



# MA in Critical Studies

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## I. MA in Critical Studies at PNCA

The MA in Critical Studies claims critical theory as a creative project of analysis and exposure radically interested in accountability and the material effects of ideas. The two-year program combines the study of critical theory with the practice of creative research, so students learn not only to critique but also to intervene, reimagine, and remake. The program is designed to help students develop modes of thinking, writing, and making that cross disciplinary boundaries.

Critical theory emerged with the Frankfurt School, and due to those thinkers' commitment to knowledge that emancipates, critical theory now includes all theories that expose, critique, and transform oppressive ideologies. The Critical Studies program adopts this broader view. Coursework includes seminars in Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, LatCrit Theory, Queer Theory, and other emancipatory projects. Critical Studies also offers seminars in creative research that claim research as a form of intervention and making. The program culminates in a thesis project so students can make a contribution to the field based on their own interests and commitments.

Situated in the context of a 21st-century art school, Critical Studies pays particular attention to images, examining overlaps and tensions between critical theory and visual studies and investigating the role critical theory and art can play in transforming institutions and ideologies. The Critical Studies program explores how human beings engage language and images to make and unmake worlds.

The two-year required course sequence builds from identifying key questions and issues in critical theory to providing students with the methodological, research, writing, and professional skills they need to ask good questions and to investigate those areas of inquiry in a thesis project of their own design. The thesis research occurs during the first year; the thesis writing occurs during the second year, resulting in both an academic research paper finished in the third semester and a work of publishable writing based on the student's professional interest in the fourth semester.

Allotting two years to complete the 45-credit MA program provides time for students to take electives that support their research interests, to work at jobs that sustain their professional and financial needs, and to complete thesis projects in a timely manner. In addition, should students wish to apply to doctoral programs, the two-year timeframe will allow them to apply in the third semester of the program rather than at the start of the first year, making them stronger candidates with better letters of recommendation and more focused research interests. The two-year program also allows students to have the summer off for independent research, work, fellowships, travel, or internships.

## II. Critical Studies Curriculum

### SUMMARY OF COURSES:

Critical Theory = 9 credits  
Creative Research = 6 credits  
Ethics & Visual Culture = 3 credits  
Creative Non-Fiction Writing = 3 credits  
Professional Practice = 3 credits  
Electives = 6 credits  
Internships = 3 credits  
Thesis writing = 12 credits  
**Total Credits = 45**

### COURSES BY SEMESTER:

#### Fall Semester 1 = 12 credits

3 credits *Critical Theory 1: Introduction*  
3 credits *Research for a Creative Practice 1*  
3 credits *Ethics & Visual Culture*  
3 credits *Elective (from existing PNCA courses in graduate or undergraduate programs)*

#### Spring Semester 1 = 12 credits

3 credits *Critical Theory 2: Feminist Theory, Queer Theory, Gender, and Sexuality*  
3 credits *Research for a Creative Practice 2*  
3 credits *Creative Non-Fiction Writing*  
3 credits *Elective (from existing PNCA courses in graduate or undergraduate programs)*

#### Fall Semester 2 = 12 credits

3 credits *Critical Theory 3: Critical Race Theory and Postcolonial Theory*  
6 credits *Thesis Writing 1 (complete thesis)*  
3 credits *Professional Practice*

#### Spring Semester 2 = 9 credits

6 credits *Thesis Writing 2: Preparing for Publication*  
3 credits *Internships*

### III. Overview of Critical Studies Curriculum

**Critical Theory Seminars (9 credits):** In three critical theory seminars, students learn to read and write carefully and critically; to express ideas clearly; to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously; and to analyze ideas based on their material effects. The critical theory seminars form the intellectual foundation of the program and constitute the students' shared texts. The seminars introduce students to major concepts and questions in critical theory – and, as the seminars build on one another, they become more focused on particular lines of thought within critical theory. The seminars approach critical theory/ies as epistemological and methodological approaches to the study of structural inequalities and as tools for questioning power and analyzing the construction of difference. Because the courses are taught in the context of an art school, particular attention is paid to exploring overlaps and tensions between critical theory and visual studies and investigating the role critical theory and the image can play in transforming institutions and ideologies. In each seminar, students will be exposed to a required set of texts and will also have the opportunity to connect the assigned topics to their own area of expertise and interest. Courses will combine both requisite content and opportunities for intense engagement with specialized topics in which the student chooses to read more deeply.

