

METHODS OF INSCRIPTION: ILLUSTRATING TATTOO METHOD, IMAGE
AND MEANING

by

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Bachelor of Design, Ryerson University, 2015

A MRP presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Program of

Fashion

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2017

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Abstract:

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Methods of Inscription utilizes an arts-based research approach to explore the intersection of method, image and meaning in the tattooing process. The goal of this project is to perceive tattoos from a new perspective, to visualize a complicated relationship between the physical act of being tattooed, the emotional response related, and the interplay with art and imagery.

The first set of illustrated rounds, entitled *Motivation*, visualize the many different experiences of tattooed individuals. Images are repeated on different mediums, emphasizing the diversity of experience. The contrast of branded leathers, painted canvas and embroidered fabric emphasize the differing methods of tattoo application and motivation, while inviting semiotic analysis of imagery versus material. Two large scale illustrations culminate the experience, depicting the artist's personal experience being tattooed. The images represent tattoos as the internalization of external factors. The act of permanently embodying an external feeling, image, or emotion.

Acknowledgments:

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Professor Grahame Lynch for the amazing support throughout this process. My artistic practice has developed tremendously with his invaluable advice, encouragement and dedication to laser-cutting fur.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Henry Navarro as the second reader of this thesis, and I am gratefully for his very valuable comments on this thesis.

I want to thank my family and my friends for providing me with support and encouragement throughout my years of study. For the countless coffee shop writing sessions, proofreading and moral support.

And finally I must thank my mother, who's hands helped bring my art to life, and who's love and support has brought me to where I am today.

This accomplishment would not have been possible without them. Thank you.

Ketzia Sherman

Table of Contents:

Title page.....	i
Author’s Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
vi. List of Figures.....	vi
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Research background.....	3
3. Literature Review.....	4
Tattoo History.....	4
Theoretical Framework.....	8
4. Methodology.....	15
Primary Research.....	15
Material Exploration. Idea Generation.....	19
Making a Final Body of Work.....	22
5. Creative Work.....	24
Motivation.....	24
Internal & External.....	32
6. Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography.....	38

List of Figures:

FIGURE 1: Adrenaline Advertisement.....	8
FIGURE 2: Motivation. 9x9". Cotton, Animal Hide, Wood in Bamboo hoops.....	24
FIGURE 3: Aesthetic. 9x9". Pony Hair.....	25
FIGURE 4: Spirituality. 9x9". Embroidered Cotton.....	25
FIGURE 5: Belonging. 9x9". Baltic Birch.....	26
FIGURE 6: The Self. 9x9". Pig Skin.....	26
FIGURE 7: Detail of Embroidery.....	28
FIGURE 8: Detail of Laser Etched Baltic Birch.....	29
FIGURE 9: Detail of Laser Etched Pig Skin.....	29
FIGURE 10: Detail of Laser Etched Lamb Skin.....	30
FIGURE 11: Detail of Laser Etched Pony Hair.....	31
FIGURE 12: Internal & External. 24"x48". Embroidered Cotton, Laser Etched Wood.....	32
FIGURE 13: Detail of Embroidery used in External.....	33
FIGURE 14: Detail of Laser Etching used in Internal.....	34

Chapter 1: Introduction

This project began in response to the common discourse around the tattooed body. The art form of tattooing is a hot topic in the media, it is sensationalized in news, television and even museums (Friedman, "Spectacle Over Scholarship"; Friedman, "The Melodramatic Nostalgia of Tattoo Reporting"). It is likely that we all know someone who is tattooed, often a fairly large portion of our social circles. As of 2006, approximately 40% of American adults were tattooed (Laumann 413). Perceptions are shaped by this discourse, yet most of the conversation around tattooing emphasizes the visual aspects, the designs themselves. Questions like 'is it art?' 'is it beautiful?', 'will you regret it?' dominate the conversation (413). This isn't necessarily a bad thing. When observing tattooing traditions, the imagery does stand out as the most distinctive feature; shapes, patterns and subject matter reflect and define cultural identity in a visual way. However, as an artist, I felt there was an overemphasis on visual components. As with any artistic medium, it is not just the final image that is significant, but the methods used to create it.

