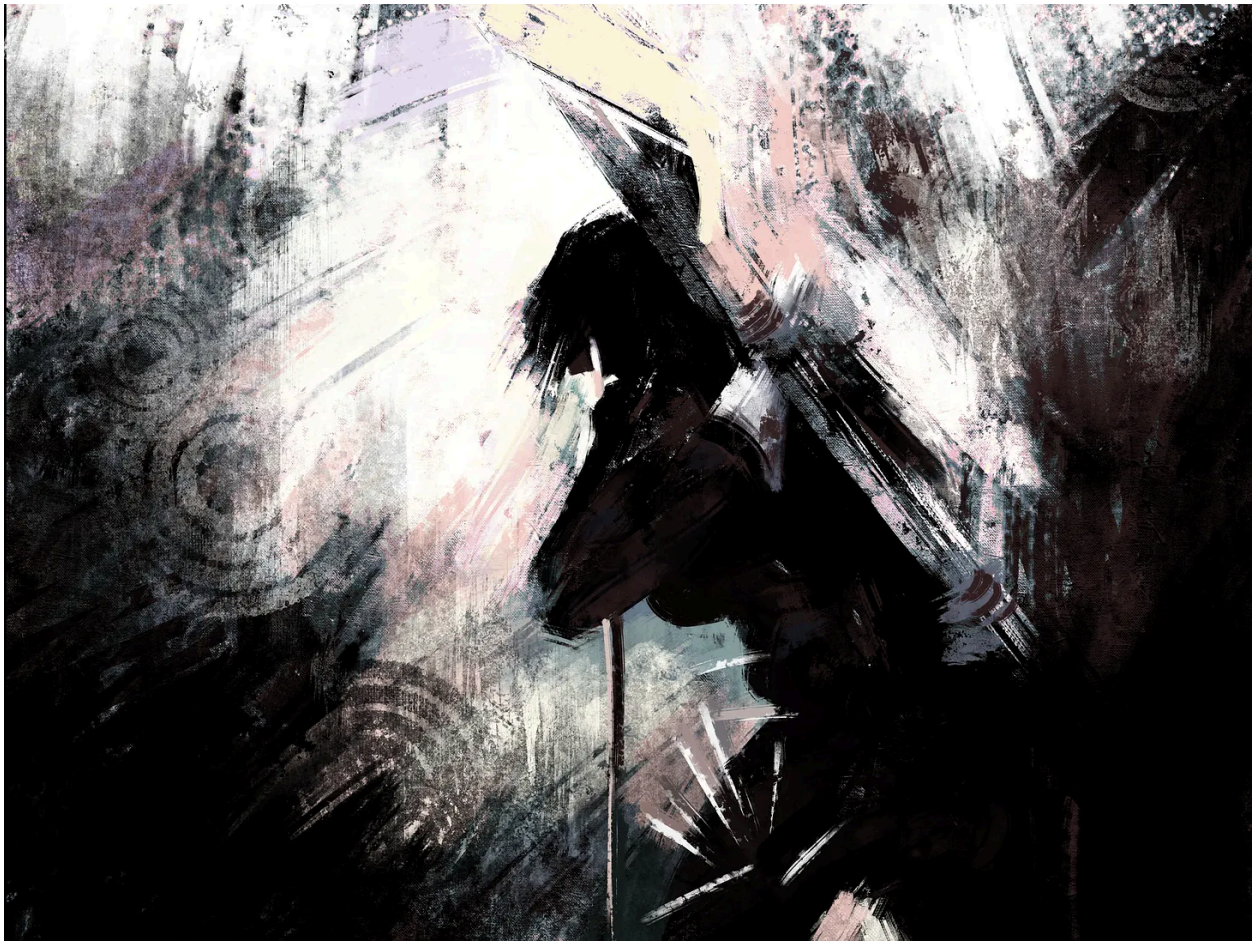
Welcome to Womanhood: A Crystalized Transfeminist Anger

An essay by Laurelia Gagnier

The following is a response essay discussing the following piece by me, addressing my graduate program professor in a class that teaches the interpretation and creation of art through critical lenses, such as the transfeminist lens. I resubmitted the assignment after first submitting a version with one of my concept art pieces, before recognizing that something more heartfelt, even if it lacks the panache of my more central portfolio images, would fit the class content better.



