

Tadáskía: “The hardest thing is learning to be a prey”

text by Maria Bogado

The Brazilian artist comments on the direction of her new work and reveals literary projects in progress.

If you look closely at Tadáskía's social media, you'll notice that her artwork is not the only recurring subject. She also posts about her exhibitions in renowned museums and galleries in the United States, Brazil, and Europe. The artist often posts videos of herself dancing with lightness and joy in her home. She also increasingly posts excerpts of her poems featuring animals, fantastic characters, and vows of love. It's no coincidence that dance and writing intersect in this virtual space. Text and dancing are two vectors of the same impulse. In life as in art, Tadáskía strives to create a world in motion.

Since her first solo exhibition, in an artistic residency in Barcelona, the artist has been drawing on walls that span entire rooms. She also did this at the São Paulo Biennial in 2023 and at the MoMA in New York in 2024, becoming the first trans artist in the world to work on the walls of that institution. These drawings are erased at the end of the exhibitions with white paint, which supposedly turns spaces neutral and ready to hold other works. The drawings are therefore not made to last over time, but are rather conceived to be transient, akin to the fleeting gestures of dancers. Despite building a poetics of movement, not only with drawings made to be erased, but with the presentation of sculptures made up of perishable organic materials and performances, the artist has been leaving traces in institutions that seek to preserve her legacy for posterity. This is proven by her reception of the K21 Global Art Award, announced on June 10, 2025 by the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen Museum in Germany, which consists of acquiring a work of art for the benefit of the German institution. The attribution of this prize is a noteworthy milestone for the museum, as it marks the inaugural presentation of such an accolade to a Latin American artist.

I visited her studio to find out more about the direction of her new pieces that she is showing in the exhibition “*jour nuit papillon / day night butterfly*”, which opened on July 5, 2025, in Tadáskía's first solo show in France, at the Haute-Vienne Museum of Contemporary Art - Château de Rochechouart. The title of the show suggests two types of butterflies, “day”

and “night” ones, the latest being usually translated as “moth” (*mariposa* in Portuguese). According to Tadaskía, who preserves a certain taste for vagueness, choosing a precise translation is not a necessity, “all the things in my life end up showing me that I'm completely ambiguous, I can't define just one thing”.

We started talking standing up, circling the works, some of which were still in progress. Tadaskía commented that she rarely gives interviews “talking”, preferring to write - “I take writing very seriously, but in a way that doesn't bind me. Writing can bind you and free you too”. As we watched the changing sunlight, which made us see the works differently, Tadaskía told me right away that she would refuse to explain them, “this isn't my job”. Amusingly, she commented on a certain amazement on the part of journalists who are surprised when they interview her: “When you see my interviews, there's that thing that everyone expects, which is a description of the work, getting people to approach it for the information, but come to think of it, there's always something that doesn't make any sense”. I played along and continued, not knowing where the conversation would take us.

Tadaskía pays special attention to the titles of her works, but the words never explain the images, “I like to associate my word with a poem”. She comments that “when you read poetry, you don't approach it through information, you approach it through the senses, through contemplation, more like the character of a game, or play”. Even before her career went international and led her to live a nomadic life, spending time in different countries and cities, Tadaskía was interested in mixing languages. Often, in the titles of her works or conversations, she uses words from different origins in the same sentence. This is what happens in the title of a series of portraits in which she poses for her mother, Elenice Guarani, who took the photographs with an analog camera: “*are you a bicho a bicha?*”, from 2019. This amalgamation is also evident in the title of the series of photographs entitled “*to show to hide*” which was produced in 2020. Perhaps this inspiration came from her childhood, when she attended a Pentecostal church in Santíssimo, in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, and during times of devotion people would speak “in tongues”, a phenomenon characterized by the utterance of words that are not comprehensible to the listener and which have a profound effect on the speaker's spirit.

She is particularly interested in the inevitable variation of meanings present in attempted translations. Her new exhibition makes us think of the translations of moth into English and French, “night butterfly” and “papillon de nuit”, which refer to the sign of the night. This

meaning that accompanies the translations of “moth” may be associated with the selection of a darker palette in some of the works currently in progress. At one point during our conversation, Tadaskia pointed to a hanging work measuring about two by two meters, adorned with a representation of shapes that evoked wings and appeared to move in synchrony with the ambient wind: “this one that's flying is called b.trans.f.”. Seeing the two-sided surface, with a red background, one side covered in dark colors while the other more colorful, I ended up letting the impetus for the explanation slip away. I asked if, after all, the moth was somehow represented in those shapes. As expected, she immediately dodged: “I don't know, that's for you to say”.

