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Art Review  
Guilherme Teixeira

# Tadáskía

*Interview by Guilherme Teixeira*



*elas here elas there*, charcoal and pastel on paper,  
diptych, 100x70 cm (each), 2023

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## The Brazilian artist who builds harmony from ambivalence



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Born into a Pentecostal Christian family on the periphery of Rio de Janeiro, Tadáskia is interested in giving her work, which encompasses installations, drawing, bookmaking, textiles and photography, a dual role – artworks that operate in this world, while also finding a presence beyond their materiality. She makes the analogy of the word *língua* in Portuguese, the same term used to signify the bodily tongue and the abstraction of language. At the current Bienal de São Paulo she is showing her first looseleaf book, *Ave preta mística Mystical Black Bird* (2022), the title written in both Portuguese and English and the text telling of a bird who speaks to other birds, the pages pasted onto a richly painted abstract mural and facing a series of three bamboo, straw and cattail floor sculptures, each of these bundles marking different ritual offerings, suggestive of AfroBrazilian religion, including eggs, fruit and various coloured face powders. Guilherme Teixeira met the artist to discuss how hospitalisation, religion and identity combine in her practice.

**GUILHERME TEIXEIRA** *I wanted to ask you about community, and communication, in your work.*

**TADÁSKIA** In general, my experience of art has always involved a lot of groups, because I was always involved in social projects, in public schools, in church. So groups of people were very present in the places that informed my path to

being an artist. At the same time, when I returned home I was very lonely. I've been writing since I was very young. I started to enjoy reading and writing after a period when I was hospitalised as a child, so the place of writing and drawing has always been somewhere in which I could imagine people. Perhaps I could create an imaginary group, a fantastical one from another world, from another order or cosmology.

When in hospital I was visited by a clown, and she gave me a copy of Jean de La Fontaine's

**“There are materials  
that carry an ambivalence,  
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borders on debauchery”**

fables, which left a huge mark. *Ave preta mística* stemmed from what I was reading as a child, revisiting this notion of fable, but without the moral. Instead we see the figures undergo a transformation, a moral development of personality. The central entity changes shape: one moment it resembles a star, another it resembles a mountain, at the last moment it just becomes a series of lines and dashes, incorporating many possibilities. The story, written in both Portuguese and English, doesn't explain the drawing, nor does the drawing explain the story.

**GT** *Regarding this bilingual aspect, you often refer to your works through the concept of 'this-that', as aspects that are both within the context of those who see your work, as well as contexts that are inherently within the materials of the work. How does this idea of localised alterity take place?*

**T** There are materials that carry an ambivalence, something that almost borders on debauchery. Like in older works such as *As Cabeludas* [2019], which features hollow clay bricks laced with hair – the materials carry a meaning from their original context, into a new one. This procedure appears a lot in *Ave preta mística*, this idea of two dimensions, one earthly and one divine; the ambivalence of this-that. I believe it relates to my own life, from the precarious place where I came from. In the past I was condemned by my Pentecostal experience for being on the fence: doubt, and error, are looked down upon. In my work, these religious aspects persist; but it's a positive thing, I see it as a way to give my drawing a margin of freedom, to operate between one path and another.

**GT** *These aspects aren't paradoxical, they don't cancel each other out, they're almost like harmonic contradictions.*

**T** Exactly. They create a harmony, a composition, a game, a dance.

**GT** *With your Pentecostal upbringing, how did this harmonic contradiction come about? How have*



*as cabeludas, 2019,*  
brick and hair, dimensions variable



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*Ave preta mística* *Mystical Black Bird* (detail), 2022,  
mixed media on paper



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*you been able to transfigure these elements into your artistic practice?*

T I started thinking of myself as an artist when I was eighteen, and I stopped going to church when I was nineteen. There was a moment where there was a schism with the ways of thinking about God, divinity, life and Hell. Until then I did believe that people would go to Hell. When I was asked about myself, about my sexuality, I always sat on the fence. I used to say that I was an asexual person, then a nonbinary person, and today I consider myself a trans woman, a trans person. But for a while this was very difficult for me, having to say that I didn't really know where I was: I'd like to be in Heaven, but they'll put me in Hell. And if you look at my work in general, not just the drawings, but the videos, the sculptures, the apparitions and so on, you see a universe of proximities and distances in action.

GT *Nonhuman agency pervades the work, where objects have a form of autonomy, an individuality that operates this relationship between the work and the public.*

T Yes, they have a certain sense of individuality, but they can also become collective – such as the eggs, and the drawings, which exist outside a specific consciousness. They act as compositions that give a rhythm to the story, although I believe the main character in the work is time. These are elements that compose time – like the

cattail, which, alongside copper wires, appears in many of my objects – and show different ways in which materials yield to time. The copper literally so, as it oxidises. The face powder present in the installation brings an element of confusion between the relationship of the ornament, and the dust on the body – it's like a butterfly that sheds its pollen as it flies, or an animal that leaves a trail. I remember that when I was drawing with my mother, Elenice Guarani, and my aunt, Gracilene Guarani, who are both black,

**“I've assumed the error; now I can accept that when I draw, I make mistakes. That's the great thing, because error is implicit in drawing”**

Afro-Indigenous women, they always told me to add more colour because colour is life.

