



BUZZ-WORTHY
Works by Dominik Halmer (far left), and Zachary Fabri (above) fulfill the vision of Aljira founder Victor Davson, left, and his successor, Dexter Wimberly.

Energizing Newark's Art Scene

ON A RECENT WINTER EVENING, Victor L. Davson was wrapping a scarf around his neck and getting ready to leave Aljira, the center for contemporary art he cofounded in Newark in 1983. On the other side of the door, Kala La Fortune, a Rutgers-Newark student, was standing in the bitter cold, about to enter for the first time.

Davson's exit and La Fortune's entrance followed a script Dexter Wimberly, Aljira's recently installed executive director, had sketched for *New Jersey Monthly* minutes earlier: "Victor wanted this transition, his retirement, to be about change and new energy. And it absolutely has been. It's really weird, because it's sort of like, *How many times can I hear that it's somebody's first time here? Or first time ever being in a gallery?* It happens all the time."

Wimberly, 43, started his new job last October after several years of independent curating in his native Brooklyn. He is Aljira's second executive director, following Davson. Since Davson, 68, launched the nonprofit (his founding partner is no longer involved), he has

stood at the helm, hosting acclaimed and burgeoning artists for ambitious shows and attracting the attention of major arts organizations like the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, which has named Aljira a Major Arts Institution every year since 2006.

Aljira's 2,000-square-foot gallery has hosted exhibitions by artists ranging from the Guyanese-British painter Frank Bowling to students at the local Malcolm X Shabazz High School. The center inspired an "Aljira at 30" show at the New Jersey State Museum in 2013. It has also given liftoff to several Guggenheim Fellows through its Emerge program for artists on the brink of serious notice. And it earned the attention of the New York-based Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which, along with Prudential, Bank of America, PSE&G and other big names, still provides funding.

All those achievements may be just a prelude of what's to come. Wimberly is cultivating the desired new energy for the center through his efforts to reach younger art lovers and first-time gallery

visitors with shows like the current, playful "Kontrolle," the first U.S. solo exhibition by the German artist Dominik Halmer, who weaves sports equipment like basketballs into his work. Fortunately, the nondescript section of Broad Street where Aljira is located is poised for a liftoff of its own.

A few doors down, developers are erecting a 160-unit apartment building at the former Hahne & Co. Department Store. The building will house a 30,000-square-foot Whole Foods market, as well as Express Newark, a new Rutgers-Newark arts incubator that Davson will codirect.

Right now, "it's totally dead around here at night," says Wimberly. "But once construction is done, we expect a lot more foot traffic."

La Fortune, 20, a Newark native, was perhaps ahead of the curve when she stopped in to see the works of the multimedia artist Zachary Fabri. She came not because she was familiar with Fabri's work, but because "there's so much buzz around this place," she says. "All my friends know about it." —*Tammy La Gorce*