For art’s space

A gallery grows — and grows — in Newark
Gallery Aferro is celebrating its 10th anniversary in Newark this year, and it's marking the milestone by taking over the two buildings to the right of its main entrance and tripling its existing space.

Gallery directors Evonne Davis and Emma Wilcox hope to fill the space — some 70,000 square feet — with their trademark mix of artists' studios, exhibition galleries and shared-use flex space for community art projects. The expansion is expected to be complete by next spring.

The new space will allow Aferro to establish 60 new artist-in-residence studios on Market Street, in the heart of downtown Newark.

The expansion of Gallery Aferro is part of a five-year agreement with RBH Group, the real estate company that owns most of the block surrounding 73 Market St.

Since Aferro moved into the former furniture store on Market Street in 2006, the gallery has sponsored dozens of shows that have done everything from filling the empty storefronts with funky installation art to projecting light shows on the buildings and sidewalks outside.

Gallery Aferro has so quickly become part of the fabric of the growing arts community downtown that 10 years in existence seems both too long and too short.

The gallery's name, taken from the Portuguese word for "iron," comes from the location of the loft where Davis and Wilcox first opened, in the Ironbound. After spending a year renovating that space, Aferro had just two shows when the New Jersey School Construction Corporation evicted them through eminent domain.

"After that, I really didn't want to come back to Newark, but Emma's a real New Jersey lover," Davis says. "The space is a resource," Wilcox laughs. "We're already seeing it in Brooklyn — the number of artists' studios is going down, more and more..."

buildings are being converted into upscale residential space... people from there come here and see the spaces available in Newark are huge compared to what they've been used to. It's a pattern in so many artists' lives, just moving from space to space as neighborhoods change."

"Not that we like to," Davis says. "In fact, we're kind of sick of it."

"I see a lot of it in New York City," says Aferro assistant gallery manager Kayla Carucci, who, like Davis and Wilcox, graduated from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan and began interning at Aferro in May. "The idea is that art is just for students, that it's a kind of high-end thing. Emma and Evonne think art should be for everyone, they really believe that, and that's really

Emma Wilcox, left, and Evonne Davis, directors at Gallery Aferro, hope to fill their new space with artist studios, exhibition galleries and shared-use spaces for community art projects.

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why I want to work here.”
Aferro opened its season this year on Friday, timed to coincide with the Newark Arts Council’s annual Open Doors studio tour. The headline show is “Election/Erection: Adokejo Tugbiyele,” sculptures and works on fabric by the gay Nigerian-American artist who spent time in her ancestral country last year. Tugbiyele has woven a series of figures from traditional African palm brooms and pot-metal sink drains, as well as gay-themed banners made with batik and Dutch wax-resist cotton, popular fabrics across much of Africa.

Tugbiyele will also appear Nov. 9 from 2-3 p.m. at the opening of “Present Tense: Arts of Contemporary Africa” in the Newark Museum with Global Arts of Africa Curator Christa Clark.

“Because of the repression of the gay community there, I spent much of my time sort of undercover,” Tugbiyele says. “So much of the violence was supported and sometimes instigated by religious groups from over here … They’ve exported their views, because they’ve already lost in the U.S.”

Tugbiyele fits neatly into Aferro’s diverse roster of artists with a mission to build a community without an overt aesthetic bias — the goal is closer to expanding space for art itself.

The gallery is also showing “No More Place,” a group exhibit featuring graduates of the 2014 Bronx Museum Artists-in-the-Marketplace program. The artists in “No More Place” use everything from video to paper collage to talk about the same loss of physical space for artists in the region that Wilcox and Davis say will benefit Newark’s art community. Even though, as the two directors cheerfully admit, their own tenure is temporary.

“The difference between now and the first time we lost a gallery in Newark is that we know exactly what we’re facing,” Davis says. “It was never in the conception of this space that it would be permanent. If I thought this was permanent, would I have allowed this beat-up carpet to stay and not put down a beautiful hardwood floor by now?”

Most of the alternative galleries in Newark — including Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, City Without Walls and the Index Art Center — have temporary leases; none of them own their own exhibition space. Davis, who was asked to serve on Newark Mayor Bas Baraka’s transition committee on Arts, Culture and Tourism (which ultimately recommended the creation of an arts commissioner for Newark), says she’s come to see that as a kind of hidden blessing.

“Established institutions have to have more than a building — they need a steady stream of funding, and reliable donors over time,” Davis says. “Here, I can fail. I can experiment. If it doesn’t work, I can just move on, with really no consequences.”

And like all contemporary nonprofit galleries, Aferro is trying to crowd source its funding. Soon, the Aferro homepage will have a direct link to an Indiegogo campaign to raise $30,000 for the ongoing building costs of the new buildings. The gallery will offer campaign donors perks of Aferro merchandise and unique, artist-designed posters for Aferro shows.

Meanwhile, Aferro is collaborating with Aljira’s EmergeNEXT program to fill the big shop windows at 77 Market St. with Mary Valverde’s offerings, and a huge camera obscura built by Jayson Keeling that will allow passersby to see themselves as art right on the sidewalk.

Nigerian-American artist Adokejo Tugbiyele's works are on display at Gallery Aferro. (ROBERT SCHRIRLING/ADVANCE MEDIA)