The Magical Realism of Barragan's *La Casa Gilardi*

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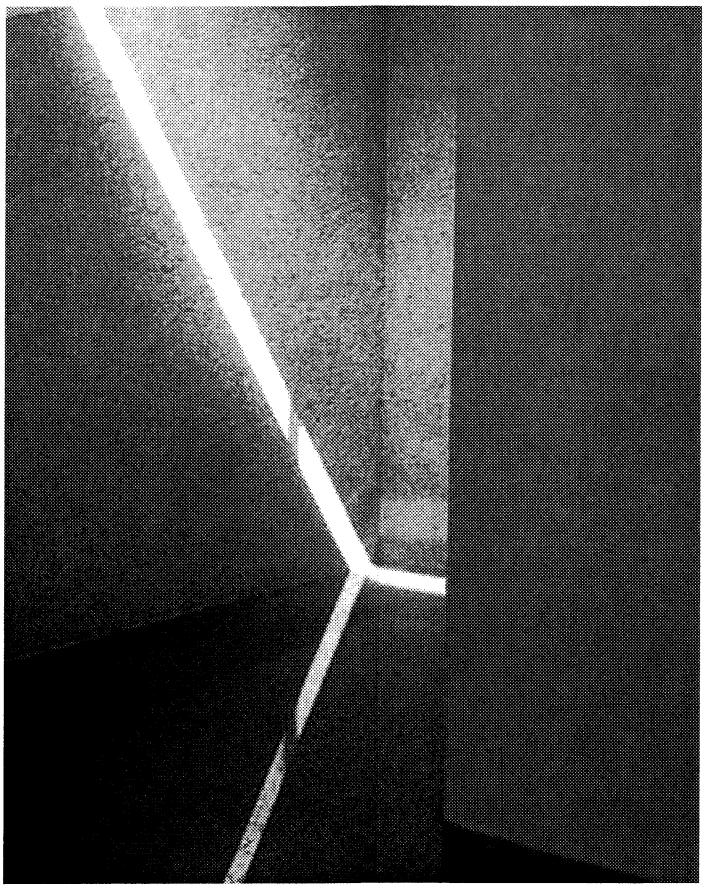

Figure 1 ***indoor pool at la Casa Gilardi.***

> *"On Wednesday night, as they did every Wednesday, the parents went to the movies. The boys, lords and masters of the house, closed the doors and windows and broke the glowing bulb in one of the living room lamps. A jet of golden light as cool as water began to pour out of the broken bulb, and they let it run to a depth of almost three feet. Then they turned off the electricity, took out the rowboat, and navigated at will among the islands in the house."*

As with the fantastic imagery suggested by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in "*Light is like Water*," Luis Barragan fuses light into water at the

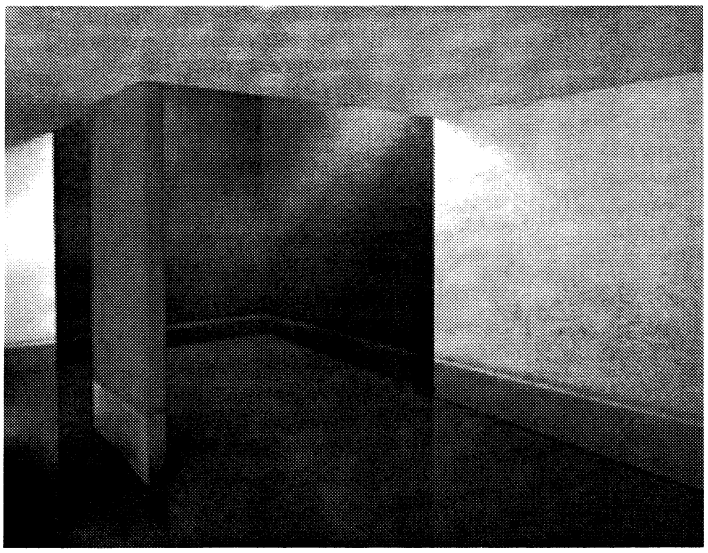

Figure 2 ***indoor pool at la Casa Gilardi.***

indoor pool of La Casa Gilardi in Mexico City. (Figures 1,2) Through this melding of water and light, writer and architect reveal to us the liquid quality of light that might be perceived through child-like eyes of wonder. Like Marquez, Barragan uncannily isolates water from nature within the confines of domestic space to reveal its essential property of fluidity. In Marquez's short story, light *pours* from an electric light bulb and in a similar fashion, at La Casa Gilardi, a slot of light seemingly pours from a tiny skylight forming a pool of water below. To support this illusion, Barragan reduces the saturation of color at the base of the vividly painted wall planes. The resulting spatial-temporal experience is surrealistic or *Magically Real*, eluding Western modern and post-modern categorization.

