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Art vs. sport: galleries flourish in arena's wake

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This year is the one -- the sixth, as it turns out -- when the urban aesthetic expressed by the annual Open Doors Tour of Newark arts studios cemented its permanence in the city, confirming a new art scene in the shadow of the hockey arena downtown.

Now a strip of the old city east of Rutgers-Newark, running roughly from the Newark Museum and Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art, in the north, to City Without Walls on Crawford Street to the south, can be said to be the center of visual arts in the city and two new private galleries on Market Street are the buckles on Newark's art belt.

The Gallery Aferro, founded by Emma Wilcox and Evonne M. Davis, set up shop more than a year ago in an old furniture store at 73 Market St. Last month, Rupert Ravens, the independent curator who for three years organized the joint New Jersey, Brooklyn and international art exhibitions for the Newark open studio tour, has opened his gallery, Rupert Ravens Contemporary, virtually next door, in another former furniture store at 85 Market St.

The gallery's debut exhibition, "Sanctuary," is almost a greatest hits of this Jersey aesthetic -- it includes work by many of the artists Ravens featured in his National Building shows in Newark, ranging from Charlee Swanson and Carl Hazlewood, cofounder of Aljira, to Judith Brodsky, founder of the Brodsky Center at Rutgers New Brunswick, and anti-war painter Grace Graupe-Pillard.

In fact, Rupert Ravens Contemporary is, at 30,000 square feet, the largest private gallery in Jersey, and "Sanctuary," along with a show of prints from the Brodsky Center (formerly the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print & Paper), taken together feel like a museum show of contemporary art. But it's a particular slice of contemporary art -- urban in outlook, but also narrative and personal, less formal than it is engaged with the larger general culture, and perhaps more conscious of race as an American social touchstone than other art scenes clustered around the big center of New York City.

Several of the artists in "Sanctuary" -- notably Swanson and Hazlewood, as well as Newark painter German Pitre, who tars stuffed animals to the wall, and James A. Brown, a sculptor who deals directly with the legacy of his parents with "Memorial Poles" constructed out of objects found in their Jersey home -- mine the vein of Newark as a sort of unofficial capital of black urbanism. Bisa Washington, Ujima Kuumba Majied, Roy Crosse and several other African-American artists -- even Abstract Expressionist Sam Gilliam -- are also included, and underline the theme. But it would be wrong to think that this Newark look ends there.

In fact, it rhymes with much of what's going on in non-glitz art worlds elsewhere in the country, like in Brooklyn and Jersey City, but also in California and the Midwest and even, quite recently, in the South.

Tom Nussbaum's wry totem heads share space with Brooklyn-based Norwegian artist (and graduate of the Aljira Emerge class for emerging artists) Rune Olsen, who makes fantastically convincing 3-D animals out of paper and masking tape and a Bic pen. (You should see his two tussling elephant heads.)

Austerity is represented by Stefanie Nagorka's rays of acrylic fishing line and contemporary Surrealism by Brooklyn-based Thomas Broadbent's tent-sized camouflage jacket, with plastic windows set where

the heart beats.

Photographer Jay Seldin shows landscapes on hanging scrolls, and Asha Ganpat's "The Marys" is a votive table covered with scores of 6-inch statues of the Virgin, one of which, as in Sherlock Holmes' "Adventure of the Six Napoleons," has a diamond buried in the plaster. Could you smash the Mother of God to find it?

Add to this the vigor of the not-for-profit galleries, like Aljira, which this month is showing a retrospective of Newark-born, 71-year-old street photographer Helen M. Stummer, and relatively new sites like the New Jersey School of Architecture Gallery (113 Summit St.), run by the comic "archeologist" of lost Newark, Matt Gosser, and you have a kind of critical mass forming downtown.

Gosser has assembled "The Modified History of Downtown Newark," an exhibition of artwork by more than 40 artists, in part to celebrate and to mourn the disappearance of what had become the city's most vital arts district, which lies now under the parking lots around the new Prudential Center.

If art can take a hockey puck in the kisser and survive, it'll stay part of the city for a while to come.

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