Drawing Together

Gallery Aferro has made Newark a magnet for alternative art

By Dan Bischoff
Photos by Noah K. Murray

“I always say Gallery Aferro started as a drawing,” says Emma Wilcox. “We drew up all our ideas on a diner napkin in 2003. We could never imagine it would end up like this.”

This is a 20,000-square-foot contemporary art gallery at 73 Market St. in downtown Newark, founded by Wilcox, 30, and her partner Evonne Davis, 35.

A one-time furniture store, the spacious four-story building provides space on the first two floors for public exhibitions and a funky gift shop that sells T-shirts, embroidered pillows and jewelry. The remainder of the gallery is reserved for artists-in-residence, with enough room on the top floor for both Wilcox’s photo and video experiments and Davis’ growing sculpture studio and tool bank.

“For us, I think, it was always a question of what to do after art school,” says Wilcox. The two met at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan in 1999. “We kept dreaming about setting up a collective to help share resources—you know, if an artist has access to this or that resource, we could maybe find some way to share it among all our friends.”

Davis and Wilcox also work with teenagers from neighborhood schools on weekends and mount shows by a dizzying array of contemporary artists every couple of months. Its artistic program also is varied.

Last winter the gallery showed a controversial video by the late David Wojnarowicz, who died in 1992 from complications related to AIDS. The video included a brief clip of ants crawling over a Mexican crucifix. The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery banned the video after complaints from a few prominent Republicans. In defiance of the censorship, a number of museums and galleries around the country and abroad began showing the video in their foyers or street windows. Gallery Aferro was the only institution in New Jersey to do the same.

Recently, it hosted an exhibition of video and drawings by Belle Meade artist Michael Amter that mocks public service announcements (his pictures look like Heimlich maneuver posters gone wrong).

Many of the artists are directly associated with the gallery and have lived in New Jersey for a long time, such as word artist Dahlia Elsayed (a Jersey City conceptualist of Egyptian heritage, currently an artist-in-residence at Aferro). But others come from just about anywhere—from Brooklyn and Milan and the Netherlands. Most learn about the gallery online. Aferro has gotten queries from artists around the world who want to have their work seen in the New York region, and an alternative gallery run by a sympathetic pair of young artists more than fits the bill.

“When it comes to visualizing the programming at the gallery, that’s very shared between the two of us,” says Davis. “But I do work that’s more related to the physical structure of Aferro. Like the gift shop was sort of my idea. Emma does much more research into artists and much more online administration. She’s a wonderful writer, great at finding funders and working with the board, that sort of thing.”
Wilcox says she is now working on a long-term project, creating a black-and-white photographic record of a half-mile radius around the gallery.

"I see it as an extension of the gallery persona," she says. "I use an old-fashioned, wet-plate camera — a big, boxy old thing that takes forever to set up, hours really, for one shot. And I've learned how to slow my process down to meet and talk to people. I think of my studio upstairs as a storeroom for bizarre props, because I also do elaborately staged photographs and even make dioramas for them.

"And, paradoxically, I sometimes take photos from a helicopter," she adds, "which means I'm constrained by time and cost and have to take as many good pictures as I possibly can as fast as I can."

Davis, on the other hand, began as a photographer but has evolved into an allusive environmental sculptor, most recently devoted to "reassembling the tree," as she puts it.

"My work right now is about cutting firewood, which is one of the few things I did with my father," Davis says. Her late father worked as a logger in upstate New York, and her sculpture requires cutting, sanding and polishing with beeswax large sections of raw wood. One piece suspends eight logs in two parallel lines from cables, like a Newton's cradle by Paul Bunyan.

Davis' mother, an accountant, helps with the gallery and hasn't missed one of its annual party-fundraisers.

Anker West, the Newark sculptor, ceramicist and architect, was responsible for finding Aferro its current home. The gallery originally was located in the Ironbound. In fact, Gallery Aferro takes its name from the Portuguese for "iron." When Davis and Wilcox lost their lease on the Ironbound building, West found a Newark investor who was willing to give them space downtown.

"His only request was we keep his name out of the press," says Davis.

West, with his architect father, Troy, and Victor Davson, co-founder of Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, have been playing godfathers to the city's art scene for many years. They all helped to create what the two women had sketched out on that diner napkin.

You know what they say about drawings: Sometimes they come to life. 

Opposite page, Emma Wilcox, left, and Evonne Davis. Above, Davis helps high school student Katerin Salguero with an art project at Gallery Aferro. Left, Davis and Wilcox help students finish their pieces by exposing their photo projects to light on the streets of Newark.