Methods of Inscription utilizes an arts-based research approach to explore the intersection of method, image, and meaning in the tattooing process. Arts-based research is the combination of traditional 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). This framework has allowed me to visualize — through the making of a body of artwork — the complexity of tattooing from the physical sensation to the internalized emotional response. This research aims to envisage the collective experience of tattooing by determining common themes within historical and contemporary accounts of the tattoo process. The study is focused on the intersection of method, image and

meaning within the tattoo experience—that is, the physical sensation, the emotional response and the visual outcome.

The resulting body of work investigates tattooing from the perspective of experience, rather than imagery. In order to do so, I have chosen to ignore visual cues of tattoo and illustration styles, and focus instead on the lived experience. No matter the century, the basic tattooing method is the same—embedding ink into the skin using sharp implements. Focusing on the similarities and differences within this process may help define new understanding.

Chapter 2: Research Background

Considering the widespread practice and appeal of tattoos, there is comparably little scholarly work on the subject. While the discipline has existed for thousands of years, research on tattoos is primarily from the last century, with a distinctive rise in the 1970s onwards. The lack of interest in illustrative bodily ornamentation stems from an overall disinterest by the academic community in any form of ornamentation deemed to be primitive, artisanal, and impersonal (Galliot et al. 27). However, studies show that there is no known society that does not practice tattooing, be it permanent or temporary (11). Canada, in particular, is a prime example of the widespread practice, as a home to hundreds of ethnicities, nationalities, and rich social histories. It's varied multicultural landscape is ideal in terms of exhibiting the cross-cultural art of tattooing, and the evolution of the practice from early tribal tradition to a contemporary urban art form.

Thus, the goal of this project was to perceive tattoos from a new perspective by visualizing a complex relationship between the physical act of being tattooed, the emotional response related, and the interplay with art and imagery. The supporting literature review is comprised of two key parts — the first part provides an analysis of historical and contemporary tattoo practices considering the evolution of cultural perceptions over time, and the second provides analysis of arts-based research practices that contribute to a framework for the creative process.

The methodology of my process will be further analyzed, considering research techniques and an observation of my creative practices based on the framework. Finally, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the artifacts created including the artistic intentions and the likely audience interpretations.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The review of literature for this project involves two key areas. First, an examination of tattooing from a historical and contemporary perspective to further understand the subject matter in relation to the artistic practice. Second, an analysis of arts-based research approaches that have contributed to the development of a framework for the creative process used in the development of this body of work.

Tattoo History:

Tattooing has existed throughout human history, as a practice, it has evolved both in technique, style, and cultural significance (Deter-Wolf & 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.

The history of tattooing within Canada must be reconciled between the past, a history of colonialism and appropriation, and the present, a national identity defined by the idea of multiculturalism and acceptance. When studying tattoo history, it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge the effects of cultural appropriation, especially in a Canadian context (Udy). European colonialists have inflicted immeasurable damage to the Indigenous people of Canada, with an aboriginal policy of aggressive assimilation and destruction (Udy). At no point in this research do I intend to appropriate or claim expertise in indigenous culture, rather I acknowledge their significant contribution to the history of tattooing in Canada and the world.

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.

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). Our best early accounts of tattooing come from archeological evidence which date the practice and hint at how the tattoos may have been applied, and what they may have meant within the culture. For example, the oldest known archaeological evidence of tattooing in Canada is a 3,500-year-old Paleo-Inuit maskette from Devon Island, Nunavut. The carved face exhibits linear tattoos, similar to those worn recently by Inuit women (Galliot et al. 112). The creation of tattoos in early Canada involved the use of natural materials, such as wood, bone and various pigments. Scholars believe these materials had supernatural or spiritual significance in the indigenous communities (Krutak 15). The transformation of these objects into tattoo instruments and designs may have formed a significant spiritual relationship between humans and nature (15). These pre-colonial tattoos were applied as a form of communication, to signal community, offer medicine, healing or protection, commemorating bravery, and enhancing beauty. They were an embodiment of strength, fear, affiliation, mystery and religion (Galliot et al. 112; Friedman, “The World Atlas of Tattoo” 18).