While architectural critics have recognized the recurring theme of solitude in Barragan's work, its indebtedness to Mexican vernacular traditions, its "surrealistic" tendencies and its relationship to the metaphysical paintings of Georgio de Chirico, critics have failed to acknowledge the more ontologically based Latin American tradition of the 'fantastic' that has come to be known as *Magical Realism*. Although critics have not connected Barragan's work to that of the Latin American Magical Realist genre, Barragan, in his 1975

Figure 3 **indoor pool at la Casa Gilardi.**

Pritzker Prize address, referred to magic as an essential ingredient in his architecture: *"I think that the ideal space must contain elements of magic, serenity, sorcery and mystery."*

According to literary historians, the term Magic Realism was coined in the 1920's by German artist and art critic, Franz Roh, to describe post-expressionist paintings that revealed the "*uncanny inherent in and behind the object detectable only by objective accentuation, isolation and microscopic depiction.*" This pictorial expression later came to be largely associated with the de-familiarization of common place elements "*that have become invisible because of their familiarity.*" The expression *Magic Realism* was used at various times to describe the fantastic nature of the work of artists ranging from the German writer Franz Kafka to Italian painter Georgio de Chirico. Literary critics have traced the introduction of Magic Realism in Latin America to the publication of *Revista de Occidente* in 1927. By 1955, Angel Flores had appropriated the expression "*Magical Realism*" to describe that which, in the 1940's, Luis Borges had deemed the *fantastico* to describe the "*outsized reality*" of Latin America. Gabriel Garcia Marquez explains: "*Magical Realism expands the categories of the real so as to encompass myth, magic and other extraordinary phenomena in nature or experience which European Realism excluded.*"

Unlike the surrealist imagery of odd juxtapositions derived from individual dream states and visions, Magical Realism, as appropriated by Latin American writers, articulates a collective "*expectation of the miraculous in everyday life.*" This collective sensibility is born from the unique historical, cultural and physical landscape of Latin America. In Mexico, as in all Latin American countries, the restructuring of feudal systems of land ownership did not take place over the course of several centuries as in it did in Europe, nor was there an industrial revolution. Instead the relatively recent and rapid development of Latin America has led to rather sudden shifts in a myth-based traditional society. Adding to this abrupt societal transformation, these sudden transformations in social structure, land ownership and technology were overlaid atop a "mestizaje" society that included Indian, Spanish and African ethnic groups. Cuban author Alejo Carpentier describes the resulting fantastic landscape as the "*Marvelous American Reality*" and tells us,

Figure 4 **Inoccent Erendira** *Mexican ex-voto illustrating the supernatural visitation of a patron saint.*

> *"The fantastic is not to be discovered by subverting or transcending reality with abstract forms and manufactured combinations of images. Rather the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realties of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's history geography, demography and politics, not by manifesto."*

Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo makes a similar distinction between the rationally derived "irrational art" of the surrealist movement and the "fantastic" nature of her work. In the 1930's Andre Breton, founder of the Surrealist movement, described Mexico as the "*surrealist place par excellence*" and claimed Mexican painter Frida Kahlo as one of their own. But Kahlo, Barragan's artistic contemporary, exerted that the fantastic tendencies in her paintings was not the stuff of surrealist dreams, but born from her Mexican reality: "*I never painter my dreams, I painted my own reality.....I never knew I was a surrealist until Andre Breton told me I was.*"

In Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace*,(Figure3) she freely mixes images alluding to both Aztec and Catholic beliefs. According to art critic, Sarah Lowe, the black monkey perched on Kahlo's left shoulder is symbolic of the Aztec belief that gods could trans-

