

Making Research:

An Analysis of Arts-Based Practices in the Academic Process, A Case Study of *Methods of Inscription*

BY KETZIA SHERMAN

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Abstract: Researching within the field of fashion and the body means working very closely with the artistic community including fashion designers, illustrators, and visual artists. Despite this, research on the subject rarely utilizes arts within the research project. This paper aims to analyze a successful application of arts-based research practices within scholarly research. The project in question, *Methods of Inscription*, utilizes an arts-based research approach to explore the tattoo experience within a Canadian context. The body of work, developed for exhibition, combines primary and secondary research with artistic exploration to visualize the collective experience of tattooed individuals. The ways in which we understand tattooing and body adornment are directly linked within the study of fashion. Both visual art forms change the appearance of the body, consequently effecting one's interaction with the world around them. The study of both fashion and tattoos can only be achieved through the use of an interdisciplinary research method, which acknowledges both visual outcome and lived experience. This paper will outline the significant writings used to support and analyze arts-based research practices, the methodology used in the creation of *Methods of Inscription*, as well as an analysis of the created artefacts, and the knowledge that they embody.

KEYWORDS

- arts-based research
- body modification
- textile art
- illustration
- tattoo

Arts-based research is the combination of conventional research methods with artistic studio practice. The central premise of this theory is that clarity and meaning are able to occur when ideas, concepts, or information are transformed into visual images or experiences (Marshall 23; Solso). This paper will serve as an analysis of the arts-based research process in regards to the creation of *Methods of Inscription*, an illustrative body of work that I developed for exhibition in 2017, investigating the tattoo experience within a Canadian context. Tattooing throughout history has always been an important aspect of visual culture; indelible markers of identities and communities. Tattooing has permeated both the fashion industry, as well as mainstream media and academia. WGSN (*Worth Global Style Network*) features tattoo blogs for designer inspiration (WGSN), celebrities embrace tattoo culture, and museums highlight tattoo-themed exhibitions (Friedman, "Spectacle Over Scholarship"). However, frequently the primary representation of tattoos in mainstream media and research has been of the images inscribed in the skin, rather than the experience of those being tattooed (Friedman, "The Melodramatic Nostalgia of Tattoo Reporting").

Therefore, the goal of *Methods of Inscription* was to utilize research on the tattoo experience, and visualize this research using pictorial illustration, while avoiding the visualization of any images of tattoos or tattooed individuals.

From a research standpoint, the body of work aimed to envision the collective experience of tattooing within a Canadian context by determining common themes within historical and contemporary accounts of the tattoo process. In this analysis, I will outline the significant writings used to support and analyze arts-based research practices, the methodology used in the creation of *Methods of Inscription*, as well as an analysis of the created artefacts. While the focus of this research is tattoos, it can be transferred and contextualized within the framework of fashion. Both the fashion industry and tattoo industry utilize art forms that change the appearance of the body as well as modifying the experience of the individual in day-to-day life.

To wear specific clothing is to change not only one's image, but may also effect one's posture, comfort, self-esteem, and interaction with the world around them. We "fashion" our bodies using clothing, jewellery, and tattoos to fit a specific appearance in order to fit within a social order or construct (Entwistle 25). To study fashion or tattooing through the lens of image analysis is therefore only understanding a single aspect of its significance. Utilizing an interdisciplinary arts-based research approach, while still narrowing its focus, has the potential to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Arts-based research is distinct in its use of both studio practice and visual images (Marshall 24). Artistic process is the factor that distinguishes studio-based research from other discipline-based arts inquiries such as those in art history, anthropology, or cultural studies, where images serve as focal points of analysis (Sullivan 795). In practice-based inquiry, analysis of images is only a part of a reflective process; the creation of images is the primary mode of inquiry (795).

For the purpose of this body of work, I define arts-based research as the concurrent use of conventional research methods with artistic practice to inform the creation of an artistic artefact. Arts-based methodologies utilize experiential research to develop knowledge; as such, it is a fitting framework when specifically researching physical experiences.

In conventional research, the theory is that making is a consequence of thinking, such as in the case of scientific experimentation. It is done to solve a problem or to answer a question. In contrast, practice-led research uses making as the driving force behind the research — it is therefore a method of developing arguments and understanding (Mäkelä 159).

The difference, however, is that artistic research is a mode of research not focused purposefully on generating “expert knowledge,” but specifically on expressing experimental knowledge (Slager 2).

Both the process of inquiry and critical dissemination are equally essential parts of the arts-based research method (Mäkelä 159). Practice-led research manifests the study through the production of artefact, implying that as an object of experience, the creative product is just as important as the knowledge embodied within it (159). Emphasizing the use of making as a method to support understanding justifies the creation process as an integral step within the “traditional” research process — thus pushing the focus to creation as necessary to research rather than subsequent.