**Research for a Creative Practice Seminars (6 credits):** The seminars in research for a creative practice provide frameworks for students to pose questions and incorporate qualitative research methodologies into ongoing inquiry. The emphasis is on research as a process of critical engagement for observing connections between seemingly disparate ideas, planning future actions and strategies, and asking better questions. The seminars introduce students to a range of qualitative research methods and examples of creative inquiries that cross the boundaries of discipline and genre. The seminars also prepare students to write their thesis projects. By the end of the first seminar, students pose their research question; by the end of the second seminar, students write a literature review of relevant theorists, artists, and creative practices that inform their thesis work and are well prepared to transform core concepts and questions into a novel, researchable project that will make a contribution to the field. In addition, students develop professional skills for clearly communicating research ideas with theoretical and methodological rigor to various audiences.

**Thesis Writing Seminars (12 credits):** Students in the Critical Studies program complete and defend a master's thesis (30–50 pages), which is both critical and constructive. In the first seminar, with support from a mentor, the thesis writing professor, and in-class workshops, students complete the thesis. In the second seminar, students reshape their academic thesis work for publication so the research project is outward facing and makes a contribution in the world. The form of publication depends on the student's area of interest and professional practice plans.

**Ethics & Visual Culture Seminar (3 credits):** This seminar explores critical theory as a critique of seeing. The course investigates practices of looking and the production, circulation, and effects of visual images.

**Creative Non-Fiction Writing (3 credits):** In this writing workshop, students learn to write in preparation for the thesis project through a variety of writing exercises, experiments, and reading assignments. Emphasis is placed on experimentation and argument as means to develop a personal vocabulary while initiating a self-directed writing practice.

**Professional Practice (3 credits):** In this seminar, students develop effective professional strategies to successfully pursue a chosen career path upon completion of the Critical Studies program. The course helps students identify opportunities for achieving meaningful career objectives and for making a contribution as a critical citizen. Students learn concrete professional skills: curriculum vitae formatting, email and communication etiquette, letter writing, interviewing, public speaking, job search resources, portfolio development, and how to apply for opportunities (which may include PhD programs, teaching positions, publications, grants, fellowships, internships, residencies, or exhibitions). The objective is to prepare the future Critical Studies graduate to identify, plan, and pursue a strategy for meaningful career development and a rewarding professional life in which their talents translate into a significant critical cultural contribution.

**Internship (3 credits):** Internships provide opportunities for students to translate their academic research interests into real-world professional experience.

**Electives (6 credits):** Students take additional courses in graduate or undergraduate programs at PNCA that support their creative, research, and intellectual interests and prepare them to complete their thesis project.

## IV. Critical Studies Courses Organized by Semester With Descriptions

### Fall Semester 1 = 12 credits

#### **Critical Theory 1: Introduction (3 credits)**

This seminar is an introduction to major concepts and questions in critical theory, beginning with key figures in the Frankfurt School and moving through feminism, critical race theory, and postcolonial criticism. The seminar claims critical theory as a creative project of analysis and exposure radically interested in accountability and the material effects of ideas. Because the course is taught in the context of an art school, we will pay particular attention to images, exploring overlaps and tensions between critical theory and visual studies and investigating the role critical theory and the image can play in transforming institutions and ideologies.

#### **Research for a Creative Practice 1 (3 credits)**

This seminar explores the connection between critical theory and creative research, providing a framework for students to pose questions and incorporate qualitative research methodologies into ongoing inquiry. The emphasis is on research as a process of critical engagement for observing connections between seemingly disparate ideas, planning future actions and strategies, and asking better questions. The seminar will investigate how power (mis)shapes knowledge production and will introduce students to a range of qualitative research methods and examples of creative inquiries that cross the boundaries of discipline and genre. By the end of the class, students will identify the questions that will frame their thesis research and writing, and the methods they will use to investigate those questions.

#### **Ethics & Visual Culture (3 credits)**

This seminar explores critical theory as a critique of seeing. The course models the program's combination of critical theory and creative research and investigates practices of looking and the production, circulation, and effects of visual images. When images can be used both to liberate and to oppress, to save and to kill, what does it mean to be an artist? What does it mean to be a viewer? This seminar investigates how images are used both to construct and resist "otherness." Drawing on visual studies, critical theory, religious studies, performance theory, rhetorical analysis, and ethics, the seminar attends to the responsibilities of image-makers and image consumers; the roles of artists and viewers in an image-saturated culture; the use of images to create difference; and questions about how human beings engage language and images to make and unmake worlds.