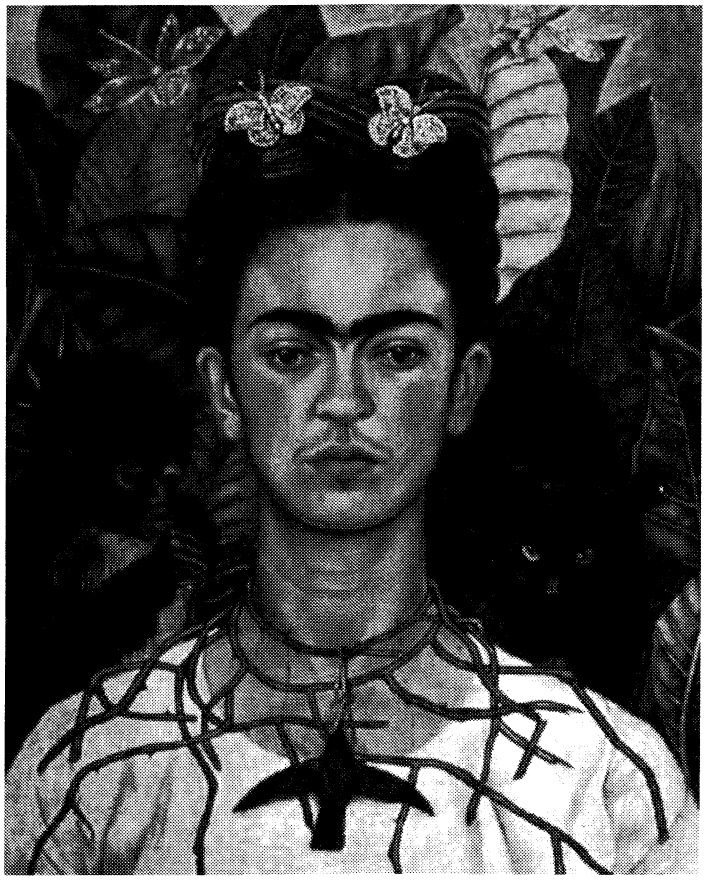

Figure 5 **Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace,** Frida Kahlo

form themselves into their animal altar egos. A backdrop of dense foliage suggests that Kahlo, like the fictional Magical Realist character Eva Luna, came *"into the world with the jungle on my breath."*

Kahlo's references to Aztec mythology and its' ancient past are interwoven with symbols of her Catholic faith. The necklace of thorns around Kahlo's neck alludes to the death of Christ, while its attached bird amulet suggests flight and transcendence. A black cat staring at the observer is symbolic of the ever present reality of death, but butterflies, in various states of metamorphosis, hover above Kahlo's head alluding to the resurrection. One of the most potent readings that emerges from this painting eludes the traditional western separation of mind and body, self and world. Kahlo's self-portrait gives us an identity and subjective reality that cannot be separated from collective memories and belief systems. Kahlo's tells us that her *"own reality"* is informed by a complex web of past and present, of the collective and the individual of the physical landscape and the interior landscape of her own psyche.

Kahlo also alludes to the intertwining of self and world in her painting *"The Accident,"* which describes her miraculous recovery from a nearly fatal street-car crash when she was a teenager. In this painting, Kahlo draws upon the format of the ex-voto, the Mexican vernacular images painted on tin, canvas, and wood that depict two simultaneous realities - the earthly, portrayed with a journalistic clarity, and the divine presented in the form of a patron saint. Intertwining fact and faith, the ex-voto depicts an image of divine intervention to commemorate one's miraculous recovery from a sickness or an accident. as in all myth based cultures, the purpose of the art image is not to give voice to individual expressions or to realistically depict a subject, but exists instead to allow its maker and its viewer to participate in natural or cosmic processes. Muralist Diego Rivera, Kahlo's husband, comments on the significance of the ex-voto: *"...believing only in miracles and the reality of beings and things, he paints both of these in the retablo (ex-voto) ... he makes miraculous events ordinary and turns everyday things into miracles."* Kahlo uses this unique relationship between image, maker, and viewer to articulate a unique Latin American identity.