Arts-based research goes by many names: arts-informed methods, art-integrated research, studio-based research, or inquiry and artistic research, all used interchangeably (Eaves 147). These names come from the variety of ways in which a researcher may engage with arts-based research, either to support or engage with a hypothesis, to disseminate information, to assist in the development of concepts and ideas (Marshall 23; Mäkelä 157; O’Donoghue, “Are We Asking the Wrong Questions” 352; Eaves 147), or, in my case, to develop a body of work supported by data.

Learning is the central principle of research, understanding the ways people learn through seeing. “Visualizing and making visual imagery” is critical to any explanation of why art-making qualifies as research (Marshall 23). From a pedagogical perspective, it is understood that diverse modes of learning can inform how one engages with material (Reid 32). In accordance with Reid’s perceptual learning style model, an arts-based perspective may be a solution to appeal to individuals who require visual, auditory, or kinesthetic methodologies when engaging with new material (Karthigeyan and Nirmala 135). For some, clarity and meaning are only able to occur when ideas, concepts, or information are transformed into visual images or experiences (Marshall 23; Arnheim).

The primary differentiation between arts-based research methodologies is the author's chosen justification for the importance of the research method. Some emphasize artefact or the process of creation (Mäkelä 157), others source methods of inquiry or learning (Eisner 15). The definition of arts-based research that I utilize is a combination of multiple theories and methodologies, suited to my research.

My arts-based practice placed an emphasis on goal setting as an integral part of the research development.

I set two goals to consider while developing a body of work: First, to explore the meaning of the tattoo process through illustrative means designed for public exhibition; second, to visually capture the physical feeling of tattooed flesh, highlighting the diverse lived experiences of tattooed individuals.

With these goals in mind, I am able to develop work that is simultaneously exploratory, experimental, and focused. In order to fulfill the research intentions, I created a three-segment approach in which additional research could occur concurrently with the artistic practice. These segments include the conducting of primary and secondary research, material exploration, and concept generation, and the making of final images.

Segment One: Research

Tattooing has existed throughout human history and, as a practice, it has evolved both in technique, style, and cultural significance (Deter-Wolf and Diaz-Granados). Analyzing the evolution of the practice reveals common themes that occur through history, regardless of time or culturally-specific norms. It also demonstrates how shifts within cultures affect tattooing practices. Academic research on the history of tattooing in Canada is primarily based on ethnographic texts, some archeological evidence, and few accounts of Indigenous oral histories (Friedman "The World Atlas of Tattoo"; Laumann; Roe). Most of the documentation of tattooing in early Canada comes from accounts and images provided by those of European heritage who encountered them (Friedman, "The World Atlas of Tattoo" 16). It is important to note that these documentations may have been exaggerated or downplayed and are subject to the perceptions of the person who recorded them (17).

The creation of tattoos in early Canada involved the use of natural materials, such as wood, bone, and various pigments. These precolonial tattoos were applied as a form of communication, to signal community, offer medicine, healing, or protection, commemorate bravery, and enhance beauty.

Tattoos acted as an embodiment of strength, fear, affiliation, mystery, and religion (Galliot et al. 112; Friedman, “The World Atlas of Tattoo” 18). Many early colonists to North America participated in ceremonial tattooing as a form of adoption into the local Indigenous communities (Friedman, “The World Atlas of Tattoo” 18). Some colonists took inspiration from the local culture and received Western-style tattoos that reflected European traditions, such as religious crosses (18).

Sailors would trade tattoos as souvenirs of cross-cultural travel, much like a passport (18). Many settlers entering the country brought with their own tattooing traditions of marking names, memories, and religious symbols (16). By the late 1700s, as Europeans took over the land, Indigenous tattooing traditions were forced into near extinction — with the exception of remote parts of the northwest coast and arctic shores (Friedman, “The World Atlas of Tattoo” 16; Krutak). Meanwhile, the European tattooing traditions continued within Canadian borders, enhanced by new technology and cross-cultural adaptation and theft. Around the turn of the twentieth century, tattooing shifted into a professional industry, with trained artists opening shops in urban areas. The introduction of the electric tattoo machine in Canadian shops in 1916 made the process faster, and stencilled designs provided the growing industry the opportunity to become an aesthetic movement (Friedman, “The World Atlas of Tattoo” 22). From the early 1900s through the 1960s, the academic community, particularly “scientific-racist criminology writers” (22), began to connect tattooing with primitivism and criminal activity, bringing the reputation of tattooing to an all-time low. However, the proliferation of tattoo studios continued to grow in urban areas. Montreal, Halifax, Toronto, and Vancouver became central hubs for tattooing (23). The growth and popularity of counterculture movements from the 1960s onwards positively transformed the reputation of tattoos and brought them into the mainstream.

Young adults of all genders began getting tattoos to “permanently memorialize their radical and transgressive nature” (26; Brake). New, improved tattoo machines allowed for more diverse artistic styles to be represented, appealing to middle-class populations, college students, and other groups who had not been tattooed before (26).

