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The

# Naomi Diaries





## Woman of the Cloth

Glamorous and wickedly cool, an artist's work takes on the beau monde—one stitch at a time.

**L**eopolda Bolhanseck is the kind of woman one tends to envy. She is impossibly slender and tall. Her hair is almost always in an elegant chignon; her lips, the perfect crimson red. She lines her eyes with turquoise blue and is glamorous enough to pull it off. And Mrs. Bolhanseck is, without exception, always impeccably dressed—chic belted shirtdress; sleek scarlet trenchcoat; animal-print coat with a fur collar.

One thing, though: Mrs. Bolhanseck is pure fiction, a figment belonging to the vibrant



“Sometimes the fabrics drive you to the story. You have pink fabric; you see a naked man,” says Paula Sanz Caballero.

Vanity, 2005, an illustration by Paula Sanz Caballero



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"This technique allows me to be more free to talk about raw stories."



Clockwise from top left: Paula Sanz Caballero at her home in Valencia, Spain; detail from *Aloisius Dream*, 2006; *Mr. and Mrs. Sanz*, 2007; *Corset*, 2006; *Suitcases*, 2006.



imagination of Spanish artist Paula Sanz Caballero. The flawlessly clothed and coiffured dame is just one of the many illustrated individuals in Sanz Caballero's oeuvre, which also includes Mrs. B's husband, Aloisius, a natty, bespectacled dandy of a man, and their similarly tony friends, Ana Victoria and Tadeus Longodini.

Sanz Caballero has brought such characters to life in the fashion pages of publications from British *Elle* and Spanish *Vogue* to Italy's *La Repubblica* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, as well as in ad campaigns for Ann Taylor, Bloomingdale's, Tokyo mega-shopping complex Coredo Nihonbashi and even porcelain-knickknack maker Lladro. She has also designed book covers—Nikki Gemmill's *Pleasure: An Almanac for the Heart*, for example—and greeting cards for stationery specialist Roger la Borde, all featuring her fashion-loving folk.

While her characters' world is one of endless fabulousness, the artist's own is more homespun. She illustrates with swatches of fabric and a needle and thread rather than with more traditional media. Thus her inventions pop stylishly, each stitch and hand-embroidered ensemble as telling as a brushstroke. "I'm fascinated with the possibilities of fabric," says Sanz Caballero over lunch in midtown Manhattan, "and the potential of fabric as a way of expression."

Because she comes from a family of textile factory owners going as far back as the early 1900s, it may have been inevitable that Sanz Caballero's career would build on the tradition. "My background from my parents and the town where I was born [Onteniente, Spain] is all fabrics and textiles," she says. Nevertheless, she was a bookish child who showed little interest in the family business. "At Catholic school, I was the worst one at sewing lessons," she recalls. "Life is surprising sometimes."

It was an odd cocktail of elements that eventually led Sanz Caballero to her embroidered paintings, one in which kismet, rather than any particular affinity for fashion or crafts, played a large part. In her late 20s she worked as a flight attendant for Air Nostrum, a subsidiary of Iberia Airlines. (Why the fine-arts graduate ended up there: to be near her then beau, also an employee of the airline.) On a trip to Toronto, she happened to find a piece of blue fabric a passenger had left behind. Without a novel or sketchbook to keep her busy during the long flight, she started to sew, using thread from a hotel sewing kit, and mixed in a pink textile scrap that she found in her bag. By the time she reached Canada, Sanz Caballero had created her first embroidered figure: a naked man, soon to be joined by a Chanel-clad woman. "He was bald, with a big stomach and very pinky, pinky-looking skin. Sometimes the fabrics

drive you to the story. You have pink fabric; you see a naked man," she explains in her soft Valencian lilt.

Now, a decade after that journey, Sanz Caballero, 37, has made this type of needlework her signature, and her "people" have gotten a serious fabric upgrade. She describes her house in Valencia as "a library of fabrics," scoured from textile shops, street fairs and her family's factories. But if she can't find that perfect swatch, Sanz Caballero says, "I'll cut my own clothes. I can't help it."

Yet despite all the corset gowns, off-the-shoulder blouses and Seventies-print frocks in Sanz Caballero's illustrations, fashion isn't her main theme—at least when it comes to her uncommissioned gallery work. The primary subject she explores in these cases is human relationships, and Sanz Caballero focuses on characters from the rarefied echelon of high society to unveil how things are not always as perfect as they seem. So look closely: Mr. and Mrs. Bolhanseck, oh-so-cool though they may appear, almost never interact with each other. But Mr. Bolhanseck is certainly attentive to Mrs. Longodini.

And sometimes Sanz Caballero looks beyond personal male-female relationships. In one series, for example, she inserts rather disturbing elements, like a body sprawled to the side, to which her beautiful people seem oblivious. "You live in an easy world, not worrying about the problems outside," explains Sanz Caballero. "Maybe you're scared of the ugliness out there and don't want to know." Other sets have the Bolhansecks constantly traveling from one jetset point to the next, with suitcases in each frame suggesting figurative as well as literal baggage. "You travel because you want to find new things and forget about the past," the artist explains. "But that's impossible. You're carrying all the weight of your experiences, your remorse, your past, everything."

Treating these issues in something like oils, Sanz Caballero admits, would be quite heavy and intense. "Doing [them] in embroidery, it looks—funny," she says, pausing to search for the right word. "This technique allows me to be more free to talk about raw stories, but in this humorous, ironic language."

And it's a language in which, ultimately, clothes do make the man—or the chic, beanpole-like woman. "I think about what they're wearing very seriously in each picture," says Sanz Caballero. "But the fashion I'm concerned about is the fashion that explains the character. If Leoparda is in an Acapulco hotel swimming pool, she is wearing a coat. It's to add an element of how faraway and ridiculous she can be." And then the artist adds, "Funny thing, even this way, she looks cool."

—VENESSA LAU