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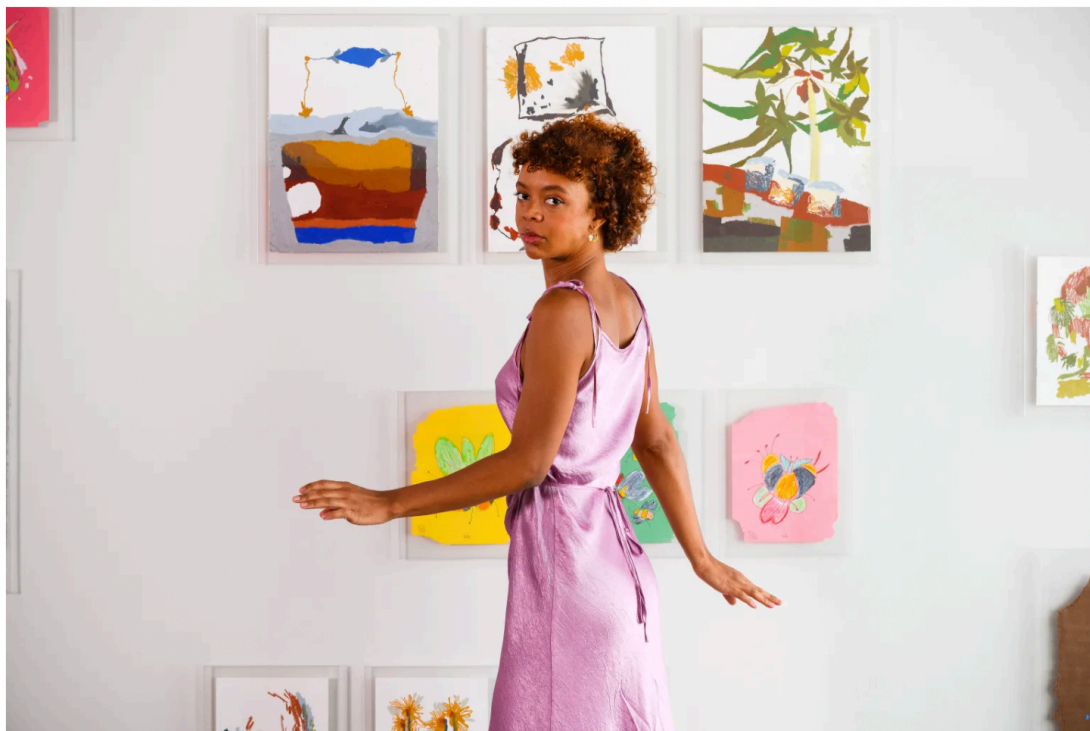
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ARTS • ARTS INTERVIEWS

# Joy in Transformation: An Interview With Artist Tadáskia

For this Brazilian rising star, color is life and freedom is hers to share.

By [Elyssa Goodman](#) • 02/14/25 8:00am



The artist sees herself as “a kind of turbulent tornado.” Image courtesy of the Nevada Museum of Art. Photo: Asa Gilmore

“I was in a moment of ecstasy,” the multidisciplinary Afro-Brazilian artist Tadáskia tells Observer when asked about her MoMA debut last year. It was her first show in the U.S., part of a partnership with the Studio Museum in Harlem, and it marked her first time visiting the States. She filled the walls of the museum’s Projects space on the first floor with drawings in luscious, vibrant colors and shapes influenced by nature and mysticism. The work, she says, comes “from a sensitive world, a world of imagination. It’s not from the real world.”

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In all of her work, Tadáskia, who is trans, contemplates that world of imagination, where sensitivity is a superpower. Through illustration, sculpture, photography and more, she engages with themes of transformation and creation—the ways we hide and share joy.

The MoMA exhibition, “Projects: Tadáskia,” became both a calling card and a lesson in acceptance. The original plan, she says, was to fill the entire space, but it couldn’t be done in just a month. She had to become comfortable with the emptiness. After her MoMA debut, which was lauded by the likes of the New York Times and the New Yorker, she made her way to Art Basel, the Nevada Museum of Art and the São Paulo gallery Fortes D’Aloia & Gabriel—the latter two shows put her work in conversation with that of the artist Ana Cláudia Almeida.