Ritual and spirituality still has a place in today’s tattoo culture, however much of the tattoo industry is more in keeping with fashion consumerism. Counterculture and rebellion are commodified and capitalized, sold as t-shirts and accessories, piercings and tattoos. Toronto- and Vancouver-based tattoo chain Adrenaline posts billboards, marketing their services with the promise of self-expression and the opportunity to “make your mark” (Adrenaline Studios). These qualities are not negative but do reveal a shift in value systems regarding tattoos in the context of our history. Tattooing has shifted from a narrative of community building to one of fashionable self-expression (Friedman, “The World Atlas of Tattoo” 26).

While I was able to work with a fairly wide base of historical knowledge on tattooing practices, few current studies fit the requirements of Canadian-focused primary research on tattoo experience.

Specifically, I required first-hand accounts of individuals being tattooed, which did not rely upon the investigation of the imagery being tattooed. To bridge this gap, I developed an anonymous online questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to gather personal stories from a diverse group of individuals, focusing on the method and meaning behind their tattoo experiences. The survey questions were designed to lead the participants through their tattoo journeys, including idea conception, choosing a studio or artist, how the tattoo was applied, and their perception throughout.

At no point did the participants reveal the imagery they chose to embody. As such, I removed visual distraction from the analysis, focusing instead on motivational factors and participants' internalized journeys. This allowed participants' experiences to be analyzed as a whole, and not divided by tattoo genre.

The study conducted was small in scale and in future research would benefit from revisions. The only requirement for participation was Canadian residency with the expectation of a larger study that could encapsulate a broad set of perspectives across Canada. Due to the timeframe, fifty responses were acquired, primarily sourced from a convenience sample of friends, colleagues, and Ontario-based online tattoo forums. The resulting respondents, while anonymous, were likely very similar in race, age, education, and economic status, and primarily from within Ontario. Proof of Canadian residency was not required, therefore relying on a trust system for screening responses. The resulting research therefore is much more limited in scope than originally intended, however it did provide reasonable data that aligned with secondary research conducted.

At the end of each survey, participants were asked to sum up their tattoo experience in one word. "Beauty," "memory," "optimism," "God," "heritage," and "freedom" paint pictures of meaning, without ever viewing the imagery itself. These words categorized experiences into broad motivational factors.

From all the responses gathered as well as the descriptions within related secondary sources, common themes emerged that link tattoo experiences today with descriptions of tattooing historically. These four key themes represent the common motivational factors behind tattoos including: aesthetics, spirituality, belonging, and the self.

The terms are defined below:

“Aesthetics” describes any experience that is led by the motivation of beauty, trends, or imagery. Often individuals may describe their tattoos as having no “meaning,” or that the tattoo was obtained “because I liked it” (Sherman). “Spirituality” refers to the act of being tattooed in order to connect with religious or spiritual values, a god, the earth, or the human body. This category is differentiated by the connection to a higher purpose. It can be described with words like “Blessed, trust, God, strength, and resilience” (Sherman). “Belonging” is defined by the seeking of connection to a person or group of peoples. These tattoos are frequently a reminder of love or affiliation and provide a sense of self through the connection to another. The final category is defined as “the self.” This includes motivations that centre around self-fulfillment, self-realization, and self-expression. It may be described as “freedom, identity, introspection, journey, purpose or autonomy” (Sherman).

Segment Two: Material Exploration/Idea Generation

The four themes of aesthetics, spirituality, belonging, and the self became the base of my artistic exploration. In combination with historical accounts, these four themes allowed for a more diverse understanding of tattoo experience from which I was able to develop a visual body of work. From the beginning, I set myself personal goals as an artist: to engage in material exploration and artistic process within the context of arts-based research. *Methods of Inscription* blended the use of pictorial illustration and physical sensation. The work created aimed to utilize textiles to add a sense of physicality to the illustrative artwork, incorporating differing methods of artistic application to represent the diverse experiences of tattooed individuals. The use of textiles also hearkens to my background in fashion, and the link between fashion and tattooing as visual body arts.

The methods of creation that I utilized can be analyzed and observed from a phenomenological perspective. Conventionally, phenomenological studies ask the question, “What is the experience of X?” (Blumenfeld-Jones 324). By applying the study of phenomenology to the application of arts-based research, we may further break down distinct steps taken by the artist to develop knowledge and achieve the final body of work (326; Husserl). By dividing the process into iterative stages, we may develop and improve the language for speaking about arts-based research, contributing in a public manner to the development of the field (322).

In order to contribute to a clearer understanding of arts-based research, I observe my own practice reflexively, dividing it into the following phenomenological steps of analysis and making: immersing, determining worth and artistic potential, assessment of rightness, and objective observation.

While these stages may sometimes occur in a linear order, they are more often concurrent practices.

