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ladybug house casa da joaninha II, 2024. Oil paint and spray on wood, transparent liquid, and red LED light, 101 x 142 x 142 cm. Photo: Eduardo Ortega, Courtesy Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro and Quadra

Inner Changes: A Conversation with Tadáskia

January 3, 2025 by Maureen Sullivan

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There's a joy and lightness to the work of Tadaskía, a fantastical celebration of nature and metamorphosis, as well as fragility and precariousness. The Brazilian artist, who caught the eye of Thelma Golden and other curators at the 2022 Bienal de São Paulo, made her New York solo debut last year with a show at MoMA. For each exhibition, Tadaskía created an immersive installation that began with murals of dry pastel and charcoal, made on site and layered with large drawings and poetic text from her first looseleaf book, *ave preta mística* (*mystical black bird*, 2022). She then populated these rich surroundings with floor sculptures constructed from a range of organic materials.

Branches and fruit, arranged like a game of pick-up sticks on the verge of collapsing, are combined with straw and cattail grass, colored powders, eggs adorned with golden thread, and fruits and vegetables, then presented on low platforms with loose pages of charcoal and pastel drawings. These sculptural arrangements have a resonance with ritualistic altars—the elements are familiar, but their meanings remain elusive. Like the painstakingly drawn pastel and charcoal murals, which can be smudged and wiped off with a gentle rub, these assemblages are fragile and subject to time. Permanence and impermanence are essential to the work. As Tadaskía says, change is always at the heart of her life and art.



Installation view of "Ana Cláudia Almeida & Tadaskía," Quadra, São Paulo, 2024–25. Photo: Eduardo Ortega, Courtesy [Cortesia] Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro and Quadra

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Maureen Sullivan: A reverence for nature, ritual, spirituality, fantasy, and mystical enchantment feels very present in your work. Have you always had a strong connection to these things? How has this interest developed and manifested in your life and work?

Tadaskia: Around age 18, I started to consider myself an artist, using materials that were free and available to me. My father would buy eggs in bulk, 36 in a box, because it was cheaper, and my first works were sewing with thread on the eggshells, making a curved drawing in and out of the shell. I continued to discover discarded natural materials, and I felt like these were lucky, magical meetings, and an opportunity to give the objects another life. I added other elements, first branches, then taboa straw (which sometimes attracts insects). I spent time with the straw, sleeping on it and sewing on it. I would take it apart and rearrange it as if it were flowers—first loosely with no constraint, later tying it for more permanence. I started making sculptural arrangements with the straw, branches, eggshells, chicken feathers, colored liquid in small glass bottles with different pigments, and fresh fruit and vegetables. I felt a connection to these organic materials, especially to the straw. Later, I learned of its spiritual association in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion, where it is used in rituals representing a passage from life to a spiritual plane. But that association was a coincidence, not intended in my work.

Many things in my work are about getting closer to the inner changes of the materials. The fruit, for instance, has a different lifespan than the other elements. Taboa straw wasn't available in New York when I did my MoMA project, so I used beach grass, which is angular and curves, so it can be sculpted in different ways. We are so controlled in daily life—I like working with something new and escaping from that control, even when the grass hurts and cuts my hands.

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Installation view of "JAIMES," Triangle-Astérides, Marseille, France, 2022. Photo: Aurélien Mole

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MS: Your exhibition narrative at MoMA described a flight toward “a journey of freedom,” which also reflects your liberation from a Pentecostal upbringing.

T: Growing up, my family was syncretic in religion and beliefs, and between the ages of 12 and 19, I was in the Pentecostal church. There was drumming, and I spoke in another language through the spirit of God. I called it “angel tongue” or “fire tongue.” In church, I learned to talk and interact with something I couldn’t see, and it moved me. I didn’t know the shape, I didn’t know the lines, I didn’t know the entity’s face. I had to close my eyes to think about or feel the divinity. This church didn’t accept my being transgender, but that’s not why I left. Leaving was about opening my wings and, out of necessity, finding something different and new, without the binary of hell and paradise. I think heaven and hell can be on the same crossroad. I can be an angel; I can also be a demon.

It was after I left the church and went to my first Carnival that I freed myself. It was an illumination, a shining celebration of Exú, an Orisha known as the lord of the paths and, especially, of the crossroads. The first thing that happened, standing in the grass during Carnival, was that I was bitten by a *lacraila* (centipede). It was possible to see the colors of the centipede after it stung me—it was half black and half red, like the Exú earrings I was wearing that night. *Lacraila* can be poisonous, but I was lucky, and this encounter inspired my next book and body of work.



Installation view of “Projects: Tadaskia,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2024. Photo: Jonathan Dorado

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MS: How does being a Black trans woman in Brazil affect your work and how you approach your art-making and community?

T: My work addresses, but is also beyond, my gender, my race, my history, and my own representation. The Blackness, the darkness, the transgeneriness are not present in a representative way. It's something that takes time to realize and is more existential; I think everyone universally is searching for their humanity or their strangeness.

It's also all about being between a familiar and a foreign connection—in my life, my sculptures, my drawings, and my apparitions. “Apparitions” is what I call a group of works that I made with a 35mm camera, in which members of my family (not necessary by blood connection) and my friends are seen doing actions that can sometimes be revealed by the camera and sometimes not. Sometimes I also appear. These are actions that we do, unrehearsed and without a test, with some material connecting us. In the apparition titled *Corda dourada* (golden rope, 2020), we are sitting and standing together with a golden rope coming out of our mouths that temporarily joins us together. I like to imagine that traces of us passing through the golden rope become a mystical part and vestige of something unknown.