Throughout history, indigenous groups in North America have used various techniques to inscribe the skin. Paul Roe, a Washington-based tattoo artist and researcher, discusses the different methods of tattooing divided into three categories: piercing, puncturing and cutting. Piercing involves an object being pushed into the skin, sometimes being drawn out through the same hole. It is generally, but not exclusively, done at an acute angle to the skin. This requires

less force to penetrate the stacked cell structure allowing for a faster motion with less resistance. Puncturing is when an object is pushed through the skin's surface with the primary difference compared to piercing being the angle applied and the force needed to penetrate the skin. Puncturing is done at a 90-degree angle and requires significantly more force and resulting in far more pain overall. Cutting the skin (including scratching or scraping) divides the surface cell structure and gives access to the underlying cells. The flesh has a tendency to resist an object cutting through it and 'drag' may slow this method down. The pigment must come into the equation at some point and this can be before, during or after the skin surface is breached depending on the method used. Each of these techniques can be achieved using a variety of tools. For example, the Inuit tradition uses bone sewing needles with thread dipped in ink, while Haida women used clusters of needles attached to stick to pierce totems into their flesh (Krutak 137; Deter-Wolf & Diaz-Granados).

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 (16). Meanwhile, the European tattooing traditions continued within Canadian borders, enhanced by new technology and cross-cultural adaptation and theft. Around the turn of the 20th

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 (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 counter-culture movements from the 1960s onwards positively transformed the reputation of tattoos and brought it into the mainstream. Young adults of all genders began getting tattoos to “permanently memorialize their radical and transgressive nature” (26). 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).

While there certainly is still a place for ritual and spirituality in today’s tattoo culture, much of the 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” (See Figure 1).



FIGURE 1: Adrenaline Advertisement

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). Nicolas Brulez, a photographer who documents tattooed individuals defined tattoos today as embodying “pleasure, seduction and youth” (11). These three words elucidate tattooing as an art form reserved for the young and trendy. While tattooing is most popular amongst young people, this definition disregards perspectives of older generations or those who choose tattoos for spiritual or devotional reasons. As a descriptor of tattooing, these words do not reflect the myriad of reasons tattoos were administered in the past, nor does it reflect my own experience today, and it raises the question, ‘how can we consolidate the past and present of tattooing practice?’

Theoretical Framework:

As my work focuses primarily on physical experiences, I believe it is integral to work within a framework that utilizes a form of experiential research. This analysis will therefore address the use and effectiveness of art in research, the challenges faced in arts-based research and how to understand the final artifact with regard to my own study.

The theories associated with arts-based research go by many names: arts-informed methods, art-integrated research, studio-based research, or inquiry and artistic research, all used interchangeably (Eaves 147). The primary differentiation between arts-based research theories is the author's chosen justification for the importance of the research method. Some emphasize artefact, or the process of creation, others source methods of inquiry or learning; it is for this reason that a framework for arts-based research cannot be determined from just one source, rather it is created by combining multiple theories that pertain to the research project in question.

Arts-based research can be broken into two major components: 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).

Understanding the rationale begins with an examination of art as an educational tool and its connection to various forms of learning. Learning is the central principle of research, therefore an understanding of 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). 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 (23). Elliot Eisner, the first to propose a place for the arts in educational research, argued: "the arts provide access to forms of experience that are either un-securable or much more difficult to secure through other representational forms" (11). This idea that art provides a kind of deeper understanding unable to

be obtained by traditional research is common among many theorists. O'Donoghue explains that the arts have the unique ability to contribute particular insights into, and enhance understandings of phenomena which are unable to be learned, or represented otherwise ("Doing and Disseminating" 2).