The process of creation used in *Methods of Inscription* is as follows:

1. Immersion

Immersion is typically conducted at the beginning of the research process. It involved conducting creative brainstorming concurrently with the research process. As I focused on the data, I allowed myself to loosely sketch and explore related imagery. This brainstorming process is about freedom of mental exploration, in order to build a foundation of imagery, which may later be refined. This stage is not precise and is not driven by a finished concept. Through the immersion process, I was able to identify key factors that “defined” my theme and explored avenues in which this theme could be demonstrated (Blumenfeld-Jones 328). To develop the artwork in this project, I immersed myself in the academic research, sketching rough ideas based on statements, theories, and quotes.

2. Determining worth and artistic potential

Determining builds on the immersion process. Having imagined and sketched some rough ideas, this stage allowed me to refine the concepts based on their value to my research and their artistic potential.

This often includes exploring small mockups, making notes, and evaluating each concept in relation to pre-set goals to decide which are the most valuable to move forward with. Illustrations from this stage are relatively well-defined and may include colour.

3. Repetition and exploration

In order to refine a concept, I firmly believe in the repetition and exploration stage. This stage is usually a response to a particularly successful sketch from stage two. The successful drawing serves as inspiration for further sketching, aiming to apply the concept and refine the technical drawing, develop poses, explore material, and technique, etc. This stage occurred for every individual piece of artwork. It can be the longest process of the artistic creation, involving not just sketching but creating refined and finished mockups. This step was used extensively to develop a visual language based on materiality.

4. Assessment of rightness

Arts-based research is heavily reliant on the maker's perspective. It relies on what is referred to as "designerly ways of knowing" or the forms of knowledge particular to the awareness and abilities of a designer (Mäkelä 158). This is, in essence, the artist's instinct, their awareness of how to create based on skills acquired from previous acts of creation. In order to utilize these skills, artists/creators must engage in reflexive arts practices; meaning research methodologies that look inwards, valuing the researcher's personal, subjective perspective. By utilizing reflexive practices, the artist may inspire the experiential and pluralistic responses from both themselves and their audience. The responses may aid to revise, reframe, relate, or reevaluate, while allowing for interpretation, experimentation, learning, and narrative reconstruction (Eaves 155). This is relevant to connect research and lived experience in a range of settings and can aid

in the communication of the diversity and complexity of human experience (Bulter-Kisber qtd. in Knowles and Cole 57).

The assessment stage of the arts-based research process can occur after the creation of a sizeable body of exploratory work as well as throughout the development process. This stage made use of my knowledge as an artist to assess ideas and refine them, removing unsuccessful designs and further exploring more successful works. This stage allowed me to create a cohesive body of work that followed a consistent artistic voice. Based on my own assessment, I returned to a previous stage or moved forward to a completed piece of artwork.

5. Objective observation

It is integral to understand how works of art may be interpreted by the audience and how this interpretation will relate back to the research. Semiotics is used to analyze the larger implications and varied interpretations of work. Semiotics, sometimes called semiology, is a theory of signs that is concerned with the ways in which words, images, and objects are vehicles for meaning (Sturken and Cartwright 459). Every time we interpret images around us, whether consciously or not, we are using the tools of semiotics to understand its significance or meaning (27). Roland Barthes' model of semiotics introduces two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. In his theory, the sign is comprised of a signifier (a sound, written word, or image) and the signified (the concept evoked by the word or image) (29). Barthes' theory forms the framework for analysis of my completed body of work. Using semiotic analysis allows the artwork to be analyzed from an objective lens, utilizing visual signifiers to create deliberate meaning.

The objective observation stage considers semiotics to assess the final value of the art. The artwork is subject to interpretation, ideally revealing hidden meanings not immediately visible to the maker. This stage validates the artwork or leads to a reevaluation of the design in order to translate a more accurate message. Objective observation is done both by the artist considering alternative perspectives as well as through the acceptance of outside opinions, by an advisor or unbiased observer. The audience is also considered during this stage, ensuring the intended meaning may be translated to viewer interpretation or discussion.

Segment Three: Making a Final Body of Work

Based on the above stages of artistic creation and exploration, I developed a complete body of work that achieved the research goals. The pieces were intended for exhibition; therefore, all development was based on the linear format in which the pieces would be displayed. The body of work includes eighteen individual artworks, divided in to two sections.

The first, titled *Motivation*, is a collection of sixteen hands illustrated on woods, leathers, furs, skins, and fabrics to signify the meanings and motivations behind tattoos.

The second, titled *Internal and External*, is a diptych comprised of two four-foot tall pieces that illustrate the contradiction between personal and private in an individual tattoo journey.

Once complete, an analysis is conducted through an examination of the imagery displayed, and a semiotic analysis of the relationship between the two goals of this artistic research — to visually demonstrate tattoo meaning and to capture the physical experience of being tattooed from multiple perspectives. The analysis is broken in to two sections correlating to the works of art, and further into subsections dissecting the imagery and materials chosen (**see fig. 1**).



