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SHARON ADARLO

# **Gentrification fuels rift among Newark's local artists**

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# *Longtime residents feel left out of resurgence as newcomers land prime art spaces*

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by **Sharon Adarlo** (</profiles/a/sharon-adarlo.html>)

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Gilbert Hsiao, 58, has bounced among various studios, from Berlin to the concrete shell of a defunct oil tank in Brooklyn before landing space in downtown Newark, New Jersey, where he now paints his colorful, geometric art pieces.

Once overlooked as an art destination and better known for its 1967 riots and urban decay, Newark's downtown hosts a growing visual arts scene that has attracted outsiders like Hsiao with cheap rent, good public transportation and a constellation of cutting-edge galleries that have garnered outside praise. There are more than a dozen art galleries in Newark in addition to spaces that double as coffee shops or beauty parlors.

But as these newcomers increasingly flock to Newark, some older artists — many of whom are black and are longtime residents — are feeling overlooked, especially as a few gallery owners and artists who are relatively recent arrivals have snagged prime real estate. Tension within the visual arts community is brewing as the downtown area is poised for gentrification. New, luxury apartments are for rent, upscale cafes and restaurants are coming soon, and a Whole Foods is slated to open in a few years.

“There a lot of whites coming into Newark now,” said Kevin Sampson, 59, a black artist known for his elaborate sculptures made of found objects. A resident since 1993 who has been involved in the city's art scene longer than

that, Sampson has led the debate on Newark’s older artists versus its newcomers, whom he describes as “carpetbaggers” and “white hipster refugees from Brooklyn.”

Sampson wants the new artists and gallery owners to pay their dues and respect the history of the artists who have been in the city for years or decades. He said a few galleries and artists have received space for free or at reduced rents and bluntly described it as white privilege.

“They use privilege to set something up,” he said. “They are getting free buildings. Its landowners say they trust you.”

Bisa Washington, a 63-year-old Newark resident and artist who has been involved in the art scene since the 1970s, agrees with Sampson.

“It was a question of access,” she said. “You look around, and you wonder how these things are happening, why the artists who are already here weren’t pulled into that loop.”

Sampson said he plans to hold a round table on the topic in the fall.

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**— Bisa Washington**  
Newark artist

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Kevin Sampson, 59, is an artist known for making elaborate sculptures out of found objects. He has lived in Newark for more than 20 years. Sharon Adarlo

Rebecca Jampol is the owner and one of the founders of Solo(s) Project House, an art gallery in downtown Newark that rents its space. She's also a founder of the Gateway Project, a series of pop-up exhibitions at the Gateway Center, a commercial complex adjacent to Newark Pennsylvania Station. C&K Properties, a real estate company, donated the space for the Gateway Project.

“My interactions with all the older artists who have been here a longer time have always been positive,” Jampol said. She added that she acknowledges the groundwork they've laid and is aware of the criticisms lobbed by Sampson and others.

“I am here the same reason they are here,” she said. “To indulge in a city that has a lot of inspiration.”

Evonne Davis, a founder of Gallery Aferro in downtown Newark, where Hsiao works, swatted away criticism that she, as a white woman, was favored for free space. The RBH Group, a major real estate developer in the city, donated space for the gallery after she and her partner, Emma Wilcox, had started another gallery, she said.

“We have already proven we got it done,” she said. “The idea we got the space for any other reason than hard work is, frankly, insulting.”

Davis said she and Wilcox work hard to pay the gallery’s hefty heat and electricity bills by selling work, fundraising and working other jobs. Davis said she does not get a salary running the gallery and works as a consultant, art handler and photographer.

“We are not above criticism. We are not perfect,” she said. “We try hard to be part of the solution, not part of problem.”

Gallery Aferro has shown many works by local artists, including well known Newark artist and performer Jerry Gant, who recently had a large solo show. The Gateway Center has shown Sampson’s work.

“This tension is long-standing,” said Clement Price, a history professor at Rutgers University. “There has always been an insider-outsider dynamic.”

Price says tension within the arts community was also revealed when the New Jersey Performing Arts Center opened in 1997. Critics, he said, believed “NJPAC was a larger plot to bring whites back into city.”

Redevelopment has accelerated in recent years, and Hsiao says Newark is an increasingly attractive option as people are pushed out of Manhattan, Brooklyn and Jersey City, which has a vibrant arts community and faces increasing gentrification too.

At least one longtime Newark artist applauds the changes.

“I feel really good about it,” said visual artist Gladys Grauer, who at the age of 90 is considered the godmother of the city’s art scene. “There are so many artists now.”

Grauer, a black artist, has watched the city evolve since she moved there in the early 1950s. In 1972 she opened the Aard Gallery, the first art gallery in the city since the Great Depression and the only local place for visual expression besides the Newark Museum, she said. It was in the city’s South Ward, where she currently resides.

The arts community grew as galleries like City Without Walls (1975) and Aljira (1983) were founded, both fixtures in the city. The nonprofit Newark Arts Council formed in 1981 and has promoted artists ever since with open studio events and other programs.

Grauer said the more recent arrivals over the past 15 years have established themselves in Newark rather than coming and going, as they did in the past.

“People started to think there was something great here,” she said. “[Artists] were looking to seek their fortune in New York. They are now seeking their fortune here, which I think is excellent. They want to stay here and work.”

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