Interview with Evonne Davis, Artistic Director at Gallery Aferro

IU: Give us an introduction to yourself and Aferro.
ED: I am the Artistic Director and one of the founding Directors of Gallery Aferro, and we have been in Newark for 10 years. We have been in this current location for 7 years and somewhere in between that time we were without a location for one year.

We have many different things we offer here, we have a residency program so we have artists’ work-only studios on the upper floors, we have presenting space on the ground floor, we do a very small education program for high school age girls and we have a small line of publications.

IU: Tell us a little about the space here where you are located?
ED: We are currently located in a 20,000 square foot former retail location, it’s about a hundred years old; it is donated to us rent free ... We are responsible for a huge amount of maintenance and upkeep, utilities and stuff like that, so there are still a lot of costs associated with occupying the space ... And we may very soon be expanding into the two buildings that are immediately next door to us.

IU: That is quite a bit of space.
ED: It is a huge amount of space, it is about 70,000 square feet ... about half of the space will be studios ... the other half we are hoping will be programmed space for about a dozen or more partners with whom we are sharing the space.

IU: Who is your landlord for this space and the two prospective spaces?
ED: The landlords for both are RBH Group.

IU: What induced them to let you have the space rent free?
ED: RBH is wonderful, they’re a big developer, and they’re working on a lot of different projects [in Newark]. They are deeply invested in the success of Newark and they understand what the arts bring to a community and how art spaces and vibrant cultural institutions transform a community ... So, even though we know we can’t occupy these spaces forever, there is a relationship there that we know will help us to stay in downtown.

IU: And do you have long term leases on these spaces or is it an understanding?
ED: We do not have [a] long term lease. We have been here for 7 years on a month to month lease and I am sure you can understand firsthand how unbelievably stressful it is...

IU: Tell us specifically what kinds of things are problematic when you are in that situation?
ED: Well one of the things is that you can’t plan very far in advance ... The more advanced someone is in their career [or] ... The higher the quality of the presentation that you want to show, the more lead time you need to plan out all the components ... It is also hard to get investments from your funders. They want to know ... if they write you a big check you are not going to be kicked out in six months. So basically those are the two major reasons: it makes it hard to get significant funding and it makes it harder to get more established artists on the calendar.

IU: Tell us a little bit about how you see the overall art scene in Newark, especially with regards to the health of arts institutions and the outlook for the future.
ED: Well, as you had mentioned, all arts institutions for the past six or seven years have really been struggling financially to hold on to the funding they had or to maintain their... spaces or to maintain their staff... but at this same time there is still this overwhelming kind of vibrancy in the arts community in Newark... Our audience really gets excited about what they are doing, they want to engage, they really want to talk about the art, they want to talk about why we are doing what we are doing, why we are doing it here and what it’s all about.

I believe that we need to start developing strong sustainable foundations for the anchor organizations, and by anchor organizations some people mean NJPAC, I mean Aljira, CWOW, Sumei, possibly Aferro is in there somewhere and start creating real sustainable futures so that we are not always stressed to the max every second of every day.

I was very honored recently to be asked to be on the Mayor’s Transition Committee for Arts, Culture, Heritage and Tourism... I put together a recommendation that what the city ought to... do is start transferring ownership of the vacant properties... to cultural organizations in every ward... to develop programs and to have permanent spaces and permanent homes. There are fire houses, there are schools, there are apartment buildings and there are vacant lots that art organizations can use to enrich the city, to partner with other type[s] of community based organizations like health care organizations or after school programs... recovery services, employment training.

IU: Did you see the Al Jazeera article (article in which older Newark artists call the new art galleries and artists coming in as “carpetbaggers”) and what did you think when you saw it.

ED: I think that talking about inequity in the art world is a very important conversation... And it’s an important conversation outside of the art world because... the way we talk about race, gender and class is changing... The idea that... at least some portion of our society is really trying to address really difficult, painful and important issues... without... flinching is very exciting to me, is very challenging to me and I am ready to participate in that conversation; to listen, to participate, whatever. I didn’t personally find that article to be a really engaging part of that conversation... I come from a very rural, very poor family. I never went to an art gallery until I was in my twenties... I really felt then like I was perceiving another dimension. It was like magic and I wanted to open an art gallery so that people like me and people like my father who... probably never went to a museum or an art gallery in his entire life, [could have] a space that was vibrant and creative and beautiful but was really welcoming to whoever walked in the door... So I wanted to have a space where Bill Gates would be as welcome as Joe the plumber and if you don’t know anything about art, you could learn something and if you have something to say you could say it. I felt like what the Al Jazeera article was really doing was encouraging us to squabble over crumbs. It didn’t feel like a progressive conversation and I think that was very unfortunate... My personal reaction to being called a carpetbagger; I would like everyone to know that out of the ten years gallery Aferro has existed, I have been paid for one of them. I have volunteered for nine years. Carpetbaggers make money. They come, they take and they leave. I came, I am still here and I have worked my ass off. I am not a carpetbagger. But even that should not detract from the actual conversation and the actual issue which is that there is a huge gender gap in the arts world, there is a huge racial gap in the arts world between who can make a living and who can’t, you know what I mean, and whose work gets bought and whose work gets seen and what gets shown in museums and who gets grants and who gets residencies and who gets support and who gets access to resources and who gets heard and who has a platform – that’s the real discussion, that’s the important discussion and it’s one that we need to be having... so if that article helped advance that discussion in some way...yeah! I didn’t feel it really did that but you know it was only a few paragraphs so how much can you address in 200 words.

IU: It was enough to “Kick the Cat In”. 

ED: That’s what I felt like, it was enough to “Kick the Cat”.