The key strength of arts-based research is its connection to visual learning. There is a specific nature and advantage of utilizing visual experience in research. Almost all theories on visual culture agree that vision and visual imagery play a dominant role in shaping consciousness in the contemporary world (Marshall 25). It can be compared to a language, without the necessity of sequentiality or shared terminology. Vision, and visual images, while lacking precision, can use patterns, space and forms to demonstrate meaning (26). This is especially true today, in a pictorial age in which we are constantly surrounded by images. The world is made comprehensible through the pictures that represent and mediate it (Elkins 130).

The line between pictorial and conceptual images is often flexible and porous (Elkins 130). Most images have both pictorial and conceptual qualities as images are often the building blocks of concepts, intermixing in concept-construction and creative process. (Arnheim; Barry; Solso; Zeki; qtd. in Marshall 34).

Arts-based research has the ability to use art to appeal to a wider demographic than an academic text has the capacity to. The arts have the potential to be used as a democratizing experience, connecting decoration and utility, supporting social change, promoting personal discovery and knowledge making (Sullivan 275, Eaves 147). Art can "induce emotion, challenge understanding and be disrupting and even disconcerting", redefining how we make assumptions and potentially catalyzing transformative change (Eaves 147).

These positions relating to visual language and visual learning emphasize the disseminating power of the artefact. Arts-based research using visual learning also has a secondary purpose, and that is within the act of making. Arts-based research relies on the process of creation to inform aspects of the study. As a language, this means that visual creation moves beyond the confines of the "hegemony and linearity in written texts" (Butler-Kisber 268) to deliver new insight, meaning, and values (Eaves 147). It uses the expressive quality of image and form to develop meaning (Barone & Eisner xii) in ways not possible in traditional and linear research methods (Butler-Kisber 268). This concept can be explained as a "process of coming to know," placing studio practice in line with qualitative research procedures in other domains (Marshall 24). 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). In most of the literature I reviewed, both the process of inquiry and critical dissemination are viewed as equally essential parts of the arts-based research method (Mäkelä 159). Mäkelä explains that 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.

What components are required when developing arts-based research? How can such a broad set of theories be achieved correctly? There are multiple approaches that discuss this, including the emphasis on reflexivity, utilizing traditional academic approaches and critically analyzing the resulting artefact.

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. That is, 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 revision, 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 (Knowles & Cole 57).

The practice of arts-based research requires a blend of skills from multiple disciplines and is therefore very different from traditional research techniques. Many researchers are overwhelmed by practice-based research as traditional research methods and art practices are so often kept separate in academic spheres (Throp 9). Students new to the theory are often unable to relate a research goal to their artistic creation, or unable to gain inspiration to disseminate their findings through artistic practice (9). Better understanding can be gained on the production of

art-based research by breaking it down: practice-led research is firstly, research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners (9).

Mäkelä gives a similar response, identifying the steps a creator needs to make to ensure a successful practice-based approach. She explains that the requirements of arts-based research are the existence of explicit research questions, specific methods for answering the questions and a specific context in which the research is carried out (160).

The final stage of developing an arts-based research project lies, not in the creation, but the interpretation. Mäkelä states, “there is no embodied knowledge in the artefact until it is interpreted” (160). To this end, 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.

For the analysis stage of my research, I use semiotics to further the understanding of larger implications and varied interpretations of my 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 & 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). There are three key scholars to take into account to understand semiology. Charles Sanders Pierce believed that language and thought were processes of sign interpretation, in which meaning was created in the interpretation of the perception and subsequent action based on that perception (27). Saussure, on the other hand, argued that the relationship between a word and an object is arbitrary and relative, rather than fixed. Thus as languages change, so do the tools to