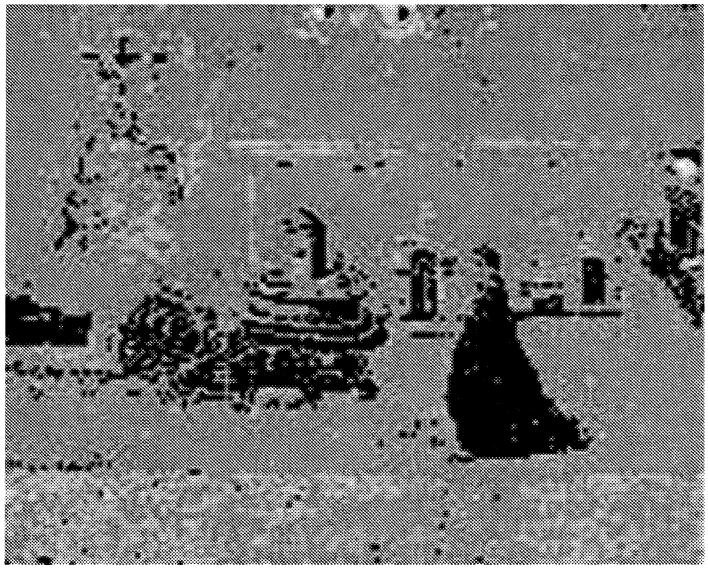

Figure 6 **"Our Lady of Anguish"** *Traditional Mexican ex-voto illustrating the super-natural visitation of a patron saint.*

As the ex-voto reveals, the melding of the ordinary and the everyday with the mysterious and esoteric is the nature of the Mexican landscape. In his book The Architecture of Mexico: Yesterday and Today, published in 1969, Hans Beacham wrote:

> *"Nearly twenty years ago, during a rainstorm in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, we were invited to take shelter and refreshments with an old shepherd and his wife. His thatched hut was warm, dry and impeccably clean. On the wall hung a small plaster statue of the Virgin, painted pink and blue. Illuminated by a candle, she was standing on a half-moon. To her left hung a bright chromium-plated hubcap from a 1935 Plymouth. The combination, though startling, did not seem incorrect."*

Barragan, like Kahlo, was also very much informed by this faith-oriented society in which the invisible plane of existence merges and co-mingles with daily life. Barragan stated in his Pritzker Prize acceptance lecture, *"The irrational logic harbored in the myths and in all true religious experiences has been the fountainhead of the artistic process at all times and in all places."* In Barragan's private residence, Calle Francisco Ramirez 14, the Catholic cross, as an expression of Barragan's private faith, emerges in a variety of forms and is integrated with its domestic surroundings. A view of the courtyard is framed by a large glass picture window from which subtlety emerges a cruciform. As is typical of most Mexican homes,

Figure 7 ***La Casa Barragan***

Figure 9 ***Corridor to indoor pool***

sculptures of saints and other religious icons are placed throughout Barragan's house and garden. On the roof terrace the cross takes the form of a relief. This unexpected juxtaposition of spiritual images with everyday life articulates the interconnectedness of faith and life in Mexico and throughout Latin America. In the following passage, Alejo Carpentier recalls a series of historic events of mythic proportions that reveal how faith informs the Latin American perception of reality.

> *"The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in history of the continent .... [There is Mexico's] Benito Juarez's little black carriage, in which he transports the whole nation of Mexico on four wheels over the country's roads, without an office or a place to write or a palace to rest, and from that little carriage he manages to defeat the three most powerful empires of the era. Juana de Azurduy, the prodigious Bolivian guerrilla, precursor of our wars of independence, takes a city in order to rescue the head of the man she loved, which was displayed on a pike in the Main Plaza. Haiti's Mackandal makes thousands of slaves in Haiti believe that he has lycanthropic powers, that he can change into a bird or a horse, a butterfly, an insect, whatever his heart desires, and foments one of the first authentic revolutions of the New World."*

Carpentier's passage reveals the commonly held Latin American belief systems that intertwine the simultaneous realities of the earthly and the divine and accounts, at least in part, for recognized affinities between the work of Kahlo, Barragan and the Italian metaphysical (or Magic Realistic) painter de Chirico. De Chirico, like Kahlo and Barragan, sought to reveal the invisible plane of existence behind the visible plane of day to day life. Utilizing the Russian Formalist strategy of de-familiarization to emphasize common elements that have become "invisible" because of their familiarity, de Chirico sought to create a momentary "lapse in conditioned thinking" that allows one to see things ordinarily beyond one's perception. De Chirico explains *"under the shadow of surprise, one loses the thread of human logic – the logic to which we have been geared since childhood. ....faculties forget, lose their memory."* Exaggerating the normal conditions of light and shadow, de Chirico placed commonplace fruits and vegetables in vast, otherwise empty, melancholic spaces to create a disturbing and unsettling sensation. Barragan's architecture of stark, empty courtyards with strong con-

