools during NCECA over the years. I heard horror stories of graduate professors who would tear you down to the bare elements of human existence and then slowly build you back up to a new *avant-garde* art making machine. I was not sure that I was quite ready for that, but whatever came my way, I would cope. Much to my surprise, that never happened in my time at Tech. Though I was constantly being pushed in my ideas and to experiment with new

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Top left: Kiln yard at Texas Tech University.

Top right: Firing of the 'Middle Child' wood kiln at Texas Tech.

Above left: Texas Tech University glaze lab.

Above right: Bede Clarke and Zach Tate working on a collaboration during the Cone 2012 Woodfire Symposium at Texas Tech University in 2012.

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materials and techniques. The great and effervescent question of 'why' was always awaiting me around each turn, testing my resolve. "Why blue? Why wood-fired? Why ceramic? Why blue again?" And so forth. This tactic seemed to be a way of keeping me on my toes: the koen of the clay department, perhaps.

Aside from my studio practices, being in a graduate program that allowed me to teach has been a positive for my growth as an artist. Teaching well is not for the faint of heart. As rewarding as this action is, it is also time consuming and emotionally draining. In my undergraduate experience at Missouri State University, things were not exactly handed to us, but there was never a question of whether our basic needs as an artist would be taken care of (for example, materials to make clay and glazes). When you are first given the reigns of your own classroom in a university setting, you quickly realise that you must be the one answering the questions and providing for your students. Baptised by fire, at times.

As the pieces began to come into place and my work began to find its heading, I realised that my career as a student was nearly over. I have spent the last two and a half years working, exploring, changing and being frustrated. I have taken full advantage of my opportunities to teach, research, write, lecture, exhibit, travel and so forth. It is through all of these processes and resultant emotions that I realise how much I have changed as a person and artist. This has led me to construe that it is not so much the school that I have chosen or the professors with whom I have studied (though both of these have been major factors in my development) but it is about you and what you invest your time

in. I was fortunate to select a graduate program that has respected my ideas, yet still pushed me to new and better ways of expressing those ideas. The most glorifying 'ah ha' moments were not always found in the midst of a heated critique. Sometimes they were found in the solitary confines of my studio as I rendered my ideas in clay at three o'clock in the morning.

As I begin to test the waters of the real world, armed with my skills and education, I realise more than ever, that it is up to me. And that is my new anxiety. You can be rejected a hundred times from shows and jobs, but it is your stubbornness and willingness to continue on that makes you the artist and person that you are. I find comfort daily that I work in a social medium, one that is as much about giving back as it is about taking. And maybe that is where I find myself now: learning from another one of those lessons that you do not get in academia.



Above: *Calling Kennedy*. 2012. Ceramic, handbuilt, multi-fired with oxides, underglazes and glaze. Photo by Zach Tate.  
Below (Left to right): MFA Candidate Zach Tate, Professor Juan Granados, Professor Von Venhuizen, MFA Candidate Adam Redd.

Zach Tate is in his last year of graduate school at Texas Tech University. He earned his BFA in Ceramics from Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri, US (2008). After graduating from Missouri State, Tate has taken several opportunities to travel, exhibit and work professionally in the ceramics field. He has been a resident artist and / or technician at the Union Project (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, US), Tainan National University of the Arts (Tainan, Taiwan), Springfield Pottery (Springfield, Missouri, US), Guldagergaard International Ceramics Research Center (Skælskør, Denmark) and Rothshank Pottery (Goshen, Indiana). Tate has been in numerous exhibitions (internationally and nationally), has presented several lectures about his research, given demonstrations of his unique building processes and continues to be a contributing writer to several publications including *Ceramics Technical*, *Studio Potter* and the *Log Book*. In the summer of 2012, Tate co-organised (with Swedish artist Eva Zethraeus) the 2012 International Wood-fired Landscape Symposium in Göteborg, Sweden. This symposium brought together 11 invited artists (including Torbjørn Kvasbo, Nina Hole, Satoru Hoshino, Chang Ching-Yuan, Dick Lehman and others) to the campus of HDK University to make work, fire kilns, lecture and exhibit the work that was created in those four weeks. Tate's interest in the ceramics medium lies, not only with the expressive qualities of clay, but with the community that is inherently ceramics.

