- **No.35**
- **Feminist arts-based community research**

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- **Abstract:**
- Although art constitutes one of the oldest forms of knowledge, women's arts have been treated with disregard for "so long it is almost inconceivable for some critics…to acknowledge them as discursive formations from which meaning can emerge" (Perron, 1998, p.124). Yet women have for centuries used the arts to uncover, educate, illuminate and problematise. Women in Chile, for example, created arpilleras (storied pieces of cloth) metaphorically depicting the atrocities being committed by the Pinochet regime, smuggled them out of the country and alerted the world to the realities of the violence (Stalker, 2003). Feminist aesthetic theorists have re-legitimised women's art practices by uncovering problematic yet normative historical processes of exclusion. Feminist researchers, however, still have some way to go in terms of raising the profile of the value of the arts in community-based research. Yet as Eisner (2008) argues "to make the case for arts-based research is as daunting as it is important" (p. 19). Similar to other forms of community-based research, arts-based research developed as a means to challenge the "limitations and oppressive features of traditional scientific research, opening spaces for experimentation of alternative approaches" (Butterwick, 2002, p. 243). Ball (2002) describes this as "writing outside of the lines, transgressing the rules, while staying within the lines of dominant discursive practices...[and is one of the] few ways we have left to disrupt the dominant discourses in society that silence and marginalise" (p. 2). The goal of feminist arts-based research is to intentionally weave aesthetic sensibilities and post-positivistic forms of expression in a quest for social change and women's empowerment. This paper focuses on both the practice and the teaching and learning of feminist arts-based research. Across Canada, women community-based artists are working with communities to aesthetically extricate and visually illuminate. I bring these women artists into my course at the university to work with students to discuss metaphoric imaginings and collectively develop and analyse visual or narrative imagery. Aims are to illuminate the potential (and challenges) of creative community research methods within the academy and enhance the repertoire of community-engaged practices. Using examples from the community and the classroom, this paper outlines key aspects of feminist arts-based research practices that give representational form to stories and experiences, enhance knowledge construction, challenge and empower.