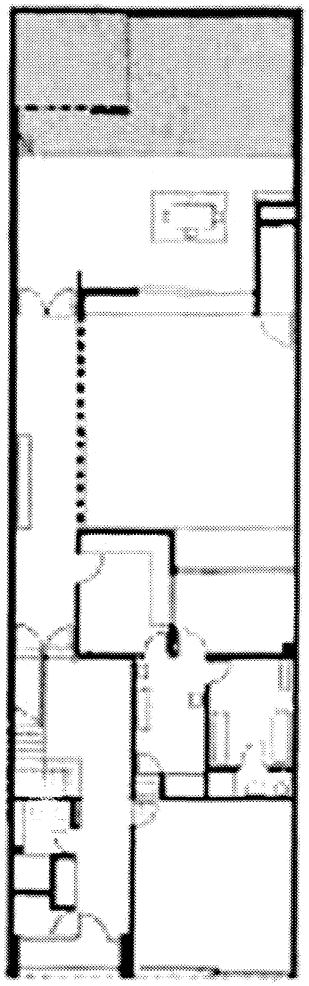

Figure 8 ***La Casa Gilardi - plan***

Figure 10 ***Dining Table off of pool***

trasting shadows resonate with the empty, melancholic piazzas of de Chirico's paintings. This strange and unsettling quality also appears at Barragan's private garden, Avenida San Jeronimo, where headless torsos, removed from their normal context and arranged in and around a waterfall, appear as alienated from their surroundings as do the eerily mute mannequins in de Chirico's *Disquieted Muses.*

The Gilardi house, one of Barragan's last projects, was designed for an art collector, Francisco Gilardi, between 1975 and 1977. The house occupies a small lot - 9.6 x 30 meters - and included two other small buildings. The general layout of the house was formed around a central courtyard to maintain an existing tree. Unlike many of Barragan's residential plans, the focal point is not the interior courtyard, but an indoor pool located off of a dining room and connected to the main house by a light-filled corridor (Figures 1,4). One approaches the pool through a corridor of glowing yellow light where one experiences, as at Barragan's Thalpan, the almost tangible thickness of light and color.

At the end of this corridor, Barragan reveals a pool of water uncannily isolated from nature within the confines of domesticity. At a precise moment during the day, a shaft of light enters the dark interior from above and seemingly pours from the ceiling forming a pool of water below. Barragan's reduction of color saturation at the base of the pool's sculptural red column and its surrounding walls reinforces the illusion of light melding into water (Figures1, 2). Critics have alluded to Barragan's Catholic faith and his use of filtered light, as at Thalpan, to allude to the presence of the Divine, but like the work of Kahlo, Barragan's imagery reflects a complex, interweaving of both latin American and Catholic visual imagery, belief systems and world views. The luminous red wall/column, surrounded by light-filled water, takes on an other-worldly, seemingly magical aura that resonates with what Latin-American cultural critic Lois Parkison Zamora calls the *Mythic-Physicality* of traditional meso-American imagery. In her essay, *"Quetzalcoatl's Mirror,"* Zamora proposes that Mythic-Physicality is Magical Realism's visual counterpart. She writes, *"In Western culture, both formulations are contradictions in terms: myth is ordinarily considered the obverse of physicality, as magic is of realism."* In her discussion Zamora ref-

erences the writings of Serge Grunzinski, scholar of pre-hispanic visual imagery:

> *"Mexican images were designed to render certain aspects of the divine world physically present and papable: they vaulted a barrier that European senses are normally unable to cross."*

Zamora suggests that traditional Meso-American images did not serve to *represent* its subject, as in the western conception of the word, as much as to *re-present* it, that is to give it a tangible presence in the physical world. Pre-conquest Latin-american imagery, Zamora writes, existed rather *"to allow its creator and viewer to participate in natural and cosmic processes."* With narrow concrete steps inviting the viewer into the pool of water, the indoor pool at la casa gilardi transcends the suggestion of a private baptismal, to echo the ritualistic imagery of pre-conquest Latin America that conjoins creater, viewer and the divine.

