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ART REVIEW

Tristate Talent Search Hits a High Note

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

Think “American Idol” meets the art world meets “The Apprentice” and you have an idea of “Aljira Emerge.” The competitive professional development program, along with the subsequent exhibition, is sponsored by Aljira, a 23-year-old alternative gallery in Newark.

This is the seventh Emerge, and in the past the shows have sometimes been maddeningly unfocused. This year’s show, though, pops with playful and catchy artwork by 40 artists, selected from about 200 submissions. It is better than anything that has come before — a lot better.

Emerge, which began as a small, [New Jersey](#)-oriented project designed to help young and emerging artists learn career essentials, has evolved into a tristate talent scouting quest; the selected artists attend seminars given by art professionals — not only dealers, critics and curators, but also publicists and accountants. Franklin Sirmans, an independent curator, helped organize this year’s installment, along with Jennifer Moon, an associate curator at Artists Space, a nonprofit organization in New York.

The curators sought out talent rather than trying to find artists and artwork to fit a theme, as has sometimes been done in the past. They also selected a wide range of media, including installation, video, painting, photography and sculpture. That sense of inclusiveness is refreshing, even if the presence of so many different kinds of artwork in one place can sometimes be distracting and confusing; it is hard to concentrate on a painting or photograph with a blaring video in the background.

Emerge exhibitions are always a showcase for the cultural diversity of the region’s art worlds, and the current grouping is no exception. That, too, is welcome, especially given the news headlines of the day; it is nice to see everyone getting along for once.

Some of the artists demonstrate a desire to comment on world events. Linda Ganjian, for instance, presents a small, blood red model of an oil refinery with the heavy machinery and infrastructure arranged in the pattern of a Persian carpet. You get the point, which is made in a way that invites thought about the nexus of politics, oil and war in the Middle East without pushing an ideology. That is smart art.

Other works have nothing to do with politics, and simply beguile through their beauty and cleverness. Yuken Teruya has carved delicate little branches out of tubular cardboard inserts from rolls of toilet paper and hung them on a chain to create a kind of tree. Nearby, dried thorns from rose stems have been stuck onto rice paper by Cui Fei in patterns that evoke Arabic script or Braille.

Assisting Mr. Sirmans and Ms. Moon in their selection were the curators Edwin Ramoran from the Longwood Arts Project in the Bronx and Rocío Aranda-Alvarado from the [Jersey City Museum](#). Their influence is noticeable, for several of the best artists here have shown at their spaces. Among them is Nicolás Dumit Estévez, who has been in exhibitions at Longwood and is represented here by a manic episodic video installation about imaginary art pilgrimages.

The selection, which numbers 24 women and 16 men, includes lesser-known artists who nonetheless make good work. That list is long, but those whose works really stand out are Bryony Romer, Chrissy Conant, Bettina Johae, Emma Wilcox, Tara Mateik, Kent Rogowski, Carla Gannis, Tamara Gubernat and the team of Mike Sarff and Tim Whidden. Most have shown in galleries before but are generally fresh to the professional exhibition circuit. That is what a program like Emerge is all about.

Mr. Sarff and Mr. Whidden have done their best to be noticed, reinstalling the gallery front-of-house reception desk on a three-foot-high wooden podium. It seems a slightly hostile gesture, for visitors are confronted by someone looking down on them as they enter the gallery. It will be interesting to see what Mr. Sarff and Mr. Whidden have to say about their work during the artists' talks that accompany the exhibition.

“Aljira Emerge 7,” Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad Street, Newark, through Sept. 30. Information: (973) 622-1600 or www.aljira.org.

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