

GALLERY AFERRO

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Newark cultural figures to be honored with launch of the Eleta J. Caldwell and Rodney M. Gilbert Memorial Gallery, with inaugural exhibit opening February 10, 2018 at Gallery Aferro

Inaugural Exhibit: ***Well Hung: a Multifaceted Interrogation of Stereotypes***

Curated by Jo-EI Lopez

Opening Reception and Gallery Dedication February 10, 2018 from 7-10 PM

February 10 – March 16, 2018

Featured Artists: Ben F. Jones, Jerry Gant, Victor Davson, Vaughn Spann, Kevin Darmanie, Mashell Black, Anthony E. Boone, Steve Green, Suliman Onque, Kern Samuel, Ron Powell, & Ceaphas Stubbs

Gallery Aferro and Newark Arts are honoring the lives of two powerful and much-beloved Newark culture workers: Rodney Gilbert (July 27, 1967- November 8, 2017) and Eleta J. Caldwell (June 13, 1945 - December 13, 2017). Ms. Caldwell was Mr. Gilbert's teacher, and both were working artists passionately committed to cultural leadership in Newark, and to mentorship of the artistically inclined youth of the community. The new Memorial Gallery, located within Gallery Aferro's downtown location at 73 Market Street, is an intimate space appropriate for visual arts exhibits, poetry readings, screenings, and other sorts of gatherings where people connect with ideas and each other. The gallery is a place to linger, and a place for remembering.

The public is joyfully invited to join us on February 10 for the gallery dedication and opening reception curated by Jo-EI Lopez, as well as two other exciting exhibitions. RSVP is not required and there is no charge to attend and enjoy.

The inaugural exhibition, running February 10 – March 16, 2018, curated by Gilbert's friend and colleague Jo-EI Lopez, explores Black male identity and showcases the talents of local, Black male artists. Lopez writes: *"My friend Rodney Gilbert and I spoke about creating the "Well Hung" show numerous times before he passed away this December. The title that I suggested in jest took on a life of its own as we spoke about the overwhelming need to highlight nuanced portrayals of African-American male identities. He reminded me of the importance of creating an art show like this. He wanted to take on a powerful stereotype and give it a totally different direction. I want to create something influential, evidencing an extraordinary range of personalities, impulses, and ideas too complex to ever be contained or constrained. This show in Rodney's memory is about the African-American Male artist: his power, identity, joy and his trajectory for the future.*

In selecting these artists, ranging from established, mid-career, emerging and novice, I focused on artists who have had positive influences and are great role models to their community. Our working definition of these criteria differs from the reactive pressures sometimes put on artists to make exclusively "affirming images;" we instead find that

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when people are their most authentic, idiosyncratic and personal, they lead the way by showing others that it is possible to live freely.”

For Gilbert and Caldwell’s contemporaries and (now-grown) mentees, the dedication of the gallery is evidence that another new generation of youth will be inspired by the lives these two led, what they accomplished and the example of public service they modeled. Gallery Aferro, being close to Arts High School, is a frequent destination for students to visit, both informally as well as with field trips, and as such is a space where moments of inspiration and discovery happen for youth on the verge of believing they, too, can succeed. As an LGBTQ-led space, we also can honor the legacy of those who lead proud, out, professional lives. Planned exhibits throughout 2018 showcase the extraordinary talent and stylistic range of Newark-affiliated artists

About Ms. Caldwell: Born in Chapel Hill, NC, Eleta J. Caldwell moved to Newark in the late 1940’s and graduated from Arts High School. She began drawing at age 3 and went on to earn a Bachelors and a Masters of Fine Arts from Montclair State University. She began her teaching career at Weequaic High School and then went on to Arts High School, where she was first a teacher, then a Department Chair, and then the principal. She began exhibiting her work in the 1970’s with Gladys Barker Grauer’s AARD Gallery, and exhibited extensively including at the Newark Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, City Without Walls, Clocktower Gallery, Art in the Atrium, and others. She dedicated most of her work, time, and life to the city of Newark, NJ, and is remembered as a tireless and powerful mentor, advocate, and culture worker by countless former students as well as by her colleagues. Eleta wrote: *“My parents raised six children with love and respect. My father was a Pullman Porter, while my mother worked occasionally her primary obligation was the home. It was a major sin to be “idle” in my household. My father would give you a boring domestic chore if he caught you doing nothing. Therefore we all had interests: reading, art, sewing or music. We had a great deal of freedom, and that freedom was based on trust and respect. Art has always been my first love. During junior year my college class visited West Kinney Jr. High to observe a class and I was assigned an art class (of course), and I fell in love! I loved the teaching, the atmosphere, and especially the aura emanated by the students and their teacher. I felt a strong connection to my hometown, the city of Newark, where I received a great education. How better to give back to the city than to teach- I’m so glad I did it! I created my art while I pursued my teaching- it was an excellent marriage. I believe education is synonymous with experience. For me, exhibiting and teaching go hand in hand. I wanted to give my students a broader experience. Art was my tool to emphasize a holistic approach that combined creativity and critical thinking. I began painting in a representational genre; I loved the African and American face and figure. My family members were often the subject for my figurative works and portraits. I drew and painted Black faces incessantly. My work started to lean towards a more abstract presentational style. I painted women and our contributions, historically, spiritually and physically. I still focus on women’s unrecognized contributions but now employ mixed media to broaden my statements.”*

About Mr. Gilbert: In 2003 Rodney M. Gilbert founded Yendor Productions in Newark, NJ to meet the challenges of the underserved artists and communities. As CEO of Yendor Productions he developed, oversaw, and produced arts education programming

GALLERY AFERRO

and events and consulted on numerous projects. As one of the leading teaching artists in the tristate area, he provided acting instruction for numerous institutions. A professor in the Theatre Department of Drew University, an arts educator for the Kennedy Center's Wolfrap Program, and the Director of the Writers Program for Playwrights Theater, he developed the afterschool arts education program "ZOOM" for the City of Newark, NJ and provided professional development for the Caucus Educational Corporation's Stand and Deliver Program. He conducted workshops as far as Johannesburg, South Africa. As the Senior Program Manager for the Newark Murals Program, He was directly responsible for many of the murals that enhance the esthetic of the City of Newark. He advocated tirelessly for equal pay for artists raising awareness for a better Newark through the Arts. He curated many art shows throughout the City of Newark focusing on new and developing artists as well as showing established ones. Yendor Productions provided many arts activities to Newark children in the form of outdoor activities as well as summer arts programs. Mr. Gilbert, a Newark Arts High School graduate, earned a BFA from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia in 1989. A member of the Actors Equity Association, a Leadership Newark Fellow, and a Audelco Award Nominee and recipient of numerous awards including the Civic Engagement by Drew University. In 2014, he was appointed by Mayor Ras J. Baraka to serve as one of the first members of the City of Newark's LGBTQ commission.

In remembering and honoring both Ms. Caldwell and Ms. Gilbert, we are inspired by how many lives they were able to make a positive impact on, and by how affectionately, and vividly, both are remembered by so many people. Educators and activity planners are encouraged to contact the gallery to book a free tour of the exhibits for their youth or adult groups.