understand the word (28). Roland Barthe's 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). These theories of semiotics, with an emphasis on Barthe's theory, form the framework for analysis of my completed body of work. Understanding the theory of semiotics allows the artwork to be analyzed from an objective lens, utilizing visual signifiers to create deliberate meaning.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Mäkelä's emphasis on goal setting is integral to the understanding of practice-led research development. She approaches the use of arts within an academic context, allowing for artistic experimentation while working within an established set of guidelines. Consistent with Mäkelä's framework, I set two goals to consider while developing a body of work. First, to explore the meaning of tattoos through illustrative means. Second, to visually capture the physical feeling of tattooed flesh, and to highlight the diverse lived experience of tattooed individuals. With these goals in mind, I am able to develop work that is simultaneously exploratory, experimental and focused. These goals informed the methodology used within this project. 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 research, material exploration and concept generation, and the making of final images.

Primary Research:

While I was able to work with a fairly wide base of historical knowledge on tattooing practices, less information exists which critically analyses tattooing today. To fulfill the goals of this project, I required current first-person narratives of tattooing which touch upon both tattoo methods and the psychological impact. 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 experience. Survey questions were designed to lead the participant through their tattoo journey, 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 the visual distraction from the analysis. Instead, focusing solely on motivational factors and the internalized journey. This allowed their experiences to be analyzed as a whole, and not divided by tattoo genre.

Most surveys which investigate tattooing focus on statistics and demographics, little emphasis has been placed on the internalized tattoo journey (Laumann). The findings of this survey, therefore, proved invaluable in terms of contextualizing common attitudes towards tattooing today. The sample size was relatively small, with 53 responses, primarily made up of convenience samples from within Toronto, Ontario. Participants were recruited through social media, primarily Facebook, as well as sent direct links via email. Some participants shared the link through their social groups as well, allowing for a snowball sampling to occur. Participants ranged from the recently tattooed (within a week of the survey response) to the heavily tattooed. While the focus of this questionnaire was primarily to give context to the artistic work, some significant information was revealed about the common tattooing process. For example, of the participants, about a quarter had only 1-2 tattoos at the time of the survey, the same number had between 3-10 tattoos, and half of all respondents had 10+. The majority of participants describe having an in-depth research process prior to getting tattooed, carefully researching safe studios, and talented artists. One-third described being more spontaneous with their tattoo decisions. Often, participants described their motivation and tattooing process as changing over time. Starting with very meaningful and emotionally heavy designs, then later choosing tattoos based on the image itself. All participants described feeling happiness and satisfaction upon receiving a tattoo, some also described it being anti-climactic due to the pressure they felt around the activity. When asked how they felt about their tattoos once time passed, most described their

feelings as evolving, explaining that their taste in imagery may have changed, or that they found a better artist elsewhere. Rarely did participants express regret, rather an optimism and excitement to receive new pieces or cover up the old work with something new. The survey reflected an overall positivity from tattooed individuals. 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 summed up experiences into broad motivational factors. The terms reminded me of Brulez's definitions of tattooing as "pleasure, seduction and youth" (11), but rather than placing terms over other's experiences, the participants were able to create their own definitions. Interestingly, from all the responses gathered, common themes did emerge which I believe can be used to accurately define tattooing not just today, but in a historical context as well. These four key categories of meaning or motivation include: aesthetics, spirituality, belonging and the self. The terms are defined below:

Aesthetics describes any experience which 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" (Anonymous Survey). In this category, we may acknowledge the pursuit of aesthetic fulfillment as a valid and significant motivational factor. Aesthetics have always been an aspect of tattooing as a visual culture, however, it is a relatively recent concept to consider tattoos purely aesthetic in value. It is led by arts and fashion movements/trends influencing body art.

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” (Anonymous Survey). Historical texts often describe tattooing as being spiritual in nature (Krutak 18). It is interesting to see that this value is still maintained by tattooed individuals today.

