

Visible Cities

Carlo Franco Stella Atencio

April 9 – May 14, 2022

The exhibition *Visible Cities* features Peruvian artist Carlo Franco Stella Atencio's unique cosmovision of the worlds he inhabits. Challenging the distinctions between real and unreal, normal and pathological, modern and archaic, as well as past, present and future, Stella Atencio uses drawings to make visible the worlds that only he can perceive and that he wants to share with his friends or *compañeros*. In *Visible Cities*, Stella Atencio tells us stories about three cities: *Huancanова*, *Lima y Callao*, and *Alberkitloyu*. Each city is its own different world. He uses distinct drawing styles, materialities and temporalities to convey each of their particular realities.

Huancanова, the graphite pencil city, is where Stella Atencio claims to be born. This was an ancient city, from the Inca times, located in a hidden place of the Southern Andes of Peru and isolated from the rest of the country. It was a communitarian society, organized according to highly altruistic principles and governed directly by God. Humans and animals coexisted in harmony. Due to its isolation, *Huancanова* was a self-sustaining city with dated production technologies based on animal and human labor forces. Subjects and animals in *Huancanова* had particular features because of the city's age: for example, people reproduced by laying eggs, and several types of dinosaurs still existed. When Stella Atencio was three or four years old, *Huancanова* was invaded and destroyed by the second Spanish conquest of Peru and only he and some distant relatives managed to escape.

After a long and arduous journey, Stella Atencio arrived in *Lima y Callao*, the city where he currently lives.¹ He draws his everyday life in this city with colored pens in a comic strip format. Although Stella Atencio appreciates his family members and has found several *compañeros* in this city, most people do not understand him. He describes *Lima y Callao* as an unfair and corrupt society with serious problems of crime, abuse, poverty and exploitation. *Lima y Callao* is also inhabited by Stella Atencio's enemies: the voices that torment him. The voices come in an auditory form, but are also disguised under different shapes. The artist gives them names: *La Audioplaga* (The Audioplague), *Los Hampones* (The Thugs) and *Los Witroles*. He uses drawings to make his enemies visible and to fight them.

Stella Atencio says that he will move from *Lima y Callao* to another city, named *Alberkitloyu*, which he draws using colored pencils. He calls *Alberkitloyu* the promised city because he plans to build it one day in the future, but he still does not know when. *Alberkitloyu* will combine the ethical principles of *Huancanова* with the technological advancements of modern science. For Stella Atencio, the *Alberkitloyu* drawings constitute the blueprints of the promised city, and as such, are his only way out of *Lima y Callao*, the city in which he presently feels stuck.

1. Callao is an independent province (*provincia constitucional*), which does not belong to the city or department of Lima. However, Callao is relatively small and integrated into the city of Lima, which is why Stella Atencio refers to "Lima y Callao" in his drawings.

The works in this exhibition are not only about Stella Atencio's life worlds. They also tackle many themes that are relevant to postcolonial societies: a utopian Indigenous past, the experience of colonial invasion, the difficulties faced by emancipated communities and an imagined better life with the help of technology. The exhibition design and layout are guided by these three cities and their themes.

Stella Atencio underwent psychiatric hospitalization at the age of 22. As part of his treatment, he attended *tecnoterapia* sessions. *Tecnoterapia* is a Peruvian tradition of art therapy, created by Dr. Honorio Delgado in the early 1920s, several years before art therapy was practiced in Europe and North America. Dr. Delgado believed that "pathological" and "normal" functions coexisted within patients' minds, and that the latter had the virtue to heal the former. He considered that freedom of artistic creation and a non-confrontational approach to patients' positive symptoms (e.g., hallucinations and delusions) were crucial to triggering the reconstructive virtues of the mind's normal functions. But in order for that to happen, patients' art production had to be motivated by comprehensive and affectionate contact with health practitioners. In *tecnoterapia* sessions, health practitioners did not seek to convince patients of the "unreality" of what they perceive; instead, they carefully persuaded them to materialize these perceptions into artwork. Stella Atencio learned the principles of *tecnoterapia* during his hospitalization, and still applies them in his artistic production. His work is part of the permanent art collection of the Hospital Víctor Larco Herrera in Lima, Peru.

Stella Atencio's work as an artist has been receiving wider attention in the last years. In 2010, he had his first international showing as part of a group exhibition and in 2013, his first solo exhibition. As a result of this visibility, art galleries from Europe and North America have acquired some of his drawings for a small fee, and have exhibited these drawings in different parts of the world without informing the artist. These galleries have aggressively pressured Stella Atencio and his family to sell his artwork, making offers that fall well under its potential value, and even suggesting that Stella Atencio donate several drawings in exchange for promotion. In particular, the color pencils drawings about the promised city, *Alberkitloyu*, most interest art galleries.

Stella Atencio has resisted the commodification of his artwork. He is not willing to sell the *Alberkitloyu* drawings because they are the blueprints of the promised city and if he sells them, he will not be able to build this city in the future. By resisting the commercialization of his work under unfair conditions, Stella Atencio challenges the problematic category of the "outsider artist" that cloisters artists with psychiatric or developmental disabilities, often underprivileged and self-trained, in a market that capitalizes on striking power differences. By presenting *Visible Cities* in an artist-run centre, within a larger community that honours the proper remuneration of artists' labour, *Visible Cities* also aims to speak up against commercial circumstances in the art world that invite the exploitation of artists with disabilities.

Rossio Motta-Ochoa