#### **Elective from existing PNCA graduate or undergraduate courses (3 credits)**

### Spring Semester 1 = 12 credits

#### **Critical Theory 2: Feminist Theory, Queer Theory, Gender, and Sexuality (3 credits)**

Approaching feminist, womanist, and queer theories as tools for questioning power and analyzing the construction of difference, this seminar examines how lives are valued and devalued through representations of "ideal" and "deviant" bodies. We will critically investigate genders and sexualities as contested categories of social and cultural analysis that influence institutions, economies, cultures, political systems, and bodies. Our texts will be interdisciplinary, intersectional, and international, focusing on how sexism and heterosexism interact with other forms of oppression, including classism, racism, able-ism, size-ism, imperialism, and xenophobia. The seminar will combine required content with opportunities for intense engagement with specialized topics the student chooses to explore more deeply related to their thesis work. Students will be encouraged to connect assigned texts to their own areas of expertise and research interests

#### **Research for a Creative Practice 2 (3 credits)**

This seminar approaches thesis research as a process of revealing, challenging, and dismantling systems of oppression—and reimagining alternatives. By the end of the seminar, students will have written a literature review of relevant theorists, artists, and creative practices that will inform their thesis work and will be prepared to transform core concepts and questions into a novel, researchable project that will make a contribution to the field. In addition, students will develop presentation skills for clearly communicating research ideas with theoretical and methodological rigor to various audiences. At the end of the term during Focus Week, student will make public presentation of their proposed projects, which will be evaluated by a panel composed of faculty, artists, and community stakeholders.

#### **Creative Non-Fiction Writing (3 credits)**

In this writing workshop, students will explore the broad genre of creative nonfiction—from small-scale constraint based writing exercises to the personal essay to academic articles to art reviews to non-narrative poetry and beyond. Through a variety of writing exercises, experiments, and reading assignments, we will play with language, content, and form. Emphasis is placed on experimentation and argument as means to develop a personal vocabulary while initiating a self-directed writing practice. A series of visiting writers will assist us in this work. The course is designed to support graduate students preparing for thesis writing, visual artists who use language and text in their work, and creative writers.

#### **Elective from existing PNCA graduate or undergraduate courses (3 credits)**

## Fall Semester 2 = 12 credits

### **Critical Theory 3: Critical Race Theory and Postcolonial Theory (3 credits)**

This seminar explores Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and LatCrit Theory as analytical frameworks that provide epistemological and methodological approaches to the study of structural inequalities. The seminar takes as its starting point Critical Race Theory's insistence that racism is pervasive, persistent, and ongoing and examines how institutional racism, colonialism, and imperialism are embedded in institutions, laws, practices, and policies. The seminar approaches "race" as a social construction with material effects (racism) and investigates the roles language, images, and other forms of cultural production play in racism, (de)colonization, and resistance movements. The seminar will combine required content with opportunities for intense engagement with specialized topics the student chooses to explore more deeply related to their thesis work. Students will be encouraged to connect assigned texts to their own areas of expertise and research interests.

### **Thesis Writing 1 (6 credits)**

This thesis workshop seminar is intended to support students as they complete and defend a successful master's thesis for the Critical Studies program. The thesis (30-50 pages) will be both critical and constructive; that is, it should reveal, challenge, and dismantle systems of oppression, while also reimagining possible ways forward. The course will provide students with opportunities to present, refine, and receive feedback on their written work. Regular reviews of drafts will occur in a combination of writing workshops, assigned critical friends groups, and meetings with the professor throughout the semester. Each student will be provided with an additional mentor with expertise in their area of investigation. Final thesis work will be presented to a panel of faculty, artists, and community stakeholders at the start of the spring semester.

