

In 2009, Victor Barragán was a hyper-creative 17 year old living with his family in Postal, a neighbourhood in Mexico City. In high school he studied architecture, bartended at his father's *taquería*, and experimented with his sexuality at public cruising spots. Because he couldn't afford the clothes he desired, he began silk-screening images on T-shirts using the name Yñifinifinity. The irreverent, internet-inspired graphics played with corporate logos and pop-culture images, redefining them through parody. With just a few posts to Tumblr, the popularity of his designs allowed the teenager to move out of his parents' home and into his own apartment and helped him realise his creativity had bigger potential.

In 2016, after recently moving to New York, he launched his eponymous label, Barragán. Confusion about his relationship to the legendary Mexican architect Luis Barragán (with whom he shares his surname) attracted the curiosity of the press, and Victor's talent held their attention. Pulling from his upbringing as a working-class, urban, gay kid,

VICTOR BARRAGÁN

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL BULLOCK
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Barragán presented many elements of Mexican culture that had never before been celebrated on the runway. That same year Trump was elected, making the brand's showcase of his home country's aesthetics, people, and talents an important counterpoint to the former president's open racism towards undocumented Mexicans. In 2019, Anna Wintour visited Victor at his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, walk-up in order to advise on his application for the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund (America's most prestigious fashion competition for emerging talent). The nomination gave his brand an even bigger platform, allowing Victor to become a leading international voice of Mexican culture.

Victor's apartment is his home, design studio, and the headquarters for his brand. The austere space's palette is limited to white, grey, and silver. Like his clothes, the interior is defined by a butch elegance and a queer fetishisation of masculinity. Victor lives here with his snake, Chocoflan, and his pug dog, Choche.



I admit!—when I first discovered your brand I thought you must somehow be related to the legendary Mexican architect Luis Barragán. So many tourists that visit his houses in Mexico City tag our Instagram.

Does that help you with sales?
No, people who do that aren't paying attention.

Besides sharing your surname, I also see similarities in your work. His buildings and your clothes both celebrate and modernise Mexican culture. Luis Barragán's scale is aggressive and could be seen as macho, but his colours are usually feminine. You both redefine clichés of masculinity and femininity, and obviously you're both gay Mexican designers. Yes, but he was in the closet. He loved privacy. He never placed windows on any of his façades. He was always hiding something. His own house was filled with gay art because all of his friends were gay. To me, he was scared. He had this special Catholic guilt, so bad.

I will ask more about that, but first I want to know your take on the Barragán diamond.

The Barragán diamond (2017) is one piece of a multimedia artwork created by conceptual artist Jill Magid. With permission from the Barragán family, Magid used a compression process to transform the actual remains of the famous dead architect into a diamond ring to offer to Federica Zanco, the founder of the Barragán archive. Zanco acquired Barragán's entire body of work in 1995 as an engagement present from her then fiancé Rolf Fehlbaum, owner of the Swiss furniture brand Vitra. The foundation is based in Switzerland and is known for allowing limited access to Barragán's drawings, models, and photographs. Magid's proposal was to exchange the ring for the archive, with hopes of giving it to the Mexican people. Zanco did not accept. The famous situation has sparked a heated international debate regarding colonisation, heritage, preservation, value, ownership, and legacy.

It's insane. I love it because it's so morbid. I went to see the ring at the MUAC museum. They also displayed the correspondence between the two women. For me, the best part was reading the sexual tension in their emails. So, it's a big, big soap opera. Do you know the sculptor Mathias Goeritz? He worked with

Barragán, and together they coined the term 'emotional architecture'; they even published a manifesto about it. I did my last fashion show in one of Goeritz's buildings.

Didn't Goeritz have something to do with the famous hotel that was made for the Mexico City Olympics?

