

Planes, Tarot and a literary mystery for Irene Alameda

Precocious novelist reveals the twists and turns of her path to fame

PABLO GUIMÓN, Madrid
Her father has one surprising hobby, and the daughter another. He is an engineer who likes to read the cards, while she is a writer who flies planes. When she was four years old, Irene Zoe Alameda asked daddy if he would consult the Tarot to find out if she was going to be a writer when she grew up.

The cards didn't lie. The little girl grew and when she was 11, she wrote her first tale — a story she keeps to this day “about a group of kids who go into the woods and get lost.” After that, rather like the children in her first story, Irene also got a little lost.

Going against her Tarot-determined destiny, she went in for sciences at high school, and ended up starting a degree in Aeronautical Engineering. But she only lasted a year, before she gave in to her fate and switched to Spanish Philology. She has, however, kept one personal trait from her first-choice degree: she likes to fly planes.

“Whenever I can, I go to an airfield and hire a small plane — although since September 11, the truth is that one is more scared about taking commercial flights,” the 29-year-old admits. Irene was living in Manhattan when the Twin Towers were attacked, but she didn't know a thing about it until the phone began to ring as friends from Spain called in to check on her.

Irene didn't notice much of what was going on at that time — she had shut herself in her flat to write her first novel, a

story that had been buzzing around inside her head since she was an aeronautic student. The main character is a mechanic: a plane mechanic, naturally. It took Irene five years to get down on paper the adventures of Teo, a young man trapped inside a life he hates.

After experiencing a tragedy, Teo flees his native Madrid and finds work as an airport mechanic in Brussels, then meets a mysterious girl called Noella and begins to have dreams which disclose information about his own life that he did not know. “I finished the novel in March, 2003, and by Novem-

“My aim was not to narrate, but to allow the stories to exist as we experience life.”

ber I had already found a publisher.” The title is *Sueños Itinerantes* (Itinerant Dreams) and has been described as a daring debut, unafraid of taking a few risks.

One of these risks is the absence of a narrator: the very first words of the book are “My name is Teo,” and from there on, we enter the mind of the character. “I don't see a narrator as a necessity,” Irene explains. “There are books, like confessions, in which you know why someone is telling their story. But in others, you don't. My book is the thinking of a charac-

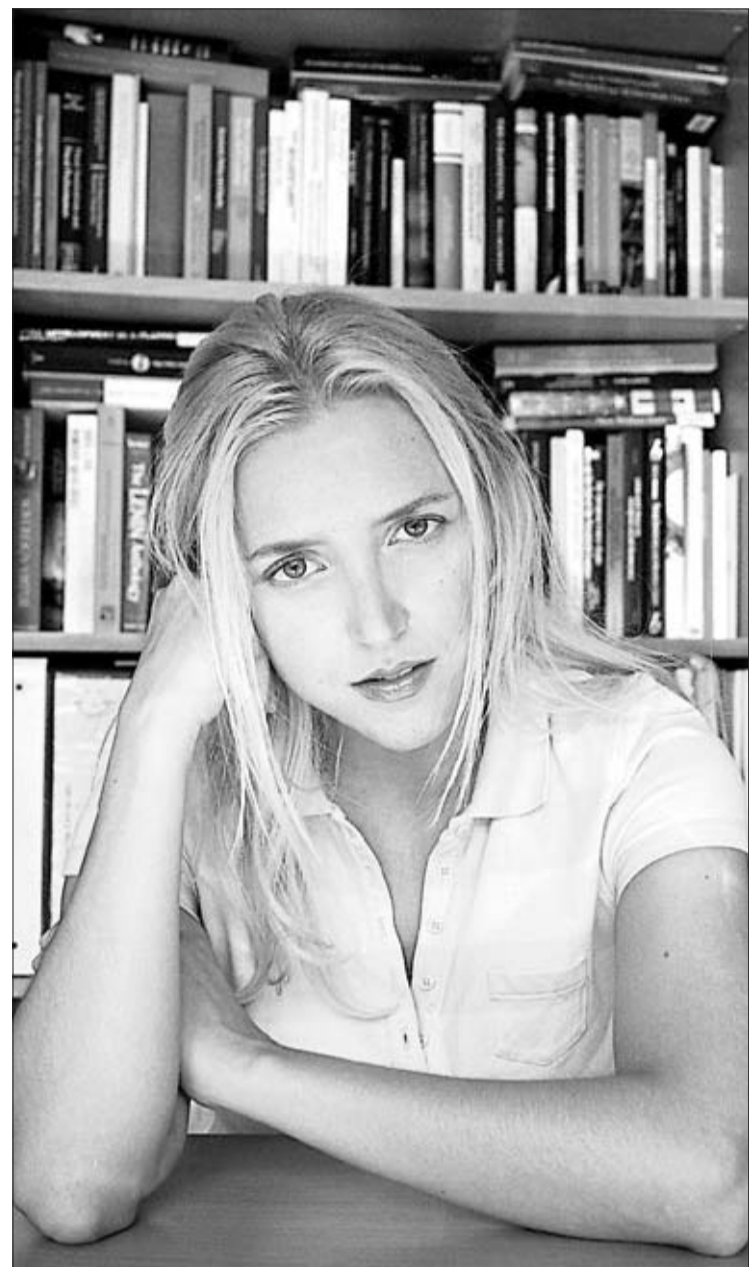
ter, and I wanted the narrator to be the actual reader as he or she interprets the text. My aim was not to narrate. Not to tell the stories, but just allow them to exist just as we experience life.”

