

'Awe'-some move

New space gives Aljira prominence in downtown Newark

BY DAN BISCHOFF
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

After more than two years in the dark, Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art, the alternative gallery in downtown Newark whose curatorial strengths have long been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts and other national arts institutions, will finally reopen in its new home.

Though the space at 591 Broad St. is just around the corner from Aljira's old fourth-floor digs on Washington Street, it could be miles away. For the first time, the gallery will

have a sidewalk presence in the city, and a 6,000 square foot home with the kind of climate controls needed to rope in traveling shows.

Actually, the opening of "Moved by Awe: Emerge 2001" on Thursday is a preview. Only the front half of the new space will open, and that for the exhibition only. The show includes work by students in Emerge, the gallery's career tutorial for emerging artists, a competitive program that gives 18 artists tips on things like finding a gallery, avoiding intellectual property lawsuits, tax law, and so on.

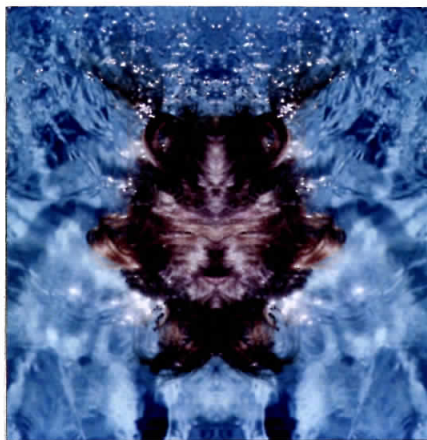
The Aljira staff hopes to start education and community outreach programs over the upcoming season that will involve a great deal more than hanging paintings on the wall — artist-in-residence projects, a student docent program in conjunction with local schools, and poetry and performing arts events as well. Those won't begin to appear until the grand opening late next summer, allowing for more fund-raising.

"Moved by Awe" should nonetheless give a very good idea of what the new Aljira will be capable of doing for downtown Newark.

"The new space will give us the chance to bring traveling shows put on by other national institutions to Newark," says Shana O'Hara, associate director. "Shows sponsored by the Smithsonian, say, or other institutions that are either too contemporary, too small, or too unusual for the Newark Museum, for example.

"But it will also allow us to change the way we ourselves do exhibitions, and allow us to bring in more guest curators and more varieties of artistic expression," she says.

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Brooklyn artist Sheila Ross is showing "Block Head," a 60-by-71-inch work composed of hundreds of hand-painted pieces of paper no larger than 4-by-4 inches, arranged in a grid.



Aljira staffers Shana O'Hara, left, and Matt Brown work on getting the gallery ready for the preview exhibit, "Moved by Awe: Emerge 2001," which opens Thursday.

Top, James Teixeira of Long Island Is showing an untitled series of photographs of his grandfather's last year in a nursing home.

Above, "Sea Siren #4" is part of a series of mirrored images arranged in diptychs showing hair floating in water, often against intensely colorful backgrounds, taken by New York artist Julie McConnell.

ART

Moved by Awe: Emerge 2001

Where: Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad St., Newark

When: Thursday-March 12. Noon-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays

How much: Free. Call (973) 643-6877.

ALJIRA

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Over the course of the next eight months, the long, deep space — it used to be a Chock Full o' Nuts outlet — will be completed with offices for the staff and for Aljira Design, the for-profit graphic design workshop affiliated with the gallery, which is run by art director Cicely Cottingham, principal designer BamBong Widodo and graphic designer Sam Larson. Including O'Hara and executive director Victor Davson, Aljira now has seven full-time staff, among

them business administrator Lisa Saroop and an administrative associate, Matt Brown.

Two more shows will follow in the spring and summer. First, a show of fabrics stretched over welded steel armatures by Stella Lackey of Hudson County, who died of cancer more than a year ago in her mid-30s. Lackey is probably most familiar to local audiences for her stretched-black-lace sculptures with their haunting suggestions of sex and torture. Aljira was one of the first galleries to show Lackey's work, and the March 27-May 7 memorial show is meant to call attention to an artist who was not sufficiently recognized

when she was alive.

From May 29-July 23, Aljira will show a second Emerge exhibition, a show of work by mid-career artists in the business-skills program. The summer show will be a double-barreled exhibit, including 36 artists who worked in the program in 2002 — the first year the gallery held two Emerge sessions.

The grand opening of the completed space, with its offices and the new home for Aljira Design, will be in late August or early September. The debut show will be of paintings by Frank Bowling, an African-American artist who divides his time between New York and London.



South Orange video artist Greg Leshé is represented by an installation called "Personal Radar," which consists of a video monitor showing Leshé pushing a wheelbarrow that is exploding into flames before a black background; the monitor is mounted atop a pile of wood that sits in its own wheelbarrow in the gallery.

JIM WRIGHT FOR THE STAR-LEDGER