Yes, the Camino Real Polanco. People think it's designed by Barragán, but the architect was Ricardo Legorreta. Mathias Goeritz designed the pink sculptural wall at the entrance. Did you know my logo comes from that place? The Barragán 'B' logo is a parody of Camino Real's 'C&R' logo. The original Mayan-inspired, interlocking letters were designed by Lance Wyman, a famous graphic designer from New York. He also designed the identity for the 1968 Olympic Games and the Mexico City subway system. When that was created many people in the city couldn't read, so he made each subway stop a symbol instead of a name. Mexicans know my logo references Camino Real because that hotel is so iconic. The reference hints at my interest in Mexican architecture. I like presenting it in a new way, so it looks contemporary for new generations.

You definitely succeeded at that with your op-art logo Speeds. Last summer, I saw them all over Fire Island and Rits beach. It's so smart. Who doesn't want a bathing suit that visually enhances their endowment?

Oh, yeah. That's how we're paying the bills now. The idea was to really exaggerate the body. It started with the iconic Jean Paul Gauthier cyber punk collection that he made in collaboration with the artist Victor Vasarely. You know the famous one from the mid-'90s that used contoured circles on sheer fabric to create the illusion that a shirt was a bikini?

You really made it your own. In person, you can't notice the illusion unless you stare very closely. Did you study fashion design?

When I was young I had so much fun working with wood and making furniture. In high school I studied architecture. My grades were kind of bad, so they sent me to a state college for industrial design, but I dropped out after two months.

Did you make any of the furniture in here?

Yes, this coffee table. The idea is that you can adjust it because the balls that hold the table-

apartamento - Victor Barragán







it. You have to own your own business'. Now I thank him, because he taught me how to work hard. I started there at eight years old, washing dishes, then cashier, then bartending. I worked there up until the last fucking day I left for New York.

Why did you move?

My boyfriend at the time wanted to move back to the States. I was 23, so I was like, 'Whatever. Let's just do it'.

Once in New York, you just kept going with your T-shirt business?

Yes, Yiminifinity had grown into more than



T-shirts, so I decided to present a collection. Honestly, I was so naive. I just said, 'Let's try it and see what happens'. The first show was in the Lower East Side. I posted the invitation online and both Dezed and i-D came and wrote about it. I was so surprised. Since then, things got crazy.

When did Yiminifinity stop and Barragán begin?

After two Yiminifinity shows Ruth Gruca from MADE New York asked me if I wanted to join the official New York City Fashion Week calendar and I was like, 'For sure, this is the opportunity!' For that, I knew I wanted to do

something different. I was done with graphics inspired by the internet, so I decided it was time to use my own name. I think many people came because, like you, they thought the brand was related to the architect. It received so much press. I was really surprised.

What have been the biggest differences between living in New York City and Mexico City?

It's totally different, the relations, how you connect with people, quality of life, and the language, obviously. People have a lot of time in Mexico City, that's the problem. The creative scene there used to be made up mostly of people who came from wealthy families. They're comfortable, they don't have to worry about paying their rent. In Mexico it's much harder than in America for people who come from humble backgrounds to pursue creative careers. I'm so inspired by the younger generations in Mexico. They are on top of their shit—thank you internet, we can showcase our work around the world. I believe the art scene in Mexico has more to offer than fashion. I don't know what's going to happen with the economy, but if you live in New York there are so many opportunities in fashion and design. That's why people migrate here from around the world. Also, in Mexico I wasn't really content about my sexuality and queerness. I got used to people on the street calling me *puto*. They call you *puto* for everything. It's still extremely strict. Mexicans accept gay men as long as you stay low-key and present yourself as masculine. It's totally about misogyny. I was so surprised how people can be gay in New York. I could finally be openly gay without worrying about someone punching me on the street. Something else I love about New York is that so much happens here: people come and go, things move faster. For me, to be here for six years, what I've done, I'm like, 'Wow, this has been so quick'. Since I moved here, I have not been afraid to ask for help. So many people say, 'You have really crazy ideas. We love what you're doing. We love the energy. We want to support you'. I was really blessed with all that, and I'm so grateful and so happy. For me New York is a place to put out my ideas and have people see them, and that's why I decide to stay. I don't love it for my personal life, but I like it for work. Moving here was a really good decision. I didn't think about it; it just happened organically. All the things that happen in my life are that way. I don't have a plan.