Welcome to Womanhood, 2026
Digital Painting
18 in x 24 in (300dpi)
Laurelia Gagnier

Upon reviewing the lenses of the course structure, I have decided to resubmit my artifact with an alternative piece; while the majority of my work stems from a place of wanting to pursue a career in concept art, I recognize now that this course goes far beyond simply the scope of “making cool shit”, and instead introduces and draws into the forefront different critical lenses that I myself *have* made art regarding, though I don’t consider it part of my primary body of work.

“Welcome to Womanhood” is a 5400x7200 (or, 18in x 24in) digital painting that I made as an exploration of mark-making techniques learned during my mentorship at the Concept Art Association, as well as an expression and crystallization of anger, confusion, disgust, and redemption. The piece was inspired wholly by my own experience as a transgender woman, and was catalyzed by discourse swirling both within the queer community as well as in the world around me at the time, during the Spring of 2026.

I struggle with my own identity quite frequently. Not in the sense of being unaware of who or what I am, but rather with the perception of others, especially when considering the impact of transmisogyny on the perception of strangers. I view myself, depending on the day, as a woman. A woman who struggles with her weight, her forehead being too big, forgetting to take her medication, and someone who especially struggles with her self esteem, but ultimately still a woman.

While I’m sure some see me the same, I don’t feel confident enough in that fact to say it’s the majority. Beyond the news bulletins discussing transgender women in sports and “men in women’s bathrooms”, things that the media at large have to say about me and my people, I face a barrage of much more minor transgressions on a daily basis. People refer to their cis women friends as their name, or ‘girl’, or ‘sis’, if they’re in the queer community at least. But people refer to transgender women as ‘bro’ and ‘dude’ and then insist it is gender neutral, despite not using that same language for cisgender women. I get called a woman from a distance frequently, but when I speak to acknowledge someone saying “excuse me ma’am”, I am met with an apology, and a “oh sorry, I didn’t mean to assume, sir”. Even among other transgender women, when discussing our hopes for our bodies, my dreams fall short of theirs, othering me and making me less of a woman in the eyes of the less socially and politically conscious; my lack of a desire for any genital reconstruction surgery makes me less of a woman in the eyes of even other women who share a core defining identity of mine.

When cisgender women *do* approach me within feminist contexts, when I voice complaints about sexual harassment or threats of sexual assault that I and others like me have received, I am met with a simple, condescending, “welcome to womanhood”.

In the Summer of 2026, I began allowing my friend, who had not been able to access medication, to skim some of my estradiol off the top for injection therapy. I gave her her injections every week, and I still do. She had no idea that other trans women existed outside of me, at least on any meaningful level; she knew there were trans women, but not that there was a larger community that interacted with one another. She had been isolated, and by giving her this shot and introducing her to the community I felt like I was beginning to heal a wound she didn’t know she had. But in that same moment, I realized the hardship that comes with knowing; prior to her being introduced to this world, she had presented herself as somewhat masculine, not really worrying about it because she never felt she’d be able to be seen as herself. Now that I’ve shown her the joy of acceptance and acknowledgement, going back would hurt more than anything if she was ever required to. In that sense, I welcomed her to womanhood.

There was no friction in the making of this piece. No hardship. The technique used to create the broad strokes was one I had learned over the spring, using wide textured marks without intention to form visual noise from which to draw forth the values of the image. It was simply the most natural image I could form using my own human capacity for pattern recognition. Creating it wasn't particularly hard materially either, as I owned all of the tools already and considered myself incredibly efficient and proficient with all of them. Though, I feel the piece itself had asked kindly to not be drawn out for too long. Humans in their impermanence make things that are ultimately impermanent, and to keep drawing out this piece longer than the time it took to make these quick, aggressive marks, would've sullied the emotion put into the piece.

This piece doesn't mirror any of my technically proficient works, it doesn't even look like anything in my portfolio really. It exists on its own, a work that I made to crystalize a point in my life. It's an image of a transgender woman carrying a scalpel like a cross on her back, needles jammed into her thigh. The Sisyphean, Christ-like struggle of someone chasing acceptance and understanding from others but not ever allowing herself to acknowledge it, and even if she was to acknowledge it, it comes with a reminder of her own queerness.