The intangible, elusive presence of the divine that Barragan evokes at Thalpan is at la casa Gilardi rendered concrete and tangible in the "body" of water below. This mythic-physciality eludes the western conception of image/object separation and brings us once again, in the words of Zamora, "to the question of magic," that echoes the surrealist qualities of european art. Like Kahlo, Barragan depicts an uniquely Latin-American perception of the world.

Barragan's poetic connection between light and water is also revealed by Marquez in *Light is Like Water*:

> *A jet of golden light as cool as water began to pour out of the broken bulb, and they let it run to a depth of almost three feet. Then they turned off the electricity, took out the rowboat, and navigated at will among the islands in the house.*

Marquez, in *Light is like Water*, anchors the miraculous event of light melding into water within the confines of domestic space to give the fantastic the quick believability of the everyday occurrence. David Darrow explains: *"Magical Realism locks the fantastic into the familiar with such subtlety that the sense of reality is not lost but heightened."*

> *The following Wednesday while their parents were at the movie they filled the apartment to a depth of two fathoms, dove like tame sharks under the furniture, including the beds, and salvaged from the bottom of light things that had been lost in darkness for years. The sofa and easy chairs covered in leopard skin were floating at different levels in the living room, among the bottles from the bar and the grand piano with its Manila shawl that fluttered half submerged like a golden mantra ray. Household objects, in the fullness of their poetry, flew with their own wings through the kitchen sky.*

Barragan's spatial arrangement of la casa Gilardi is not unlike Marquez's fantastic imagery of various household objects suspended mid-air in a light-filled space now estranged from their normal surroundings. The "serendipitous fit" of the modernist language, particularly the free standing wall plane, to the mexican vernacular allowed Barragan to subtley subvert a western vocablulary to articulate a uniquely Latin-American way of being in the world. Isolated from its familiar utilization as a system of enclosure, the free-standing column's object-ness is intensified by its vivid red pigmentation. Barragan further exaggerates the isolation of the column by surrounding it with a shallow pool of water. (Figure 2) This is a stategy also used by Barragan at San Cristobal ranch where a wall, split into two planes, acts a water fountain to fill a surrounding man-made pond.

Adjacent to the pool of color and light is placed a simple wooden dining table from which one has a view out to a stark exterior courtyard containing a single tree. A sense alienation of the table from its context is heightened by its reflection in the adjacent pool which creates the momentary impression of its floating like the islands of furnishings in the narrative of *Light is Like Water*. (Figure5) Like Marquez, Barragan isolates and enlarges the everyday and the ordinary to articulate its mythic or magical potential. Column, tree and table are isolated in an uncanny, supernatural space of light and water and emerge as do Marquez's furnishings, in the *"fullness of their poetry."* the everyday experience of eating a meal is transformed into an otherworldly event. Like the ex-voto, Barragan makes *"miraculous events ordinary and turns everyday things into miracles."* In the words of Marquez - *"Why be so surprised? all of this is life."*

But the real "magic" of the experience of the Gilardi house lies with the faith-based ability of the perceiver to *"see."* Magical realism, is not the result of an aesthetic or intellectual movement, but commonly held belief systems, rituals and practices throughout Latin America. Utilizing a unique Latin American relationship between physical and psychological phenomena Barragan bridges the Western chasm between perception and world. Anthony Vidler, in the Architecture of the Uncanny writes:

> *"the uncanny is not a property of the space itself - nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation: it is in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state, of a projection that precisely slide the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming (or between the earthly and the spiritual realms).*

Architect and author, Emilio Ambaz wrote of Barragan, *"it is only among architects that [Barragan] feels himself a stranger. Not for any anti-intellectual bias, but because he feels their education has estranged them from their own intuitive capacities."* To more fully comprehend and critically access the work of Barragan, Western critics must develop what Latin American cultural critic Zamora calls "second sight" - sensitivity to interacting cultural and social structures. *Barragan, in his final statement of the Pritzker Prize address attributes his mastery of the "difficult art of seeing,"* to "naïve" painter Chuco Reyes: *"It is essential to an architect to know how to see: I mean to see in such a way that the vision is not overpowered by rational analysis. And in this respect I will take advantage of this opportunity to pay homage to a very dear friend who, through his infallible taste, taught us the difficult art of seeing with innocence."* In *"Light is like Water,"* Marquez uses the narrative of the text to explain what Magical Realism is – "the difficult art of seeing with innocence." The fundamental revelation of both Marquez's fiction and Barragan's architecture is the wonder of our everyday existence.