But she soon filled the silence by saying that in preparation for the “*flowers and fruits*” show, held at Galpão Bela Maré in Rio de Janeiro in 2023, she began to feel the need to abbreviate the names of her works, like the one she had just shown: “I needed to abbreviate that feeling, that emotion, which was a bit too dense, but I abbreviated it so much that it became something else.” Often, after a while, she forgets the exact content of what was abbreviated - “that's the thing”. This phenomenon, as she herself has noted, offers a certain enigma to the creator herself. There is no longer any way of accessing a supposedly more authentic or original meaning, but what moves her is the possibility of continuous transformation of materials and sensations: “If you abbreviate everything that you thought was too big to become small, the big remains in the small”. For her, the abbreviations are like nicknames for the works, a way of becoming more intimate with them, even if they start to seem more mysterious to others, “there's this thing about a household, where people start calling each other names”. Abbreviations also appear in her poetry, posted in fragments on social media, as in this excerpt presented in her stories in May of this year: “It was a dark stone-colored old man. He could have been a relative, but he wasn't. He could have been a friend, but he wasn't either. He joked, calling E.E. a princess”.

The artist has been writing since she was twelve but has not yet had a book published by a publisher. She has, however, worked with this format twice and has produced bilingual books in English and Portuguese that intersperse excerpts from poems and drawings, such as “*ave preta mística mystical black bird*”, from 2022, and “*lua coelho negra moon black rabbit*”, from 2023. Initially exhibited with the pages sequenced on drawn walls, today they are part of the collections of MoMA and Pinacoteca de São Paulo, respectively. Tadaskia enjoys this game of unleashing her literary writing on social media platforms predominantly utilized for personal

profiles to present biographical information: "I write and these characters, these girls, sort of emerge. There's a closeness between one and the other, but people don't know it. As people read them days apart, what remains, more than a narrative, is a dimension of poetry, right? A rhythm. The somewhat confessional tone almost makes people feel intimate with me, but they're intimate with nothing." A fiction? - I retorted. And for the first and only time, I received an assertive answer: "Yes, of a fiction".

Tadáskia is a voracious reader. When she's reading a book that captures her interest, she allows everything around her to be perceived through the new lenses presented by the text. Her curiosity ranges from literature and philosophy to religiosity and various mystical practices. She doesn't confine herself to any particular tradition. "When I'm feeling intense, I like to read literature because it's like a waterfall. Philosophy, on the other hand, is the opposite. I think it has something earthy about it; it's more like school." When I started following her work in 2018, Gilles Deleuze and Conceição Evaristo inspired her. It would be nearly impossible to list all the authors about whom I've heard Tadáskia give heated commentary, whether critical or enthusiastic. A few authors whose work she discussed include Paul Gilroy, bell hooks, Jota Mombaça, Castiel Vitoriano Brasileiro, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Fred Moten. In the discussion concerning the exhibition, the two authors who orbited her reflections on the moths were Sidarta Ribeiro and Byung-Chul Han. But, most of all, what mobilizes the artist's work are images that erupt from the world, "I make works because I am tied to my sensibility. There is an involvement with my sensibility and with the sensibility that is available in nature, because what is the earth if not the great producer of wonders and dazzles?".

One of these images appeared in her new home: "When I arrived at my apartment, right after moving in, it was full of moths. I'd never seen that, it was as if I'd found a new way of reading life". To understand what "the moth could be saying", she turned to science and discovered that "moths get upset by artificial light. Some people think they love these lights, but the opposite is true." Moths use the light of the moon to orient themselves. Their eyes are on their backs. When light hits them, it directs them in the opposite direction of the moon. Given the long distance between the insects and the moon, their flight paths end up being long and stable. It's as if, when fleeing the moonlight, the moths inscribe circles in the sky so large that their curvatures are barely perceptible. When they see small artificial lights up close, the curve they make to distance themselves causes them to fly in small circles. This angle doesn't produce distance but leads them to stay close to the same axis. As Tadáskia describes, "They

enter a loop of eternal repetition until they die, a wind blows, or someone turns off the light." She added that "the moths nowadays are born modified by urban lights and fly less." For her, "sometimes we're much more like a looping moth than we realize, but socially we don't always pay attention to it because we've lost the ability to look around". However, the act of observing, cultivated with gusto by the artist, shows that nothing is absolute: "one day there was a light on and I saw a moth turning away from the light. I found that so curious."