GT *This has a direct relationship with your exhibition at Sé Galeria in São Paulo last year, where you used charcoal – which also has this remnant of dust – to create floor-to-ceiling wall paintings with interconnecting, spiralling abstract fields of colour.*

T At Sé I used charcoal, olive oil and oil paint. I love the smell of olive oil. And it also reminded me of the use of olive oil for purification, the

religious practice where you bless yourself. My intention was to use this same technique at the Bienal, but I ended up going for dry pastel, which meant that at the end of every day of installation I would leave covered in dust.

GT *How long was this process?*

T Fifteen days. I like to remain calm and not exhaust myself. It's a very corporal process. I always say a little prayer, as I like to offer the drawing to other people. I started drawing on the wall with my eyes closed. The drawing came and said to me, 'Everything is already white here at the Bienal, let's move on to colour.' There are errors in the drawing, but I think that errors are part of the drawing. I've assumed the error; now I'm thirty, I can accept that when I draw, I make mistakes. That's the great thing, because error is implicit in drawing. After all, I close my eyes when I draw, and drawing – by the very nature of the word, which means desire, design – already assumes, already admits that there is an error. I think there's a certain intelligence in drawing itself. Understanding that not everything is going to turn out the way we want.

GT *Earlier you mentioned apparitions, how do you see ghosts operating in the drawing?*

T Between the bird and the mountain – there's something there between them. When I start



*Golden rope with my mother Elenice Guarani, my aunt Marilúcia Moraes, my grandmother Maria da Graça and my aunt Gracilene Guarani, 2020, photograph*

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a drawing with my eyes closed, I usually think I'm seeing, but I'm not seeing through the retina. So something that starts out as a mountain in the middle of its composition becomes a sun, which starts to look like rain to me, and then becomes a beautiful girl. In the end, you see a girl who looks like rain, but the name of the work is, say, *Sun*. But I don't see it as an abstraction. I think this phantasmatic movement leads to an idea of abstraction, but I see everything there as several layers of imagination: when you see it, it looks like everything, but it's nothing.

GT *This phantasmatic movement, which operates between figuration and abstraction in your work, leads me to think about religion, more specifically the syncretisms between AfroBrazilian religions and Neo-Pentecostalism. How do you see this coming into play in your practice?*

T Today I consider myself an outspoken syncretic by nature, but it wasn't always like this. This began mainly through my sculptural work. Originally there was no intention of treating religion in this way, but it began to take place through the use of materials that are commonly used in AfroBrazilian rituals, in Candomblé and Umbanda, such as cattails and beads. I started working with these materials organically, from discards that I collected from museums in Rio de Janeiro, and a friend,

the artist Gilson Plano, pointed out to me the ritualistic uses of them, offering them to the *orixás*, to mark the places where people have been born or die, and also in the making of *guia* bead necklaces – an Afrodiasporic way of protection that someone wears around the neck. Due to my Pentecostal upbringing, I didn't know about the ritual uses of these materials, but they came together for me. Another strong relationship I see between the two religions is their own ritual languages: the notion of adornment, spells, transformation, enchantment, changing faces, changing everything and changing voices, which we usually associate with AfroBrazilian religions, but which also occur in Pentecostal temples, when they speak in tongues, for example.

GT *How do you see the idea of tongues – not just as language, but as a physical element?*

T Ever since I was a child, I've wanted to speak all languages, to live abroad, you know? Speaking tongues, the language I spoke was the language of angels, right? I didn't even understand what I was saying, I just knew that I was communicating with God, that I was communicating with a foreign language. But I didn't know. Nobody interpreted. I didn't follow the Neo-Pentecostals, who understood language as a connection between people from different countries. No, the foreign language

I spoke in church was more like a language of emotion, of shouting, of spinning, than linguistic. So in my work today I use titles for their sound, for their rhythm. For example, *Ave preta mística* – only after finishing the work at the Bienal did I ask myself the etymological meaning of 'mystic'. When I looked it up, I saw that mystic refers directly to that which has its eyes closed: the meaning of the word is also there in the use of it, in the action. So I feel that this language thing also led me to realise that I had a great interest in the things that people in the church condemned because the language that was supposed to give meaning actually brought confusion. The primary purpose of using language in the church was to create a community. However, I began to realise that community can also arise from conflict, from confusion, and that things don't need to be completely resolved for them to be created. I hope that through my work I have also come to understand and incorporate this force, this divine entity, in a different way, in a much more human way, I would say. ar

*Work by Tadaskia, including Ave preta mística, is on view at the 35th Bienal de São Paulo through 6 December*

*Guilherme Teixeira is an artist based in Piracicaba and São Paulo*



*à tarde (in the afternoon), 2022,  
oil paint, olive oil and charcoal mural  
all images Courtesy the artist*