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ART REVIEW | NEW JERSEY

A Decade of Emergence

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

Aljira Emerge, an annual program aimed at preparing artists for the marketplace, is now in its 10th season at [Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark](#), attracting participants from as far as Washington and Boston. Over the years, the group show that is organized as the culmination of the seven-week program, though not without its limitations, has gotten more interesting.

The [current exhibition](#), “E10,” features the work of 22 artists living and working throughout the Northeast. It ranges from painting and sculpture to video and installation, though the emphasis is on sculpture, in contrast to previous years, when painting dominated.

A handful of interesting site-specific installations make creative use of the building. One of them, [José Ruiz](#)’s “Abstract Funding” (2009), fashioned of blue vinyl, is attached to the gallery’s front window. It looks abstract until you get close and discover that it is an amalgam of logos for Aljira’s public and private financial supporters; each logo’s size reflects the amount of money Aljira receives from the donor in question.

Nearby is another intriguing installation, “No One’s Land” (2009) by [Priscila De Carvalho](#), a Brazilian-born, New York-based artist who currently has [a solo show at the Jersey City Museum](#). Her work here consists of a layered, labyrinthine representation of an urban landscape constructed from paint, foam, paper and photograph collage. It is a vision of a troubling urban milieu in which mysterious red figures seem to be spraying graffiti.

Over all, the show, assembled by a guest curator, [Sara Reisman](#), director of the [Percent for Art Program in New York](#), seems more political than in past years. Some of the work is even quite confrontational, including [Roxana Perez-Mendez](#)’s “Brutal” (2009), an LCD light sculpture made of large, blinking letters spelling out the title of the work, which refers to the immigrant experience.

Identity politics seems to be making a comeback, although the bitterness and anger once prevalent in this sort of work has been largely replaced by a knowing irony and a sense of

humor. [Nyeema Morgan's](#) "Elemental Configurations" (2009), an inkjet print collage, is a poster for a periodic table of the elements into which the artist has inserted faces of characters played by African-Americans in science fiction movies and television series.

Identity is also the focus of the handful of paintings in this exhibition, most obviously [Cecile Chong's](#) mixed-media works that juxtapose appropriated illustrations from vintage children's books with found imagery from North and South America and Asia. They address the artist's feelings of displacement and alienation as an Ecuadorean-born Chinese living in New York.

[Fariba Alam](#) is another artist who is making identity-oriented work, though you might not immediately guess that from looking at it. She creates wall installations of miniature tiles covered in meticulously rendered imagery, including Islamic calligraphy, archival photography, mathematical diagrams and self-portraiture. Ms. Alam manages to illuminate here the murky terrain between individual identity and cultural identification.

Inescapably, the show includes some videos; still, they are not as boring as a lot of those seen in galleries and museums these days. In fact, [Jaye Rhee's](#) three videos, "Swan" (2007), "Polar Bear" (2007) and "Niagara" (2008), are actually mildly entertaining, showing performers moving in public baths against a backdrop of wall paintings depicting nature scenes.

Which brings us to the limitations of "E10." Though the show has improved over the years, it still features too many works that, aesthetically speaking, do nothing and go nowhere. Embedding politics in a material or an image is one thing, but doing so in ways that engage the viewer is quite another.

"E10: Aljira Emerge 10 Exhibition," Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad Street, Newark, through Sept. 26. Information: (973) 622-1600 or aljira.org.

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