Tadáskia, *I.F.S.G. um/one*, 2024; Dry pastel, oil pastel and spray on paper, 152 x 180 cm., 59.843 x 70.866 in. Courtesy the artist, photo by Edu Ortega

Her English is, by her own description, broken, but it doesn’t bother her. “I know that I can’t present myself in the same way that I present myself in Portuguese, but I like that,” she says. “I think this is a connection with what I feel about art and what I feel about life—sometimes it’s empty, sometimes it’s not full.” We spoke with the assistance of translator Frances King and via email about joy, seasons of change and the possibility of new workspaces.



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### When did you begin to explore themes of transformation and joy in your work?

I think this sense of joy and transformation comes with the observer. For me, it's more about change: sometimes happiness can be hidden, and sometimes it can be shown. At MoMA, I think people saw a happier side to the work because of the colors. They were expansive. Now I'm in another moment, so I think the colors change. In my show at the Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel gallery in Brazil, the color black is more evident, and it has a greater presence in the work. In another exhibition with Ana Cláudia Almeida, you can see photographs where my family has their faces hidden behind clothing. In this case, I think joy is hidden.

Sometimes you can see in my drawings a direct connection with the joyful. Sometimes you have to keep looking. In this new exhibition, I built a ladybug house, and it's black with some colors emerging from it. Inside the house, you see a red light. It's another gesture, it's another Tadaskia. I think the transformation is about accepting the change of emotions and the emotions of the groups, animals and entities. For me, my work is a connection with animals, entities and people that sometimes I can't see.

### What is your relationship to the moment of creation in nature—as an artist and in your identity?

I'm not separate from nature or creation, I see myself as a kind of turbulent tornado. Sometimes I'm a calm river. I think now I'm getting out of the tornado. I saw some ladybugs in the U.S., and for me, there was a connection between ladybugs and Exu [an Orixá, or deity, in Brazil; referred to as "the emblematic representation of the trickster" by scholar Stefania Capone]. It felt like a crossing of paths. I can't always distinguish them. Sometimes I enter my imagination and enter creation with closed eyes. It's not about me necessarily. It's more about my alter ego. So the ladybug is not the ladybug, you know? It's more a combination of pure nature in another plane, with an impure nature inside of me. It's not me alone, it's me and the ladybug... it's me and Exu... it's me and the centipede.

But the centipede is something else. It's a centipede that's also a mountain, a sun or something else entirely. It's layers and layers, and I draw everything that way, too. It's fun sometimes, but sometimes it can be sad because you can't control it. I think the biggest thing I learned in the last year was that it's not possible to control the imagination just in the same way you can't control love. Now I'm accepting the other colors, the low colors and the low vibration, too. I like to move the energy. I want more opportunities to present main energies. I think this is my inspiration, too; not just

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change over time. Artists need time, but sometimes time is not possible. I think in connections, and one of these connections is to the seasons. From summer to winter, you show, you hide. I like this combination. Some of my work is more vibrant, but in this exhibition—I don't have all the answers yet—I think my season's now more winter.



Tadaskia, *changed color shell mudada casca de cor III*, 2024; Oil paint and spray on leather paper, 180 x 145 x 17.5 cm., 70.866 x 57.087 x 6.89 in. Courtesy the artist, photo by Edu Ortega

**After achieving success in Brazil, what was it like to bring your work to the U.S. at a moment when Black and trans people were facing the potential of a hostile presidency?**

[Trump] wants sameness, which is not about sharing power. When I was in San Francisco, I saw a ladybug land in a place with four spiders, and the four spiders tried to eat her head. But it wasn't possible because the ladybug could fly away. So I think the culture of the U.S. doesn't have the same energy of nature. Mainly, these men in power don't want to be prey, Trump in the U.S. and men in Brazil, too. They're only acting in service of people who are like them. They need to change their position and understand that they don't know everything so they can accept others... other cultures and other countries. For a long time, the white man has been the predator. He who has always been the predator needs to learn the other side of that and also be the prey.



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Bringing my work to the U.S., I learned about being prey. Sometimes the U.S. teaches you to be the predator, and sometimes it's not possible. You need to be at the top, but you have to learn to be at the bottom. I know where I'm from; I'm from the bottom. So in the U.S., I learned to be at the top because MoMA is one of the top museums. But at the same time, I knew I was afraid—it's the prey in the space of the predator. It's a big lesson to be in another shell, to be another color, to learn another movement. It's like learning another language, not speaking as well, not completely understanding. It was mesmerizing to live in the U.S., and I think it would be good for Americans to live here in Brazil to learn more about our culture and learn more about Indigenous people. My family is Afro-Indigenous, but we don't know our roots precisely. I think many people want to be equal, and it's difficult to learn to be the different one. Putting on a mask or posing can be a mess, or it can be joyful, like a game. But now it's not a game; now it's a war.