FIGURE 1

9" x 9". Ketzia Sherman, *Motivation*, cotton, animal hide, wood in bamboo hoops.

Taking tattoo imagery out of the context of tattoo research creates a dilemma. How can one illustrate tattooing without actually depicting tattoos?

In order to achieve this, the work focused on imagery related to the physical sensation of tattooing, the piercing/cutting of the skin; it emphasized the flesh and the act of modification and adornment.

The four motivations revealed through my research, including aesthetic, spirituality, belonging, and the self, served as the groundwork for the piece entitled *Motivation*. This artwork depicts four sets of illustrated hands with gestures that are representative of each theme.



FIGURE 2

9" x 9". Ketzia Sherman, *Aesthetic*, pony hair.

Aesthetic

Hands are held with model-like delicacy, caressing the arm. The gesture is indicative of imagery often seen within the fashion industry, conveying a sense of conventional beauty (see fig. 2).



FIGURE 3

9" x 9". Ketzia Sherman, *Spirituality*, embroidered cotton.

Spirituality

Hands are depicted as up-reaching, seeking a higher power while fingers are outspread, conveying yearning (**see fig. 3**).



FIGURE 4

9" x 9". Ketzia Sherman, *Belonging*, Baltic birch.

Belonging

Two hands are connected with pinkies intertwined. This signals a classic image of a pinkie promise, a pact between two individuals (**see fig. 4**).



FIGURE 5

9" x 9". Ketzia Sherman, *The Self*, pig skin.

The Self

Hands are clenched in the centre as if holding oneself close. This image could be viewed with numerous interpretations of victory, tension, or even anxiety, emotions that are each internal and related to the self (see fig. 5).

Each gesture is repeated four times, creating a grid of sixteen images. The repetition plays upon materiality, using material exploration to demonstrate the differentiation of experiences. The same image is embroidered into cotton, etched into leather, and burnt into fur, pig skin, and wood. The repetition and difference create a narrative in which the same motivations, such as aesthetics, are able to inhabit multiple experiences. Just as two people may tattoo identical images, their journeys and experiences to receive them remain individual. Six materials were used in the collection of artwork, ensuring a randomness or unpredictability in the grid design, while cohesiveness is maintained in the use of muted, natural-coloured surfaces and limited techniques.

From an illustrative perspective, the work uses imagery to lead a discussion about tattooing without directly representing tattoo art — in this case, not showing tattoos at all. Therefore, the illustrations relate to the human body and the flesh.

Hands were chosen, rather than assorted body parts, for their expressive and personal quality. Hands have the potential to be anonymous and relatable, a placeholder for any body or any person. Using hands allows the audience to relate the images before them to their own flesh, their own body.

Hands also relate to language and communication — we use them to express or emphasize meaning, augmenting linguistic expression. Informally, gestures connote emotions and simple meanings. Formally, they can be used to communicate without speech, to form sign-language. Using hands and their innate power to communicate allowed themes to be expressed using visual language rather than text. The positioned hands create meaning but also invite interpretation, much in the same way we may communicate with tattoos.

While the chosen imagery denotes specific meaning, the materials and techniques relate to the skin and the physical sensation of tattooing. Through a process of material exploration, I investigated a variety of material options and methods with which to illustrate. Each method and material was chosen based on its visual impact and unique qualities, discussed below:

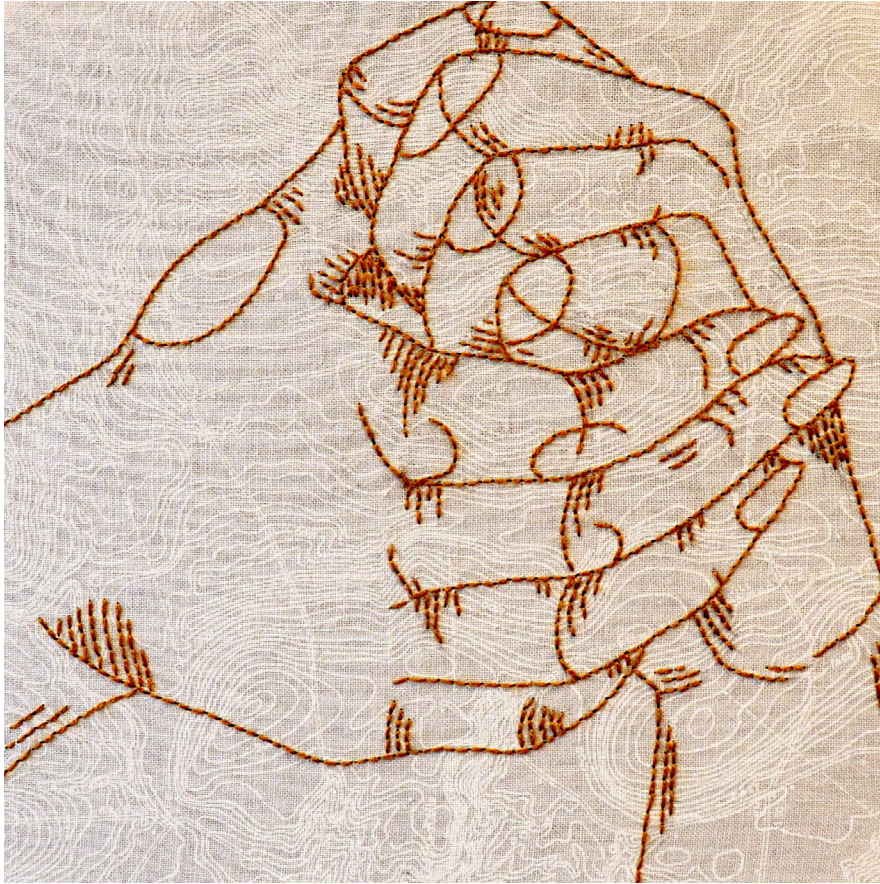


FIGURE 6

Detail of embroidery.
Ketzia Sherman, *Motivation*,
embroidered cotton.

1. Embroidered fabric

The chosen fabric is a printed cotton, depicting a subtle topographic map in cream and white. The map motif is muted; when viewed from afar or at a glance it may appear as a natural material, like a woodgrain or fingerprint. The textural quality created by the printed graphic in connection with the imagery of hands visually references fingerprints and the skin. The colour choices were subtle, gold thread on cream fabric, fitting with the natural colouration of the other pieces. The imagery is embroidered into the fabric, referencing the piercing needles used in tattooing. While the small stitches may slightly interrupt the fluidity of the image, the colour and technique allow for a clearly visible illustration (see fig. 6).



FIGURE 7

Detail of laser-etched Baltic birch. Ketzia Sherman, *Motivation*, Baltic birch.

2. Laser-etched Baltic birch

The woodgrain was chosen in another subtle reference to the flesh, utilizing natural texture to relate to the body. This material was etched using a laser cutter, indelibly altering the surface of the wood. The laser etches with visible precision, but the settings were higher than necessary, burning the edges. The permanent etches visually reference tattooing, creating a clear, if singed, illustration that maintains a similar precision to a skilled tattoo artist. The use of lasers could reference the technological advancement of tattoo machines, but also references the recent adaptation of laser cutters by the body modification community to brand intricate and precise images into the flesh (see fig. 7).



FIGURE 8

Detail of laser-etched pig skin.
Ketzia Sherman, *Motivation*, pig skin.

3. Laser-etched fine pig skin

More than any other fibre, pig skin appears most similar to human flesh. When learning to tattoo, artists test their skills on pig skin due to its likeness to the human body. The colouration and the delicate quality of the skin are emphasized by the still-visible hair follicles, allowing it to appear eerily similar to human skin. I experimented with paint and ink on the fibre to reference tattooing; however, the most effective tool to alter the material was laser cutting. The etching itself was deep enough that areas were burnt away completely, leaving holes along the outlines, held together by minuscule threads of burnt fibre. While incredibly delicate in appearance the fibre holds strong and does not rip, demonstrating the resilience of flesh and visually creating discomfort in relation to perceived pain (see fig. 8).

