

Sheets, Hilarie M., "Utopian Vision Born of a Harsh Truth," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2014

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## *Utopian Vision Born of a Harsh Truth*



From left to right: "The Marked Man" (2011, printed 2014), Jayson Keeling, photographed by Andy Brown; "Face Morph #134" (2009-13), by Janet Henry; "New York Quotidian Series" (2012), by Carl E. Hazlewood. Credit Left to right: Courtesy of Jayson Keeling and Andy Brown; Janet Henry; Carl E. Hazlewood

The exhibition "Aljira at 30: Dream and Reality," at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton, starts with a video revisiting the 1967 Newark riots, titled "5 Days in July," by Chuck Schultz and Esther Podemski. Made in 2007, it was shown that year at Aljira, an alternative exhibition space in Newark for emerging and underrepresented artists. The two-screen piece shows the city on fire and footage of the National Guard overrunning the rebellion of the African-American community after the arrest and beating of a cabdriver for a traffic infraction.

For Victor Davson, a Guyanese immigrant who in 1983 found cheap, expansive studio space for himself and a group of students, and a community still deeply scarred by these events, the riots were pivotal to the birth of Aljira. "There was this connection between a sense of decay and abandonment in the neighborhood and seeing an opportunity to somehow try to use it positively," Mr. Davson said in a telephone interview.

When a friend of Mr. Davson's who had also emigrated from Guyana, Carl E. Hazlewood, visited the studio the next year, the two young artists envisioned starting a gallery there that would offer possibilities to artists of various racial and cultural backgrounds who were not often finding places to show their work. They named their utopian art space Aljira, the Aboriginal word for "dream time."

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*"Now Is the Time" (2009), by Willie Cole. Credit Willie Cole*

"We didn't have a big mission at the time," said Mr. Hazlewood, who focused on the curatorial side as artistic director while Mr. Davson raised money as executive director. "We were just expressing our own multicultural perspectives and what we wanted the world to look like.

"Our first criteria was that the art be good, and all the other things came along with it: to show female artists who were good, to show black artists who were good, to show Latinos. We wanted to reflect our environment, to develop something that was interesting to Newark especially, but also to reflect the world at large."

"Aljira at 30: Dream and Reality," on view through Sept. 28, traces how this grass-roots organization has grown into a vibrant center for both local and nationally known artists and provides diverse cultural and educational services in its underserved community.

"We want people to know what Aljira is and why it's important," said Margaret M. O'Reilly, curator of fine art at the State Museum. She said she had been consistently exposed to new artists through Aljira exhibitions and had bought art from its yearly fund-raising auction for her institution's collection. Ms. O'Reilly organized the exhibition with Mr. Hazlewood and two other artists, Jaret Vadera and Cicely Cottingham. It includes ephemera telling the story of the organization's evolution decade by decade, and artworks by 41 of the roughly 1,800 artists affiliated with Aljira over the years.



*"Sweet Dreams" (2010), by Philemona Williamson Credit Courtesy of the artist and the June Kelly Gallery*

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A wall of archival photographs, fliers and invitations from the 1980s shows how Aljira found its footing. In 1984, while the founders were cleaning floors and painting walls to create an acceptable gallery space, they engaged the neighborhood children in a project painting a mural across the exterior of the building. From there, exhibitions included the inaugural show that year of Rafael Sanchez, a Cuban-born artist and one of the original students working in the building, and the 1989 show "Promise of Progress," organized by Fred Wilson and including Mel Chin and Willie Cole, who are all prominent in the art world today.

Installed near the archival wall are mixed-media works by Mr. Cole, who lived in Newark and was little known before his ongoing association with Aljira, and by the seminal players in the gallery, including Mr. Davson, Mr. Hazlewood, Ms. Cottingham and Elizabeth Seaton. Almost all of the artworks in the show are contemporary, to emphasize how the opportunities afforded by Aljira have helped these artists continue to practice actively today.

A section devoted to the 1990s, when Aljira moved to a space downtown on Washington Place, underscores how far it had come as a nationally and internationally recognized contemporary art center in just a decade. In 1994, an Aljira project was selected to represent the United States at the IV Bienal Internacional de Pintura in Ecuador with works by artists including Donald Locke, also born in Guyana, and Philemona Williamson, of Montclair. Both have recent works in the Trenton show.

In 2002, with the help of a major grant from the Newark-based Prudential Foundation, Aljira relocated to its current street-level space at 591 Broad Street in the city's cultural district. On view in the section devoted to the 2000s is work such as "Obama in the White Man's Land," a 2009 sculpture of a nightmarish landscape in carnival colors by a local self-taught artist, Kevin Sampson, and a 2013 four-panel piece of African-American women's hairstyles "painted" in shimmering black rhinestones by Mickalene Thomas.

Over the past decade, Aljira has expanded its range of educational and professional development programs, which are highlighted in posters and reproductions papering a reading room installed within the exhibition. Culture Creators, for instance, is a program co-sponsored by Rutgers University for Newark teenagers who have limited access to the arts; they visit museums, meet artists around the region and participate in art-making workshops. "Bending the Grid" is a series of exhibitions devoted to artists over 65. The first of these retrospectives, in 2003, focused on Frank Bowling, a classmate of David Hockney's at the Royal Academy of Arts in London who never received the recognition commensurate with his decades of work (he was voted the first black Royal Academician by his peers after the Aljira exhibition).

For artists just starting their careers, the Emerge program offers practical tools not taught in art school, such as finding gallery representation and managing financial issues. Artists who have

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participated in the program and now have national profiles include Leslie Hewitt, Jeffrey Gibson and Shinique Smith. "In my generation," Mr. Hazlewood said, "you did the work and eventually hoped one day someone would respond to it. But now, when there are so many artists, you need to strategize. I'm glad that we're able to pass this on to a younger generation of artists."

***Correction: April 13, 2014***

*An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of an artist who was involved in Aljira's beginnings. She is Elizabeth Seaton, not Seton.*

"Aljira at 30: Dream and Reality," at the New Jersey State Museum, 205 West State Street, Trenton, through Sept. 28. Information: (609) 292-6464 or [statemuseum.nj.gov](http://statemuseum.nj.gov).

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