Tadáskia doesn't seek judgment in the face of these images she sees: "I used to be very moral, I even saw luck as something good or bad, luck could be good or bad, until Clarissa Diniz [curator and writer] once said something so beautiful, that luck has no morals". Faced with this luck of having seen the moths, she preferred to react with questions: "Freedom is the great game of this world - it gives me goosebumps - what is a moth that used to be guided by the light of the moon and then starts to be guided by millions of lights? Lost?". I was curious to know what freedom would be for her, and she reacted once again by deviating from the explanatory act: "Oh, Maria, I'll tell you that I don't know what freedom is, but I'm there, orienting myself towards it, but there's also a lot of repetition, I get into a lot of loops and then I feel freedom when I get out of the loop. For me, that's the greatest thing, it's like 'wow', now I'm doing it."

Anyone following the artist's work can easily perceive these changes that occur when she breaks out of loops or, following her reasoning, finds freedom. In the exhibition "*Projects: Tadáskia*", held at MoMA, after experimenting with immense scales by making drawings on those monumental walls, Tadáskia turned to elements as small and fragile as eggshells: "When you see a wall at MoMA, there's everything there but the limit. There's an extrapolation of the limit there, but I go back and do small things, I go back to predetermined forms, when I deal with logs, when I make arrangements." For the artist, "the feeling of freedom is always modifiable, because sometimes you can feel free while being in completely restricted situations". And sometimes, in a more radical sense, even the figure of the prey can represent liberation: "socially we learn to be a predator, we learn to hunt instead of being prey, to surrender, to be the prey of time itself, to be the prey of life".

After reaching the highest points on the walls, unreachable by anyone in the audience, the artist chose to leave the arrangements on the floor as prey, alongside perishable elements — willow branches, fruit, and vegetables, among others — ready to decay beneath human eyes. With serenity, she comments, "Then we'd have to look for the difference between prey and

prison. We can think of prey as almost food, as an offering. But we can't just be easy prey, can we?" She laughs heartily and concludes, "The hardest thing is learning to be prey. But you can't be prey to just anyone or any circumstance."

In May, while working on her new exhibition, she posted verses on social media: "I would love/ to be the food/ of that morning/ special glow/ pinch and wine/ open/ sauce, leaves/ (zum zum zum)/ delivered". We don't know who the protagonist of this desire to become a happy prey is - the one who refuses the position of predator by choice. Perhaps it's a moth, a girl, the artist herself. The fact is that, when observing Tadaskia's trajectory, we see the unfolding of a fictional plot in continuous displacement, whether with the most diverse materials or words.

The impulsion for movement contained in her work proved to be an unsuitable element within the confines of contemporary art and her fictions ended up on the street, at popular festivals. At this year's Rio Carnival, the artist - wearing make-up by her sister, professional dancer and teacher Hellen Morais - crossed the Sapucaí on a carnival float from the Paraíso do Tuiuti school. To talk about the storyline "Who's afraid of Xica Manicongo?", Tadaskia created a mural of around six meters high, made up of dry pastel, charcoal and spray, which she paraded suspended and shaking over the float. Brought from the Congo to Salvador, Bahia, as an enslaved person in the 16th century, Xica was the first non-indigenous trans to be recorded in Brazilian history. Next to Tadaskia, important figures in the fight for the rights of trans people in Brazil took part in the parade, such as activist Indianare Siqueira, councillor Amanda Paschoal, MP Duda Salabert and MP Erika Hilton.

In the collective dance that took place on the carnival avenue, there was a momentary fulfillment of the wishes printed in "*ave preta mística mystical black bird*", which begins with a dedication "to black sisters and black brothers/ de fora/ to black women and black trans people/ to people who care about children/ and to people who are equally children/ at heart." In the verses alternating with the drawings, Tadaskia oscillates between writing as "I" or "we". Sometimes she proclaims, "We are ready for a journey of freedom" and envisions "our winged transformation", and at other times, she simply states, "I'm a ballerina". By aligning with the artist's perspective, these abbreviations enable the continuation of the macrocosm within the microcosm. Therefore, it can be posited that the colors and movement—or flight—of these works suspended in the air, taken to France, evoke a carnival of people—or birds and moths—who find themselves dancing on routes of freedom.