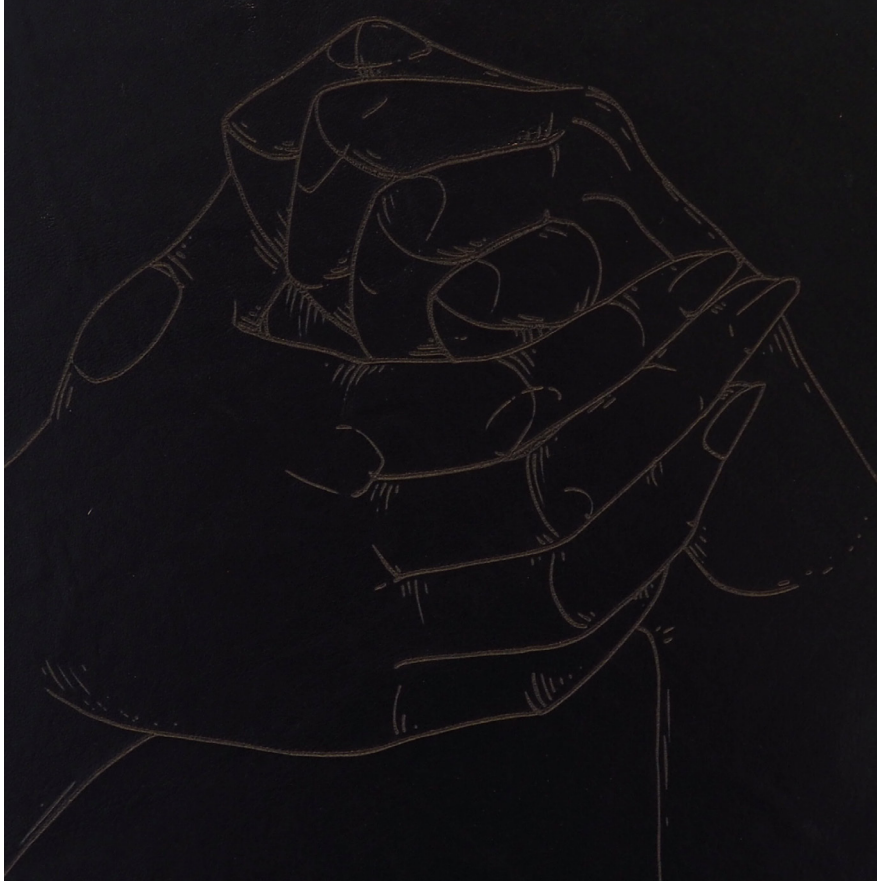


FIGURE 9

Detail of laser-etched lamb skin.
Ketzia Sherman, *Motivation*,
lamb skin.

4. Black lambskin

The black lambskin is by far the subtlest of the materials used in this project. Unlike the other materials in the series, the colour does not change when etched or burned; rather, the image is revealed purely through the creation of texture and the reflection of light. This material relates most closely to the ideal of translating a physical experience. The texture of the etched lambskin against the hand most closely resembles the sensation of a fresh tattoo and the raw, scabbed skin. While in this piece the motivation is less visible, it successfully achieves likeness to a physical sensation (see fig. 9).



FIGURE 10

Detail of laser-etched pony hair.
Ketzia Sherman, Motivation,
pony hair.

5. Etched pony hair

The pony hair is an impactful visual material, the fur coating the leather hide serving as a constant reminder of the animal it was sourced from. The smoke caused by the uneven burning fur creates a subtle image with singed, blurred edges. The burnt image in the fur could have many connotations. There is a clear visual reference to the branding of livestock. It may invoke feelings of animal cruelty or exploitation, particularly in combination with the hand positioning found in *Aesthetic*.

This interplay of image and material is ultimately what may generate conversation and analysis in regards to this artwork. Individually, the images create interplays between illustration and

materiality, emphasizing the process of tattooing the skin and the physical sensations associated with the act. As a collection, the variety of methods, materials, and images display the diversity of experiences associated with tattooing, and how meaning can be altered through subtle changes. The viewer is meant to consider this work as a whole, and, upon moving closer, as individual pieces. For instance, one may comparatively consider the meaning of a visual for spirituality in relation to the material that it was inscribed on, contrasting it with the associations of the same image done on a different material. From both individual and group perspectives, new semiotic analyses may be formed by the audience (**see fig. 10 and fig. 11**).

Tattooing inhabits a strange space between public and private. Tattoos act as a public display of the self, an alliance to a particular social group, and a display of cultural values to the public.

Simultaneously, they act as a deeply personal affirmation of values or experiences. It is this contradiction that inspired *Internal and External*.



FIGURE 11

Large two-piece illustration, 24" x 48". Ketzia Sherman, *Internal and External*, embroidered cotton, laser-etched wood.

While the other pieces focus on diverse experiences and motivations, this work emphasizes a personal experience with tattooing, with a focus on self-reflexivity. The two frames act as mirrors, depicting the silhouette of a figure. Her position changes slightly in each, allowing the illusion of time progression or evolution while maintaining visual flow. The mirror-like quality also serves to demonstrate the two figures as the same person, depicting an individual narrative. The images represent a number of concepts. It reflects upon how we display our bodies both publicly, and privately, and the contradictions this entails. It also references tattoos as the internalization of external factors, the act of permanently embodying an external feeling, image, or emotion.

The material of the images plays an important role in these pieces as well. Both images utilize a different material and artistic medium — embroidery and laser etching. On the right, to represent the external, the figure is embroidered. The embroidery is done on the same fabric as *Motivation*, a subtle topographic map in cream and white embroidered using shades of gold thread and pink accents. The use of embroidery is representative of the concept of external factors, as it is placed on top of and through the fabric, leaving marks but, ultimately, removable (**see fig. 12**).



FIGURE 12

**Detail of embroidery used in *External*.
Ketzia Sherman, *Internal and External*,
embroidered cotton.**

The piece on the left, the internal, is made using laser-etched Baltic birch. The wood is adorned further with reflective gold paint to visually balance the two pieces. The laser creates a subtractive image, embedded within the surface of the wood. The etches are permanent and sit within the material, in this way representing the internalization process within the tattoo experience (see fig. 13).



FIGURE 13

Detail of laser etching used in *Internal*. Ketzia Sherman, *Internal and External*, laser-etched wood.