This is why the pages are littered with signs. A man is signified by the scientific gender arrow symbol while water is “H₂O.”

“When you think about the number one, you don't think of o-n-e, you see the figure 1. I think this is all coherent with the mental processes of the character.” While writing the book in her Harlem apartment, Irene taught at Colombia University and studied until she got her doctorate in Literature. “I did those three things every day,” she recalls. “Classes, the thesis and the novel.”

Despite her scientific inclinations, Irene describes herself as someone who has “always been a great reader.” Of other young Spanish writers of today, she prefers Isaac Rosa, with whom she shares the same publishing house. She has even found time to dabble in cinema, writing a few scripts and even directing her own short film.

With the novel now in print, Irene has returned to Spain and lives in the outskirts of Madrid. She has returned to university work, where she busies herself trying to find out the real identity of someone calling himself Fulano. (This is a typical name used in Spanish to describe an anonymous person in a story, something like John Doe.) “I'm trying to work out who was the



Irene Zoe Alameda is a keen aircraft pilot.

writer of a 1632 manuscript, signed Fulano,” she explains. “It's a kind of cross between a picaresque tale and a travel book — a wonderful text that was never published. I want to know what was in Fulano's library, what he did in life... texts leave a lot of clues about an au-

thor.” The style in *Sueños Itinerantes* means that its writer remains something of a mystery, however.

Perhaps the next book will give us more clues? “It's going to be different to the first one,” Irene announces. “Even less conventional.”

