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“I started with closed eyes and made a prayer, offering the drawings to the world,” the artist Tadaskía said of her MoMA installation, on view through Oct. 14. George Etheredge for The New York Times

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A Bold Brazilian Artist Makes Her U.S. Debut, Drawing on MoMA's Walls

Tadáskia, a Black trans artist who is only 30, is already stunning audiences with boundary-breaking work at MoMA, Art Basel and beyond.

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By **Ted Loos**

June 14, 2024

The Museum of Modern Art does not let just anyone draw on its walls.

In fact, the Brazilian artist Tadáskia is the first to make her mark on the walls of the street-level gallery at MoMA where the recently opened show, [“Projects: Tadáskia,”](#) is on view through Oct. 14.

It comes at a moment of increased visibility for the artist, who is only 30. At the same time, some of her works are featured at this week's [Art Basel](#) fair.

Using charcoal and dry pastels in every color you can imagine, Tadáskia spent roughly two weeks at MoMA creating an immersive wall drawing full of birdlike figures amid swirling, curving shapes in an energetic, restless composition with black outlines. A jagged, mouthlike red shape lies near the center of one section.

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An installation view of "Projects: Tadaskía" at MoMA. Tadaskía made it in collaboration with the Studio Museum in Harlem. Jonathan Dorado

Tadaskía is a Black trans artist with a deeply felt, spiritual approach to her work.

"I started with closed eyes and made a prayer, offering the drawings to the world," she said, standing in the gallery, surrounded by curators and assistants. Boxes of partly used pastels were stacked up on a dolly.

In an interview, she talked partly in English and partly in Brazilian Portuguese, translated by her studio manager.

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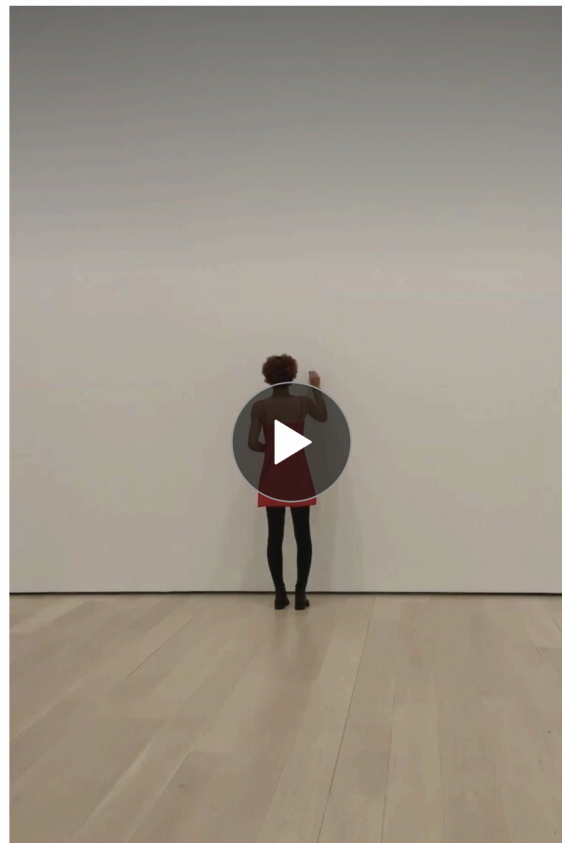
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Instead of planning the whole thing out, “I made it freely,” Tadaskía said of her wall composition, which she did by hand, somehow making curves that looked as if their creation would have required a protractor.

Part of the drawing reaches more than 26 feet high, which she worked on while standing on a hydraulic lift.

Tadaskía’s MoMA installation, a collaboration with the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#), is her first solo presentation in the United States.

On top of the wall piece are mounted drawings from a separate work by the artist that MoMA recently acquired: “ave preta mística mystical black bird” (2022), a 61-page unbound book featuring a winged protagonist and poetic text. The installation also includes two curving sculptures on the floor of the gallery.



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Tadáskia's visit to New York to make the piece marks her first time in the United States. She grew up in Rio de Janeiro and still lives there, traveling often to São Paulo, Brazil.

