Gallery Aferro has become a cultural force in Newark, acclaimed for the quality and innovation of the work it shows. But if you visit, you won’t find a crowd of worshipful art lovers, gazing quietly at the walls.

“You can come here, offer your opinion or start a conversation, and people will listen to you,” maintained co-owner Evonne Davis. “If you love something or hate something, we want to know. We like to engage in a dialogue. But if you feel like just looking around, that’s fine, too. Whatever your level of commitment, we’ll meet you there.”

Since it opened 11 years ago, the gallery at 73 Market Street has grown exponentially. Last year, it began the process of tripling its space to a total of 90,000 square feet when the real estate company RH Group donated two neighboring vacant buildings. As part of the makeover, Aferro (aferro.org) will expand its artist-in-residence program to include 60 artists and augment the community arts program it hosts.

But throughout the process, which began last summer, it’s been business as usual for the gallery, which
will remain open throughout its completion, hopefully by this spring, according to the owners.

“We have already been offering our mix of shows, public art and school tours with the renovating going on concurrently,” said co-owner Emma Wilcox. “We will not be doing the typical capital campaign where the organization takes time off from their service to the public. We don’t play like that. That is a luxury for wealthier organizations, not us. We multi-task.”

Aferro strives both to be a community resource and incorporate a global perspective, showing artists from around the world as well as its own backyard. “You can show local artists and push them out into the larger world, and you can bring the whole world locally,” Davis contended.

The gallery has included work by area artists like Lenny Correa, a Newark resident and muralist who has created public art overseas and in the city. Last fall, it exhibited African artist Adejoke Tugbiyele’s multi-media work “Election/Erection,” which explored gender roles, Nigerian cultural beliefs, religion, politics and the African diaspora.

Last year, Aferro organized Activate Market Street, which stocked vacant storefronts with art each night, including animation, neon sculptures, performance and film.

Other exhibitions have been both cutting edge and playful. One centered around three small tropical fish whose movements were translated into color and sound via a digital live-motion process. “Each one had a different tone, so when they swam around, it made music,” explains Wilcox. The music became rather jarring, however, when one fish unexpectedly ate another.

Then there was the robotic vacuum, programmed to paint the floor. On another occasion in the early years of the gallery, it stayed open 48 hours, staging a sort of artistic relay race. One by one, visitors continuously drew on a maze of walled partitions for two days straight. “People did shifts, they brought instruments, whole families came,” Wilcox recalled.
“These weren’t just cool shows, they were complicated works of art,” said Davis. “But at the end of the day, it’s just about pleasure and exploration and thinking.”

She and Wilcox are careful to avoid showing a narrow range of work that reflects only their personal tastes. “We try not to have Gallery Afferro be about ‘our esthetic,’ explained Davis. “We’re in a community that has a diverse range of tastes. We want to make sure that what we’re showing is reflective of the best talent but is showing all different kinds of things: sculpture, photography, new media, and things from many, many perspectives. We have an ever-shifting identity.”

Gallery Afferro’s ultimate goal is to reveal the possibilities—and joy—of art. “I want them to be excited by it,” said Davis. “I want them to be excited in general.”

As the city arts scene expands, they are proud to play an instrumental role in helping it grow. “Newark is just a wonderful place to be because there is so much energy, but it’s not a tabula rasa. There’s been culture here always,” added Wilcox.

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A Mighty Fortress

Newark’s only comic store

BY PETER ASEBIOMO

Superman may be faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive, but even a man impervious to pain seeks solace. Back in the 1940s, in his early DC Comics days, he created his bastion: the Fortress of Solitude.

In the metropolis of Newark, there’s another Fortress of Solitude, a comic store on University Avenue housing close to a million comics, which has been a city staple for over 30 years.

Fortress is the only store of its kind in Newark and one of very few left in Northern New Jersey with pieces as rare as the first appearance of Wolverine in The Incredible Hulk’s Vol. 1 series, issued in 1973 and worth $1,500, as well as common Japanese mangas.

It even showcases homegrown comics from local artists such as Newark native J.M. Thakar and his series Ash Man, a comic book about an up-and-coming attorney betrayed by his best friend and cremated, only to return with cosmic abilities.

“This is more than a store,” said owner Jose Robles, 48. “It’s an institution.”

An avid collector since age 8, Robles has been involved with the store since its inception in 1981, starting out as a loyal regular. He became manager in 1994 and eventually bought the shop, renaming it Fortress of Solitude in 2001.

“It was originally called One Flight Up and located on Broad Street,” Robles noted. “They called it that because it was on the second floor of the building.”

Now in a building near the Rutgers-Newark campus, the store is a draw for city college students, who comb the shelves alongside the older generation that has called this store home for decades.

“I’ve only been coming here for about four months,” said Andres Escobar, a Rutgers-Newark psychology student. “But it’s a great shop; has a great feel to it. You don’t really find too many comic stores in Jersey with such an extensive selection.”

Fuji Hernandez of Elizabeth has been a regular since the store opened. “The guys here are like a family,” he said. “We gather up and talk sci-fi, sports, politics—you name it.”