The imagery focuses on a female figure. Her form is depicted in a lightly detailed silhouette, the outlines of her body being formed only through the relation to a pattern. The female perspective that directs the art is highlighted in this piece, emphasizing femininity in an often hyper-masculine industry. The figure is objectified for the sake of this piece. The audience is being asked to consider her form as a flat design, rather than three-dimensional, encouraging them to experience the textures within the art. The figure as an object is emphasized through the scale of the project. The figures do not fit within the four-foot frames; they are cut off mid-hip and their arms push and extend past the boundaries of the canvas. The larger than life figures utilize scale to further separate the imagery from reality.

The pattern that creates the body is a repeated motif of overlapping flowers. The flower itself may be interpreted as feminine or related to images of tattoos, but the intention of the pattern was merely to signify the broad concept of imagery. While the previous pieces were intended to reflect method and meaning, this piece is about image. To avoid using literal tattoo designs, the flowers were chosen as a placeholder, similar to a wallpaper graphically filling the shape of the body with no illusion of depth or dimension within the imagery — it is meant to appear flat and graphic.

Overall, these two large-scale works invite viewers to spot the differences, and in doing so, create narrative and discussion. Why does the imagery shift from outside the body to within? How does the technique affect this meaning? Why does her body move, rather than remain static? To answer these questions, the viewer must become self-reflexive and try to understand the perspective from their own experience.

Methods of Inscription was displayed in a week-long exhibition at the Black Cat Gallery in Toronto, Ontario in Canada. The exhibition represents a new approach to the dissemination of tattoo research, developed through arts-based research practices. Typical exhibitions on this topic discuss tattooing purely through images of body art, emphasizing visual spectacle over academic content. For example, the Royal Ontario Museum's exhibition in 2016 entitled *Tattoo: Ritual, Identity, Obsession, Art* almost exclusively used reproduction photographs and artworks with

occasional visual artefacts provided by the museum itself. The exhibit was described by tattoo scholars as “a jumbled assortment of tattoo artefacts that ranged from the wonderful to the problematic accompanied by didactic text riddled with content errors” (Friedman, “Spectacle Over Scholarship”).

The focus on imagery and spectacle over scholarly analysis to attract viewers is typical in much of the dialogue surrounding tattoos, so much so that it is almost expected. Thus, the obvious absence of tattoo imagery in *Methods of Inscription* intentionally confounds the expectations of viewers.

By opposing the format typical of tattoo exhibitions, these artworks generate new conversation about how we have come to understand tattooing as a cultural practice.

Discussion with exhibit patrons on opening night revealed an overall successful outcome in terms of the dissemination of the research goals. Through its artistic exploration, my artworks encouraged the viewers to develop individual analysis. Viewers discussed feelings of physical discomfort in contrast with aesthetic appeal. Some were disgusted by the use of fur and leather, others were intrigued. As viewers were permitted to touch the artworks, they discussed how the meanings changed upon interaction. Often, the reaction was most visceral in those without tattoos; one individual stated that they never considered why someone would put themselves through the pain of getting a tattoo, but felt as though they now understood.

Through its use of material and imagery, *Motivation* inspired the audience to contemplate understandings of physicality and the flesh, considering our cultural perceptions of tattoos and the relation this has to practices that modify the skin. The imagery also opens a discussion around meaning, emotion, and psychological motivations. *Internal and External* pushed for the understanding of why imagery might be chosen and the pull to ornament or modify the body.

As a collection, these works push for a greater understanding of tattooing culture, encouraging the audience to form their own conclusion based on individual bias and experience, and the newfound perspectives demonstrated.

The use of arts-based research to engage with diverse learning methods allows this research project to potentially reach a wider audience than a conventional paper, as well as creating a series of artefacts that give voice to multiple perspectives. Ultimately, this study exemplifies how arts-based research methods can be utilized when trying to understand visual culture. Whether fashion, fine arts, body modification, or adornment, arts-based research can provide nuanced understandings of complex topics. While there are many methods that can be implemented to utilize artistic creation in the academic process, I implore all researchers to consider the benefits of arts-based research.

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Author Biography



Ketzia Sherman

Toronto Metropolitan
University

Ketzia Sherman is a Toronto based illustrator, tattooer, and researcher.

She has a Bachelor of Design in Fashion and a Master of Arts in Fashion from Toronto Metropolitan University. Her academic research focuses on using arts to understand and analyze fashion and the body, with an emphasis on body modification and permanent adornment. Ketzia began working in the fashion industry as a fashion illustrator and graphic designer. Her work emphasized the female form, often focusing on adornment and body modification. She is a skilled craftsperson, often utilizing embroidery and textile art within her creations. She has since transitioned into the tattoo industry. As a tattoo artist, her work references historical fashion motifs, textile art, and contemporary illustration. Her work within both the fashion and tattoo industry provide a unique perspective of understanding that she applies to her academic research.

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