To struggle in pursuit of the approval of others and never receive it, and to desire understanding but never be understood, is the struggle of transgender women. It's my struggle. And this is how I welcome others walking up the same hill I am, to womanhood.

My economic status as a member of the proletariat is core to the production of this piece; being forced to operate within a specific time-frame, and managing creative energy levels while working a full time job are considerations that I am required to make that bourgeois or petit-bourgeois artists are not required to make. As a transgender woman, I am, to some extent, condemned to eternal proletariat status (even if I desired to reject that fact), if I reject the grift of abandoning my community for cash as some have in the past; transgender women earn 60 cents on the cis man's dollar, compared to 80 cents for cisgender women and 70 cents for transgender men. As such, the production of a piece centered on my own transfeminine experience is inseparable and intrinsically linked to my economic status, because my transfemininity is intrinsically tied to my economic status.

The utilization of the digital medium, while it may at first glance seem to be an economic hurdle, is actually a shortcut; all of my digital tools will outlast traditional tools and can be upgraded piece-by-piece, and won't need to be refilled or resupplied after every usage. Through the use of technology, I can cut my production costs from ~$100-200 per piece, to $0.

The production of my work is entirely alienated labor; I perform concept artistry for pay, and explicitly do so for a fixed wage to pay my bills, when I can manage those kinds of jobs. However, beyond those jobs, I would stake the claim that all artwork produced by a member of the proletariat class is artwork produced with intrinsic alienation. The creation of work requires the sacrifice of potential labor hours, the withholding of one's labor from potential capitalist buyers, in favor of production of a piece of art. As a result, most working class artists, including myself, would be more than happy to sell the work if it alleviated the material hardships they must subject themselves to in order to earn the time to engage in the act of creation. In this sense, can any piece of art really be considered abstracted from labor?

In his writing, Hirst says “Decommodified labour is unwaged, but that does not mean that the decommodified labourers are freed of the need to work in order to keep themselves alive.“ (Hirst, 2020, p. 59); I would generally agree that most artwork is made independent of commodity production, including my own work, though I would say that to distinguish it entirely from capitalist modes of production and say that it is somehow unaffected would be preposterous, as no artist can create in a vacuum. All artwork is capable of being viewed through a Marxist lens, and it is the primary lens through which I view all artwork; art is a photograph of the person and society that produced it. My work is a snapshot of a society that, while people are permitted to own digital tools, and a person in particular who makes enough money through labor to purchase said digital tools, it is less about convenience and more about long-term affordability. It’s a piece that explores an explicitly transmisogynistic section of space-time, a part of the world where transfemininity is rejected and punished, and a time when that is especially the case. The work itself is produced with hasty and rushed brushwork, reflective of the creative process of a proletariat who spends the majority of their time and energy selling her labor. It is, as all artwork is, a product of the material conditions of the artist.

As far as what role my work, if any role at all, would play in some kind of revolutionary project, I would stake the claim that it doesn’t play any at all. My work does not galvanize laborers intentionally, it exists solely for the expression of my own artistic ego and as a crystallization of my own frustration. Though, as stated in Hirst’s text,

“Marx never described proletarian revolution as liberation through labour, and he and Engels also clearly articulated very clearly in The Communist Manifesto and other writings that socialism would be precisely the breaking of the shackles on the working class imposed by the rule of capital. The idea of emancipation through labour has distinct overtones of a characterisation more akin to Stalinist obfuscation than to an actual revolutionary strategy proposed by serious Marxists.“ (Hirst, 2020, p.65)

The expectation that artistic labor will somehow liberate the masses from the grips of capitalism is deeply unserious and is no different from expecting a car bombing to magically galvanize the people into revolution. Neither act is, on its own, capable of sparking revolutionary fervor, and is more so an expression of discontent and a cry out into an uncaring world hoping for a response of some kind, whether violent or otherwise. My art is, ultimately, an act of adventurism, if anything at all; the production of something that fulfills my personal emotional need to be seen, heard, and understood, and whether that contributes to anything larger is entirely coincidental, even if I wanted it to not be.

My art is a car bomb.

Sources

Hirst, M. (2020). Marx and Art. *The Political Economy of Communication,* 8 (1), 58-68.