Belonging is defined by the seeking of connection to a person or group of peoples. It is a tattoo that is acquired to honour or remember, a form of devotion. It is described in words like “home, love, memory, heritage and tributes” (Anonymous Survey). These tattoos are frequently a reminder of love or affiliation and provide a sense of self through the connection to another. We see this again throughout history in the receiving of tattoos for tribal initiation, and sense of connection to a group of people. The revival of indigenous tattooing today can be attributed to ‘belonging’ as it connects the individual to their heritage. These tattoos may also be smaller individual devotional pieces, a loved one’s name for example. It was a common response in the questionnaire to receive one’s first tattoo as a form of devotion, often an image representative of family.

The final category is defined as the Self. This includes motivations which centre around self-fulfillment, self-realization, and self-expression. It may be described as “freedom, identity, introspection, journey, purpose or autonomy” (Anonymous Survey). These tattoos are deeply personal, with meaning related to developing a sense of personhood and individuality. This often included marks of personal history, creating a timeline of major life events or moments to remember. Sometimes is to develop a sense of ownership of the body, a reclamation of the self.

These four terms can begin to define the tattoo experience; they are broad enough in scope to encompass many experiences but are distinctly identifiable by tattooed individuals.

Material Exploration/ Idea Generation:

The four themes of aesthetics, spirituality, belonging and the self became the base of my artistic exploration on tattooing. In combination with the historical accounts, these four themes allowed for a more diverse basis of understanding tattoo experience with which I was able to develop a visual body of work. From the beginning of artistic exploration, I set myself personal goals as an artist. That was to explore materiality and artistic process within the context of arts-based research. Coming from an illustration background, the canvas was always secondary to the illustration. The majority of meaning came from the pictorial representation. With this project, I wanted to recreate a physical sensation, incorporating differing methods of artistic application to represent the diverse experiences of tattooed individuals.

I used my experience as an artist and employed Mäkelä's concept of 'designerly ways of knowing' to lead my arts-based research practice. The stages of creation were driven by my own knowledge and skills which have been refined through years of artistic creation. 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). 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 by 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 this project is as follows:

1. Immersion

Typically at the beginning of the process, immersing involves the activating of creative brainstorming concurrently with research practices. As I focus on the information at hand, I allow myself to loosely sketch and explore related imagery. This brainstorming process is about freedom of mental exploration in order to build a foundation upon which I can refine. This stage is not precise and is not driven by a finished concept, rather it allows loose open exploration. Through the immersion process, I am able to identify key factors that “define” my theme and explore avenues in which it can be demonstrated (Blumenfeld-Jones 328). To develop the artwork in the 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 allows me to refine the concepts based on their value to my research and their artistic potential. This often includes exploring small mock-ups, making notes and evaluating each concept to decide which are 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 is usually in response to a particularly successful sketch from stage two. The successful drawing

will serve as inspiration for further sketching, aiming to apply the concept and refine the technical drawing, develop poses, explore material and technique etc. This stage occurs 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

The assessment stage can occur after the creation of a sizeable body of exploratory work, as well as throughout the development process. This stage makes use of my knowledge as an artist to assess ideas and refine them, removing unsuccessful designs and further exploring more successful works. This stage allows me to create a cohesive body of work that follows a consistent artistic voice. Based on my own assessment, I may return to a previous stage or move forward to a completed piece of artwork.

5. Objective observation.

This stage considers an objective voice to assess the final value of the art. It is open to interpretation, ideally revealing hidden meanings not immediately visible to the maker. This stage may validate the artwork, or lead 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.

Making a Final Body of Work

Based on the above stages of artistic creation and exploration I developed a complete body of work to achieve 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 18 individual artworks, divided into two sections. The first, titled '*Motivation*,' is a collection of 16 hands illustrated on woods, leathers, furs and fabrics to signify the meanings behind tattoos. The second, titled '*Internal and External*,' is a diptych comprised of two four-foot tall pieces that illustrate a personal tattoo journey.