At the beginning was Yiminfinity making enough money for you to live here? Before I came to New York I moved back in with my parents for a while to save money. When I arrived, I couldn't work for seven months until I got my first work permit, so I was on my own just trying to figure things out.

So, you launched Barragán without having a green card?

Yeah. I was so scared. When I moved here I started paying taxes immediately because that helps your case a lot. I was really stressed because I paid taxes but still couldn't get healthcare. It was an insane time. I was ap-

Yeah. I hated it because it really put me out of my comfort zone. They forced me to do things I don't like to do and that helped me a lot. It also helped me amplify how brown skin is represented on platforms outside of Mexico.

And you had the added intense pressure of being undocumented while representing Mexico at the same time as Trump took office and was openly racist towards Mexican immigrants. I was so scared; when I signed my green card it said I'm not allowed to protest. In fact, you can't take any action against the government. I still can't now because I'm a legal resident, so I don't have the full rights of a citizen.



plying for a green card and finishing my application for the CFDA and creating a show all at once. I was so lucky. The card was approved only one week before I was nominated for the CFDA award. I was like, 'Fuck!'

If you didn't get the green card, you would have lost the nomination?

For sure. You need to be a legal resident. I was really lucky that shit got fixed. All these crazy things happened for a reason, I guess. Now I'm in a better place to just focus on the work.

Do you think being a CFDA finalist changed much for you?

In America, a few Latin designers have become industry icons—Oscar de la Renta and Carolina Herrera—but I can't think of a Mexican designer who's achieved that level of international recognition. Who's the most famous fashion designer in Mexico?

I think it's a woman called—
Wow, so you don't know her name off the top of your head?

No, it's someone that you see in ads at the airport. It's for old ladies. Fashion does exist in Mexico, but not on the same level. In Mexico fashion is not an essential business. That's how I put it in my CFDA interview. They were so



pissed, and I was like, 'Well, that's the truth. I went off about so many things that I don't like, including colonization. Not only Mexico but all of Latin America and the Caribbean; we all grew up being taught we should aspire to be as white as possible. Many Latin people that move to the States change their names to something white and reject everything that isn't European or American. I also speak about classism in my work because that's what I experienced growing up. For example, if you listen to a particular type of music, you're judged as being from a lower-income household. If you dress a particular way, the same. I use these references. I just change the context and present them in a different way.

How are the politics you present understood in America? Is the perception of the brand in the States different than in Mexico?

I'm lucky because I received a few critiques from people in Mexico. The questions are about me being from Mexico but building my business in the US. My clothes are designed for Mexicans. They are produced in Mexico, but my brand is not affordable to the Mexican audience. I get that this is frustrating because I experienced the same when I was growing up. I couldn't afford anything that came from the States. Why? Because in Mexico we don't have money. That's why I started making my own clothes in the first place. But now the brand goes bigger and gets more expensive. And now my audience and the people who support Barragán are mostly from outside of Mexico. Fashion is an elite, luxury product, so I try to be very careful when I want to talk about politics with my work. It's tricky when you make an expensive product while people in your country are suffering. I know exactly how fucked up Mexico is. My grandparents can't go to the hospital because there are no beds. People are dying and it's so hard to figure out how to help.

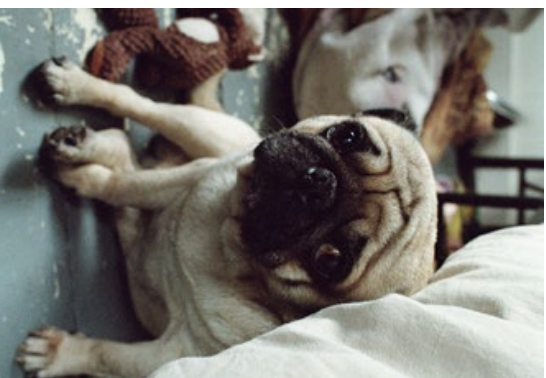
You're living between two worlds and you've become an unofficial ambassador of each to the other.

