Ruskin sometimes worked himself into a rage when he found people facing away from a sunset, as if they did not know it was there. I have seen something similar in exhibitions where crowds devoured long introductory panels, leaving the paintings more or less undisturbed.

There was no fear of such misapplication of effort at the exhibition at the AA on the Mexican architect Luis Barragán, who died in 1988. This exhibition was the least cluttered by explanation I have ever seen. It consisted of a series of identical six-inch squares running round a long room. These were photographs by Kim Zwarts, laminated onto card, which seemed to float half an inch in front of the gallery wall. The images were small and fragmentary: little peep-holes onto a larger world. Each of them gave you a small patch of coloured wall: a wall with a strong shadow crossing it, water spilling from a pipe propped on it, a window taking a sizeable portion of it away. Down the centre of the room ran a wall made of plans, sections and elevations of the most hard-to-tell-apart kind, hung on a line, like a metaphysical laundry. They had been redrawn for the show by Wim van den Bergh and Wiel Arets.

The whole effect was ineffable, like a sculpture by Donald Judd which feels as if it will never end. There were labels, but they only gave you as much of a clue as the inscriptions of Duchamp ready-mades, with names of Mexican suburbs or clients of which you had never heard. But asking for fuller inscriptions is like wanting explanatory placards in front of your sunsets. You really ought to be able to name, or not name, the colours for yourself.

Still, I found it a mildly painful experience, trying to sort these gorgeous little slivers of Mexican sunlight. In some literal sense it was as vivid as could be, yet it felt like being blindfolded. Perhaps the message is that it is better not to view the different Barragán projects conventionally and discretely, but to treat them as images in a dream, which move across the sunburnt landscape while retaining a single shape.

It is true that Barragán’s architecture is strangely disembodied — which is why people are always comparing it to paintings. But the paintings of de Chirico and Magritte (whom you will hear mentioned if you listen to even a sentence about Barragán) do not seem the right ones. Their worlds are much more real and populous than his.

It is true that he omitted — when he spoke — great clouds of purple poetry to interpret his work. But, if you look at the work and not the pronouncements, you will find a strict minimalist who could not tolerate furniture in rooms, or leaves in gardens. On his own house there is a roof terrace from where the view of the ground was progressively walled off. The final refinement is to see only the sky overhead and weightless planes of colour all around.

Barragán abstracted the wall from the dwelling but preserved its power to exclude — a kind of regulator. He loved water but used it in only two states, lying flat and falling down. He seemed to like best of all imagining it as a prone wall which trembles now and then.

He professed a great love for the native culture of Mexico but, in spite of the large slabs of earth colours in his landscapes, the works all seem the most determined rebuttal to the squalor of his country. His response was to sweep it away entirely and retreat into purely mental spaces. Solitude is the only religion here.

For me the archetypal Barragán structure is a stairway pleated like an accordion, made of cantilevered boards, with no rail. At the top is a closed door. It would be a foolish and literal-minded guest who decided to put his foot on this object of contemplation. Mounting the stairs at the AA, in fact, you came to some much less baffling and stylish buildings, including one where you could see what happened to Barragán’s ideas when they encountered the surrounding reality. But this is not what we want him for; when he turned practical, he could be awfully prosaic.

Robert Harbison

The above is a revised version of a review published in the Architects’ Journal of 14 March 1990. Reprinted by permission of the Deputy Editor.

Photographs on pp. 72–7 by Kim Zwarts.
GALVEZ HOUSE
San Angel, Mexico City
1955
SATellite City Towers
in collaboration with Mathias Goeritz
Queretaro Highway, Mexico City
1957
MASTER PLAN FOR LAS ARBOLEDAS
Mexico City
1958–61
The Red Wall, 1958
Plaza and Fountain of the Trough, 1959
GILARDI HOUSE
Tacubaya, Mexico City
1976
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