**How do you decide what medium you want to work in next? How are the ideas you explore in each medium similar or different?**

I start with familiarity—with what appears in front of me or next to me. I usually work with materials such as twigs, paper, nail polish, etc. Suddenly I am introduced to distant materials that call to me in an unusual way. This happened with wood veneer and beach grass: something that began during my first stay in the United States. I was getting closer to materials without really knowing what would happen, without any familiarity, I went for the strangeness itself. The ambiguous thing is that with each encounter with strangeness, with difference, there is a fold, a curve or a known line that can be born. A family from another time, from an unknown landscape, with no blood connection, can emerge from the invisible. This can happen with materials, too; at some point, they seem like an alien, a deity or a monster. Later, you learn to love what you don't know so well. Sometimes a material doesn't want to play with you, doesn't want to be part of your repertoire, so you let it go. With others, you create a temporary arrangement, an instant friendship. And just as happens in human relationships, all the material that was once gone can return at some uncontrollable other time.

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### How have you seen yourself change as an artist in the last five years? What are you interested in now versus then?

Now, I have more time to work than before because before, I had to be an artist and educator and live with my family in the outskirts, in a suburb, in a favela far away. Before, I didn't have a studio, and now I do. I have the opportunity to see more of what my work wants from me. Before, it was important to me to balance my work with other activities. Now I have this moment and I think I want to do bigger large-scale works. It's fun because I don't know how to build this imagination yet. I'm feeling my moment. It's my first time next to the beach, and it's my first time in a nice studio with more space to do sculptures. I had been so used to small, shared spaces, and I learned to share them with my family. That shows up in my work. I like this combination of big and small, to show, to hide things. I'm learning to live with differences, but I haven't lived with this conflict in my work until now, I've only lived it in my real life. It's a blessing with my artwork because there, I can put things together that might not normally go together. We call artists sensitive, but the sensitivity isn't exclusive to the world of art. My drawings, paintings and sculptures are a form of this imagination—of this sensitivity that I can share. Sometimes in my life, I've wanted to live with things I know are similar to me, and now I want to live with the strangeness. It can be dangerous, but I think it's better to live with differences instead of sameness.



Tadaskia, *to show to hide mostrar esconder Rastejantes and Zumbidas with my sister Hellen Moraes, my grandma Maria da Graça and my mother Elenice Guarani*, 2020; Inkjet on cotton paper, Edition of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy the artist



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### **What are you interested in exploring next in your work?**

Before, I didn't accept suffering in any form in my work, and I always deviated from the pain. Today I accept the suffering, but I don't get attached to it. I don't want to make myself a martyr. Suffering is a passage; it teaches me that, at some point, I must let go and open myself to the new. That it is necessary to say goodbye. Suffering became a temporary condition for me, unlike how we collectively experience suffering from the social production of slavery. Now I have noticed the distinction between socially produced suffering and suffering as an event of nature, of impure nature. I realized suffering is not necessarily in the created form, but in the journey of arrival to the form, in placing the form (texture, lines, colors...) alive in the world. From the harshest seasons to encountering, like an apparition, those imaginations with oases, fresh fruits, ocean winds and games.

### **You've said that expressing freedom in your work is very important to you—what was your journey toward freedom as a person and as an artist, and how do you translate that into your process?**

I learned to be free, and freedom is something you can share, but sometimes you might have it stolen from you. In my imagination, sensitivity can be freeing, but sometimes you need an institution. I think I work best in between. Sometimes I can be free, sometimes not, sometimes my work can be free, sometimes not, and sometimes I can't talk about freedom, and maybe that's a mistake. So I accept my mistakes now more than before. I accept my fragility. With my fragility, I can't change the world alone. Maybe it's possible to embrace the differences, and what I do within my work really is freedom, little by little. You need to contemplate and sleep and eat and feel joy and cry and be sad. You have to accept the changes because if you don't accept the changes, you suffer so much—every day is depressing. This culture is a culture that can make us depressed and blind with money. I love money, but not in this way. We can do a better job of sharing it between prey and predator. Money is a tool to share, like food, like thought, and you can reject some of it, too. Finding the balance is like a dance. I think sometimes we have to dance more. We need to celebrate more.