The process of creation regarding this specific body of work occurred as follows:

I began the process by immersing myself in tattoo research, at this point the goals were speculative, rather than concrete. The questionnaire was being completed concurrently, therefore the work was primarily based in loose concepts of illustrative content, including traditional tattoo motifs, drawings of the body, faces, hands, and silhouettes. Ultimately most of the sketches developed in this stage were discarded, but visual concepts such as the use of hands as signifiers remained. I created numerous sketches attempting to blend this imagery into cohesive designs. I knew that a focus on methodology would be significant, including the various ways one can tattoo the flesh, therefore I simultaneously chose to explore various materials and investigate techniques which were capable of illustrating on non-traditional surfaces such as leathers, furs, woods and fabric. Both the rough illustrations and material exploration were observed from an artistic assessment of rightness based on my artistic intuition, as well as objective analysis through discussion with my advisor. The successful work was replicated and refined further. At this point, survey results were completed and analyzed, allowing the concept of hands to be developed further in application with the theory behind tattoo motivation. These pieces were

further assessed for aesthetic success as well as objectively observed to determine possible semiotic approaches, ensuring the finalized imagery would be perceived within the goals of the project. At this point, with imagery and material exploration complete, I constructed a plan for the body of work as a whole collection. The final large pieces, which were intended to be the culmination of the exhibit, were developed simultaneously with *Motivation*, thus ensuring connections through materiality and style while creating a cohesive exhibit narrative. These works were based on early sketches that were refined using the steps above. The illustrations were developed through multiple iterations, some with differences as subtle as hair volume or arm position, paying close attention to the semiotic implications of all artistic choices. Overall, the artwork was developed with a conscious attention to the eventual relation to the audience. As Mäkelä stated, “there is no embodied knowledge in the artefact until it is interpreted” (160). Therefore, each piece was created in order to direct interpretation and create a line of questioning while emphasizing the relation between tattoo method, images, and meanings.

Chapter 5: Creative Work

In this section, I will discuss the completed body of work through an examination of the imagery displayed, a semiotic analysis and the relationship to 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 into two sections correlating to the works of art, and further into subsections dissecting the imagery and materiality chosen.

Motivation: *Set of 16 hands. 9"x 9". Cotton, Animal Hide, Wood in Bamboo hoops.*



FIGURE 2: Motivation. 9x9". 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, the piercing/cutting of the skin; it emphasized the flesh and the act of modification.

As my research revealed, there are four primary motivations or meanings that lead the tattoo process: aesthetics, spirituality, belonging and the self. These four words became the

groundwork for the piece entitled Motivation. This artwork depicts four sets of illustrated hands with gestures that are representative of each of the four words.

Aesthetic: Hands are held with model-like delicacy, caressing the arm. The gesture is indicative of fashion imagery, conveying a sense of beauty.



FIGURE 3: Aesthetic. 9x9". Pony Hair.

Spirituality: Hands are depicted as up-reaching, seeking a higher power while fingers are outspread, conveying yearning.



FIGURE 4: Spirituality. 9x9". Embroidered Cotton.

Belonging: Two hands are connected with pinkies intertwined. This signals a classic image of a pinkie promise, a pact between two individuals.



FIGURE 5: Belonging. 9x9". Baltic Birch.

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, all of which of emotions which are internal and related to the self.



FIGURE 6: The Self. 9x9". Pig Skin.

Each gesture is repeated four times, creating a grid of 16 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 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 to the grid design, while cohesiveness is maintained in the use of muted natural coloured surfaces and limited techniques.

From an illustrative perspective, the work aims to use 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 with 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:

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.



FIGURE 7: Detail of Embroidery

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 into, 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 references tattooing, it creates 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.



FIGURE 8: Detail of Laser Etched Baltic Birch

3. Laser etched fine pig skin: Pig skin more than any other fibre appears most similar to human flesh. The colouration and the delicate quality are emphasized by the still visible hair follicles, appearing eerily like human skin. I experimented with paint and ink on the fibre to reference tattooing however, the most effective tool to alter the material was using the laser cutter to etch the design. 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.