I have to be aware of what's going on in both places as a person and as a brand. I came from this background, but now I'm in a new background and my work plays around with my heritage, so I have to really think about how Mexicans will react before I present something. For me it's a privilege that I now

have Medicaid. It's a privilege to have a green card, and with these privileges I feel I have to give something back. We looked into making variants available for Mexican incomes, but it's not possible. We're not a big enough brand to produce 1,000 T-shirts. So I have to find another way to support my community that makes sense.

I read that you donate a portion of your proceeds from mask sales to an organisation that helps sex workers?

Yes. It's called Inspira. It does for Mexico City what Callen-Lorde does for New York. They help distribute PrEP for people that are



most at risk, but it is still very difficult because it's so expensive. People are still dying from AIDS there; I want to keep working with them. For me it's personal, because my cousin died from AIDS. He attended church services; he was in the closet. They took me to the hospital to say goodbye, it was really hard to see him like that. My mom was very freaked out because she knew I was gay. I understood why she got so crazy, because she was trying to protect me.

At what age did she discover your sexuality? I was maybe 15, but I didn't come out to her. My parents found a lot of my porn and read



conversations on my phone. They were worried because it was with much older men. They thought I had a sugar daddy. I was like, 'No, it's just people I met at the sauna.'

You were already cruising saunas at 15? Yeah, they never checked my age. The thing is, I found I was gay by accident. I don't know if you know this, but in Mexico City the last subway car on the pink line is for cruising. A lot happened there. Really crazy. So many people sucked my dick. It got a little out of hand, but it was fun. At an early age I realised sex was available in so many public places. Do you know Sanborns? It's a family restaurant chain that's owned by the richest man in Mexico, Carlos Slim. In every one of those restaurants the men's room is a place for sex. Once I was in there and this guy was sucking me off and a woman started calling him. It was his wife! He calmly said, 'I'm coming'. I was amazed. He didn't give a fuck, but I guess he knew his wife couldn't enter. I was like, 'You're an asshole', but it was hot.

So many people in Mexico are in the closet with their families. So many are married to women, but they keep doing things on the side. From the start I was having sex with a lot of older DL men; it helped me start to understand that I didn't want that for myself. I knew I didn't want to be in the closet with my family because it would create distance between us. I wanted to be open about being gay because, obviously, it's so normal. All these situations helped me grow, and now I put them all into the brand somehow. I try to translate what happened to me into something that people can understand and relate to, because I grew up extremely Catholic and saw how destructive it was for people to think their sexuality was taboo.

Your concept of freedom is quite clear in the design of your bedroom. Did you make those tapestries?

I found the Last Supper Orgy ipeg on Tumblr when I was 18. I have had it for a long time, but I never found out who the artist is. So I was making some nude images into blankets. I did my dick.

The dick with the Prada ribbon is your own? Yes, it was the first time I could afford something from Prada, and I was so happy. I bought a fanny pack. The logo ribbon that came with it, I just thought, 'I'm definitely going to put

that on my dick', and it looked really good, so I took a picture. Typical teenage behaviour. I took it in 2016, and it became my favourite image to share on the apps. I just thought, 'I need to put this on a blanket'. I think it's really funny to see a big dick on a bed. I love to take it to the beach. I enjoy putting myself out there in a sexual way. My feelings and thoughts are private, but my body is just whatever. I'm shy talking because of the language barrier, but I'm never shy with my body. So I always wanted to make the Last Supper ipeg bigger for my room, and I thought that remaking it in this woven format would work well with a low-res file. Growing up I was so repressed by Catholic images. Going to church, I always felt guilty about every normal teenage feeling. Obviously, there is a shock value in turning the Last Supper into a gay orgy. It plays with a story that is supposed to be sacred; for me it's about breaking a cycle of repression.

It's a symbol of your own sexual liberation? Totally, it's the direct opposite of what the Catholic Church tells you. The Last Supper shows when Jesus predicted that Judas would betray him. This unknown artist changed that tragic situation into a playful moment that celebrates pleasure. I love waking up with it every morning. It represents what I do in my work, changing the context in order to twist the meaning. It's important for me to talk about reality. My sexual experiences helped me become more free, and that's something I want to share in my work, in the collections and the campaigns. I just want to always be really conscious of how what I present affects people, and make sure it always has a positive message.

