



A Multicultural Sampler

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

NEWARK

ALJIRA, an alternative art space in Newark, is one of New Jersey's most progressive cultural sites. In addition to promoting diversity and inclusiveness, it is host to an annual sampler exhibition of emerging and under-represented artists called "Emerge." An independent curator and critic, Lilly Wei, has organized this year's installment, the sixth.

But "Emerge" is more than just an exhibition. In fact, the exhibition is the end point of a three-month professional development program in which artists attend seminars given by art professionals: dealers, critics, curators, publicists and even accountants. The goal is to try to give them the skills to survive in the art world.

Ms. Wei, from New York City, has made a handsome show of mostly colorful paintings and drawings, with a few multimedia works bulked together in a back room. There are 18 artists in all, selected from around 250 applicants. Several live and work in New Jersey, while the rest come from the New York region. Over all, it is a good spread.

Many of the artists also come from other parts of the world: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and the Dominican Republic, Ms. Wei notes in the exhibition catalog, are just a few of their countries of origin. This cultural diversity distinguishes the exhibition from previous "Emerge" shows, along with the lack of an overriding curatorial theme.

The effort to imitate the work of currently popular or canonical artists exhibited by many of the painters in this exhibition is touching. It shows ambition, and a desire to succeed. It is also a necessary part of the development process for artists, who tend to learn at first by copying and then varying the work of the artists they admire.

Perhaps the most eye-grabbing painting on view belongs to Tattfoo Tan, a young artist of Malaysian ancestry. "Spring Fever" (2004) is a large abstract combining elements of traditional Chinese and Japanese painting with the work of American abstract masters like Gorky and Twombly. I love its intuitive messiness.

A drawing by Alicia Wargo, schooled at

At Aljira in Newark, "Spring Fever" by Tattfoo Tan, above, "Red Farm" by Hiroshi Kumagai," right, and Brandon Ballengee's functioning aquarium.

Rutgers University in New Brunswick and now living in New York City, is another standout. It is a red-ink drawing of an imaginary city that resembles a medieval hill town seen from a distance. The play of highlights, random marks and shadows through which the scene is transfigured is bewitching.

The art market is hot for drawing right now, and the commercial galleries in Chelsea are full of artworks much like Ms. Wargo's. She could probably make an easy transition into this world. But how she develops from here as an artist is another matter, and more difficult to say.

The same may be said for two other artists: Gregg Stanger, a photographer, and Don Christensen, a painter. Both also make work that seems ready for the market, but then again both sail close to the aesthetic winds of currently fashionable artists — Gerhard Richter for Mr. Christensen, and Hiroshi Sugimoto for Mr. Stanger. They are yet to find their own voice, their own way of picturing the world.

Other artists here are farther along this path, even if, perhaps, their artwork on display is less salable. In this group I count Brandon Ballengee's functioning aquarium backed with a photograph of an oil painting from Thomas Cole's "Course of Empire" series, and filled with trash, crabs and fish. It is an inventive take on human hubris and the fall of civilizations, never mind that the ideas involved are hackneyed.

Looking at other multimedia inclusions, Sebastian Patane Masuelli's video projection onto a grid of soiled pillows, "Digital Path to Analog Love" (2004), is highly original and imaginative, even if its meaning is oblique. Born in San Juan, Argentina, and living in Newark, he shows tremendous potential. But we'll have to wait and see.

"Emerge 6: On Locations," Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad Street, Newark, through Jan. 14. Information: (973) 622-1600 or www.aljira.org.