FIGURE 9: Detail of Laser Etched Pig Skin

4. Black lambskin: The black lambskin is by far the most subtle of the materials used in this project. Unlike the other materials used 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, the raw scabbed skin. While in this piece the motivation is less visible, it successfully achieves a physical sensation.



FIGURE 10: Detail of Laser Etched Lamb Skin

5. Etched pony hair: The pony hair is an impactful visual material, the obvious fur coating the leather hide 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 involve feelings of animal cruelty or exploitation, particularly in combination with imagery representative of ‘aesthetic’.



FIGURE 11: Detail of Laser Etched Pony Hair

This interplay of image and materiality is what ultimately may generate conversation and analysis in regard 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 also moving closer, as individual pieces. For instance, one may comparatively consider the meaning of a visual for spirituality in relation to a material that it was inscribed on, and contrast it with the associations of the same image done with embroidery. From both individual and overall perspectives, new semiotic analyses may be formed by the audience.

Internal & External: Large two-piece illustration 24"x48". Embroidered Cotton, Laser etched Wood.



FIGURE 12: *Internal & External*. 24"x48". Embroidered Cotton, Laser Etched Wood.

Internal and External is a diptych artwork that involves a more subjective, self-reflexive approach to the research. While the other pieces focus on diverse experiences and motivations, this work emphasizes my personal experience with tattooing. The two frames act as mirrors, depicting the silhouette of a female figure. Her position changes slightly in each, allowing the illusion of time progression or evolution while maintaining visual flow with the repetition of the visual motive of hands. The mirror-like quality also serves to demonstrate that the two figures as the same person, depicting an individual narrative. The images represent tattoos as the

internalization of external factors, the act of permanently embodying an external feeling, image, or emotion.

The materiality 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, it is placed on top and through the fabric, leaving marks but ultimately removable.



FIGURE 13: Detail of Embroidery used in *External*

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.



FIGURE 14: Detail of Laser Etching used in *Internal*

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-masculinized industry. The female form is objectified for the sake of this piece. The audience is being asked to consider her form as a flat design, rather than a three-dimensional person, therefore, encouraged to experience the textures within the art. The figure as an object is emphasized through the scale of the project. The women's bodies 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 separated the imagery from a reality.

The pattern which 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, in doing so, creating 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 within their own experience. This piece shows my own experience being tattooed, but allows others to engage in their own perceptions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Methods of Inscription was displayed in a week-long exhibition at the Black Cat Gallery in Toronto. The exhibition represents a new approach to the dissemination of tattoo research. 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*, used almost exclusively reproduction photographs and artworks with occasional visual artifacts provided by the museum itself. The exhibit was described by tattoo scholars as "a jumbled assortment of tattoo artifacts 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 to attract viewers, over scholarly analysis is so typical in much of the dialogue around tattoos, that it is almost expected. Therefore, my work is significant in the effort to oppose this common type of narrative.

Thus, the obvious absence of tattoo imagery in *Methods of Inscription* intentionally confounds the expectation of viewers. By opposing the typical tattoo exhibition format, these artworks generate new conversation about how we have come to understand tattooing as a cultural practice. Through its artistic exploration, my artworks encourage the viewer to develop individual analysis including recalling ideas of physical discomfort, internalized meaning and the perceptions and cultural biases towards tattoo imagery.

Through its materiality, *Motivation* inspires the audience to contemplate understandings of physicality and the flesh, considering our cultural perceptions of tattoos and the relation this has with practices that modify the skin. The imagery also opens a discussion around meaning,

emotion, and psychological motivations. *Internal & External* pushes 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 methods allows this research project to reach a wider audience than a traditional paper, as well as creating a series of artifacts that give voice to multiple perspectives.

This is a project with significant potential in terms of expanding research on the subject of tattooing. Future iterations of this work would look towards expanding the surveys to encompass a larger representation of the Canadian population, ideally broadening results in terms of age, ethnicity, and cultural background. In any case, though, this artistic body of work will continue to built upon the idea of reflecting diverse perspectives to contribute to the ever-growing scholarship around the tattooed body.

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