A Spanish, Andalusian and yet universal artist

A new retrospective of Daniel Vázquez Díaz's work showcases his broad appeal

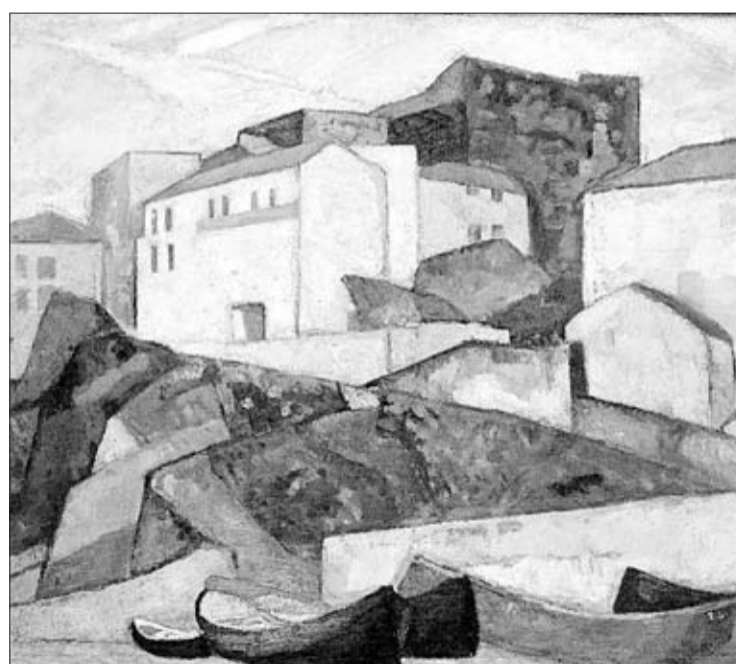
FRANCISCO CALVO SERRALLER
An ambitious retrospective brings together more than 90 paintings and about 50 drawings, 15 engravings and a wide range of sketches, water colors, and oils, to illustrate the life of the Andalusian-born painter Daniel Vázquez Díaz. Vázquez spent most of his life working in the Basque Country, where he exercised a strong influence throughout the first half of the 20th century.

Vázquez Díaz died in 1969 at the age of 87, relatively unknown, and just four years before his contemporary, Picasso. Arguably the most popular of Spain's avant garde painters, Vázquez Díaz inspired several artists from different generations, among them Rafael Canogar.

Not only were both Picasso and Vázquez Díaz from Andalusia, but they lived in Paris during the same period, with Vázqu-

ez leaving in 1916. But if his stay in the French capital coincided with the crucial years of the avant garde, allowing him to witness at first hand the genesis of modern painting, it did little to change his artistic approach when he returned to Spain. Indeed, he soon developed what was to become his hallmark style, which has been described as a synthesis between the language of post-Cubism and an assimilation of the historic traditions of Spain.

In this sense, as José Francés has noted, Vázquez Díaz straddles both the very modern and the very old. His place in the Spanish school is very particular, and might be seen as the antithesis of the wilder school of expressionism; part of that mineral, crystalline current, exemplified by Juan de Herrera, Zurbarán, Meléndez, or even Juan Gris. This might explain the difficulties that domestic audiences



Las barcas en la rampa (1919), by Daniel Vázquez Díaz.

face in assimilating his work, which is undoubtedly Spanish, but not in any clichéd sense.

In this sense, and in others, such as the specific role that Vázquez Díaz played in the development and meaning of the avant garde movement in this country, the real merit of this retrospective is that it confronts us with a wide range of examples of his work over the course

of his life and career, through which we can attain a clearer idea of his style, which was a beacon in Spanish art between 1920 and at least 1950. I have already mentioned his contribution to the modernization of art in the Basque Country, which fell into the analytical approach and constructive solidity of Cézanne and above all Gris. Vázquez Díaz is all the more outstand-

ing if one bears in mind that the rainy landscape of the Basque Country, dominated by vegetation, usually inspires the use of color — to the point of exaltation — rather than a geometric dimension.

At the same time, this proved the best way to avoid the folkloric approach, which exercised such an influence in the regionalist painting of the early 20th century in Spain, driven by the so-called Generation of 98, and by the nationalist fervor brewing in Castile and other regions of the country.

This exhibition highlights Vázquez Díaz's contribution to the language of the avant garde. He was cosmopolitan, but did not turn his back on Spanish traditions — something which a number of younger painters attempted in the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, this retrospective shows that Vázquez Díaz's rigor is not simply a question of coldness, but that he was gifted with an admirable sensibility and sense of refinement, as the visitor will appreciate before the finest works of a painter who was Andalusian, Spanish, and universal at the same time.

Daniel Vázquez Díaz 1882-1969. Until January 10 at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.