Corda dourada com minha mãe Elenice Guarani, minha tia Marilúcia Moraes, minha vó Maria da Graça e minha tia Gracilene Guarani, 2020. 35mm photograph. Photo: © Tadaskia, Courtesy the artist and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro

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MS: You've brought up the idea of allowing errors and chance in your work, especially when creating something live and improvisational on site on an immense scale and with an intensive timeframe. For "Choreographies of the Impossible," the 35th São Paulo Biennial and your MoMA project (where you worked for over two weeks on the gallery walls), the murals were painted over after the shows. Like a live performance, they disappeared, except for documentation. Do you find freedom in working this way? Do you embrace the surrender to happy accidents?

T: Temporariness doesn't affect me in a bad way, it's just a condition of the work and of life. For me, it's more about embracing the opportunity—my first full room at a museum, for instance—to do things in a different way, in a site-specific way. I draw freely, improvising, sometimes with my eyes closed. I embrace transformation and surrender to the process and the elements I'm working with, from pastel and charcoal for the drawings to the fruit and vegetables that will decay and renew in the sculptures.

At the end of my looseleaf book *ave preta mística* (*mystical black bird*), which was presented at MoMA, the mystical black bird says, "I admit the constituent error of every flight: I redraw the routes of my sensitivity over again." Making mistakes is part of our life in this world plane; and, for me, accepting this condition has been a spiritual exercise in admitting that things may not turn out the way I expected. When I accept that things are beyond my control, I can arrange myself for something freer, even if it only exists in my sensitive world.



Detail of "Projects: Tadaskia," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2024. Photo: Jonathan Dorado

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MS: Themes of resilience, resurgence, creation, and destruction are evoked in your work and in the organic materials in your sculptures. It must have been traumatizing having to quickly evacuate the Joyner/Giuffrida Residency Program in Reno, Nevada, last September when the Davis wildfires approached. Since you've been safely back in Brazil and have had time to reflect, has that experience impacted your work? Has it deepened your interest in the ephemerality of the physical world and cycles of nature?

T: I haven't thought about how the experience of the fire will come into my work—yet. But my new notebook, essays, and drawings have come from seeing ladybugs while in the United States, because it's rare to see them in Brazil. In San Francisco, I watched a black-and-red ladybug landing where there were four small spiders. The spiders tried to eat the head of the ladybug, but it wasn't possible, and the ladybug flew away and disappeared. When I see animals—rabbits, birds, centipedes, insects—I find it to be a sign. There is something mystical about it that I want to explore through storytelling. Mysticism is nourishment for me, and the animals that I saw in the Nevada desert will continue to transform into something else in my work.

When I was in Reno, I also started experimenting with wood veneer. It's a pliable material that I can shape and bend to create conical and curved forms. These forms have a feeling of being shells and metamorphosing into another thing, connecting with the symbolic ladybug shell. I had finished just one sculpture when the fires came. I've been trying to find similar material in Brazil, but so far, I haven't been able to. I did find some wood veneer, but it's so thin that it breaks easily. I bent it, plastered it, painted it, but when it didn't break, it wrinkled. I realized that the material didn't want to play the game I was proposing. So, now I have to change again. I'm currently folding another material, a leather paper, but it doesn't look like the ladybug's shell anymore, it looks like something else—I don't even know what to call it yet.



changed color shell mudada casca de cor II, 2024. Oil paint and spray on leather paper, 172.5 x 201 x 23 cm. Photo: Eduardo Ortega, Courtesy Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro and Quadra

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MS: Your love of language and poetry is evident in your work, for instance in the bilingual Portuguese and English texts in the pages from *ave preta mística*, which overlaid the wall drawing at MoMA. The texts are dreamlike, train-of-thought, and diaristic. For example: “in the dream I meet all the mystical birds of the other worlds / together / at the same time / we’re black old and young.” It’s unusual in an art exhibition to give text and image equal presence.

T: I admire the poetry inside language—the rhythm, the cadence—and the dance when I put languages together. I translate the text myself from Portuguese to English, and in the past, I had the opportunity to use Yoruba, German, and Catalan. It’s perhaps not perfect, but I find joy in creating a connection with Portuguese. The mix between one language and another is a beautiful combination of not understanding and understanding at the same time.

MS: Are there specific creatives—in visual art, music, writing, performance—who have inspired you or with whom you feel a connection?

T: Audre Lorde and her poetry book *Black Unicorn*. Her writing is full of strength and vulnerability, and I love the title. It is magical, and it inspired me to title my work *ave preta mística* (*mystical black bird*), a reference to being in between the human and the divine.

In Brazil, there is Gilberto Gil—I listened to his important album *Um Banda Um* a lot before going to Carnival last year. I am also interested in the poet Stella do Patrocínio; in her book *Reino dos bichos e dos animais é o meu nome*, she converts her voice into something that goes beyond human, representing animals, demons, and the divine. And then there’s the artist Arthur Bispo do Rosário, with his work of collecting things and transforming them through hallucinations, divine messages, and love. Both of them suffered from mental health issues and were confined at the Colônia Juliano Moreira asylum in Rio de Janeiro. My biggest inspirations though are the women in my life who have taught me about self-care, about building boundaries, and about providing a safe place of vulnerability for special people.

“Ana Cláudia Almeida & Tadaskía” is on view at Fortes D’Aloia & Gabriel and Quadra, both in São Paulo, through January 24, 2025. “One Becomes Many” is on view at the Pérez Art Museum Miami through April 16, 2026.