### **Professional Practice (3 credits)**

In this seminar, students develop effective professional strategies to successfully pursue a chosen career path upon completion of the Critical Theory program. The course helps students identify opportunities for achieving meaningful career objectives and for making a contribution as a critical citizen. Students learn concrete professional skills: curriculum vitae formatting, email and communication etiquette, letter writing, interviewing, public speaking, job search resources, portfolio development, and how to apply for opportunities (which may include PhD programs, teaching positions, publications, grants, fellowships, internships, residencies, or exhibitions). The objective is to prepare the future Critical Studies graduate to identify, plan and pursue a strategy for meaningful career development and a rewarding professional life in which their talents translate into a significant critical cultural contribution.

## Spring Semester 2 = 9 credits

### **Thesis Writing 2: Preparing for Publication (6 credits)**

Due to the fact that so much graduate writing ends up gathering dust on library shelves or serving as doorstops, this workshop is designed to help students prepare their thesis work for publication in the world. At the beginning of the semester, students will present and defend their completed thesis paper to a panel composed of faculty, artists, and community stakeholders. In addition to evaluating the thesis work, the panel will also help students determine the next shape(s) their thesis work should take and the best venues for its distribution. The form of publication will depend on the student's area of interest and professional practice plans—perhaps an essay for *Artforum*, articles for peer-reviewed academic journals, a mission statement and business plan for a non-profit, a series of critical art essays, a community manifesto, a zine, or something else entirely.

### **Internship & Seminar (3 credits)**

Working with BridgeLab, students will design a credit-bearing internship. To get the most out of their internships, students will meet in a bi-weekly seminar to make meaning of their experiences, interrogate the relationship between internships and their thesis work, and develop future plans for critical and engaged work in the world.

## V. Goals and Objectives

The goal of the MA in Critical Studies is to produce creative critical thinkers prepared to address pressing contemporary issues located at the intersection of visual art and critical theory. Graduates of the program develop the research, writing, and communication skills necessary for rigorously investigating forces shaping contemporary cultural production with imagination, creativity, and collaboration.

### Critical Inquiry

- › Master critical theory as a creative project of analysis and exposure radically interested in accountability and the material effects of ideas
- › Write clearly and persuasively
- › Approach theory with confidence, flexibility, and well-informed skepticism
- › Think clearly, carefully, and critically

### World View

- › Develop an understanding of how critical theory's questions/concerns/theories influence their own research interests
- › Analyze the material effects of ideas
- › Expose, critique, and transform oppressive ideologies

### Professional Practice

- › Demonstrate advanced individual and collaborative abilities to design and complete research projects
- › Develop excellence in qualitative research methodology
- › Communicate ideas effectively in written, oral, and visual forms
- › Develop postgraduate professional practice and collaborative skills
- › Document writing and research projects in a digital portfolio
- › Apply for grants, internships, and fellowships

### Research for Creative Practice

- › Read, comprehend, and critically analyze texts from a variety of disciplines
- › Complete interdisciplinary research project that is accountable to community stakeholders
- › Reshape academic thesis work for publication so the research is outward facing and relevant to a variety of audiences, while also making a contribution to the field
- › Claim research as a process of critical engagement and creative practice

## VI. Methods Of Evaluation

Students in the MA in Critical Studies program are evaluated based on their abilities to read, research, write, and communicate, and to apply critical thinking and creative research skills to complex problems that matter. Students' writing and research skills will be evaluated in seminars, first year review, two public presentations of thesis research, and the quality of thesis work as assessed by CT+CR faculty and community stakeholders.

### First Year Review

Students will meet individually with the Chair of the Critical Studies program in the middle of the second semester of the program. Before the meeting, students will submit a self-evaluation and a portfolio of written and creative work completed during the first year of study that represents their best work, progress, and challenges. The Chair and the student will then meet to: discuss the portfolio; identify strengths and areas for growth; evaluate performance in classes and as a member of the community; discuss progress on the thesis project; and chart a plan for completing coursework and the thesis project.

### Thesis Proposal Review & Evaluation

At the end of the first year, during Spring Focus Week, students will make public presentations of their proposed thesis questions and projects, which will be evaluated by a panel composed of faculty, artists, and community stakeholders.

### Thesis Review & Evaluation

Final thesis work will be presented to a panel of faculty, artists, and community stakeholders at the start of the final spring semester. Because students will complete their academic thesis work at the end of the fall semester, this panel will be an opportunity both to defend the thesis work and to discuss possible future venues for publication/exhibition. The panel will help students determine the next shape(s) their thesis work should take and the best venues for its distribution.



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