"It's amazing to have this opportunity," she said. "It makes me emotional."

Last fall, after a year of not having dealer representation, she joined forces with [Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel](#), a gallery with locations in São Paulo and Rio, which is showing her works this week at Art Basel in Switzerland. The three diptychs in their booth include "lacraria tears" (2024), made with dry pastel, charcoal and pen.

Tadáskia also has a piece in Parours, the fair's section that puts art in public spaces throughout the city of Basel. Her piece, "the black trans ladies" (2024), is made up of seven flags that feature abstracted figures and use the colors of the official transgender flag (light blue, pink and white) as backgrounds.

"I never worked with flags before," Tadáskia said. "That gives it more of a political connection."

The explicit trans theme of the Parours work is linked to her MoMA installation. "For me, being trans is related to being human, and the drawing humanizes the condition of being trans," she said. "One thing becoming another thing, transformation and ambiguity."

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Part of the drawing in the installation reaches more than 26 feet high, which Tadaskia worked on while standing on a hydraulic lift. Jonathan Dorado

The birds in her wall drawing — which could be rising or falling, depending on your perspective — were partly inspired by an experience she had when she was 18 at a conference for scholarship students, as she was about to enter college. She learned about the sankofa, a mythical bird symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana.

Traditionally, the bird is depicted turning backward and can refer to the importance of knowing one's own past. She recalled also seeing the sankofa image incorporated into the grillwork around the windows of buildings on the outskirts of Rio.

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“A mystical black bird can fly to hidden dimensions,” she said, adding that to her it signified “liberation but not a personal liberation — a shared one.”

The African roots of the sankofa are meaningful to Tadaskía because of what she called her mother’s Afro-Indigenous background, which she said was also a source of her intense color palette (in addition to an appreciation for Picasso and Matisse, she added).

“During my childhood I was always drawing,” she said. She was also a devoted fan of watching cartoons. At age 11, she contracted a bacterial infection that paralyzed part of her face. In the hospital, a nurse gave her “The Fables of La Fontaine,” a 17th-century book, which led to her interest in reading and writing.

The talking animals in the fables stuck with her, though she said she diverged from La Fontaine in one big way. “The fables all have a moral in the end,” she said, “but my work is not about right and wrong.”

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The birds in Tadaskia's wall drawing is inspired by the sankofa, a mythical bird symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Tadaskia came to the art world's attention when she participated in the 2023 [São Paulo Biennial](#), "Choreographies of the Impossible." Her room-size project there was similar to the one at MoMA, only smaller, and it included the same book of drawings that MoMA acquired. Working alone, it took Tadaskia two weeks to make the wall-drawing portion of that installation.

"When I walked into that installation I was truly inspired," said Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem. "It had this incredible visual strength that felt familiar but also opened me into new ways of seeing and believing in art."

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Golden added that the appeal was “the confidence and strength of her mark-making.”

Golden organized the show with Ana Torok, an assistant curator of drawings and prints at MoMA, and Kiki Teshome, a curatorial assistant at the Studio Museum. Tadaskía’s project is the fifth in a series of collaborations between the two museums since 2019. The Studio Museum is closed while construction is underway on its new facility.

As Tadaskía talked in the MoMA gallery, assistants painted white over any stray marks on the islandlike floor sculptures — small platforms that had pastel drawings at the bottom, plants like beach grass and cattails affixed on top, and bowls of liquid set on them.

For both the sculptures and the wall drawings, Tadaskía drew the charcoal outlines herself, with the five assistants helping to fill in the colors. They were encouraged to suggest shades in keeping with the artist’s personal palette.

“It was a lot faster this way,” she said. “By myself this would have taken two months, not two weeks.”

The succession of eight-hour work days was tiring. “I have to be really rested to do this,” Tadaskía said.

Not that it scared her away from life in the big city. “I want to live here,” she said of New York. “Maybe in Brooklyn.”

See more on: [Museum of Modern Art](#)