

FRANKLIN W. LIU ON SOPHIA AINSLIE

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Sophia Ainslie has an illuminating personality. She is a conscientious teacher and an internationally exhibited artist brimming with fertile ideas.

I first met her in 2007 to review her solo installation show, “Detritus,” presented at Boston’s Kingston Gallery, for artscope’s first anniversary issue.

Her art and *raison d’être* are all about pursuing an all-consuming passion; a relentless, intellectual journey she seizes to critically examine fundamental and formal concepts in art while spotlighting issues germane to societal concerns.

The content of her art, even as she tackles salient social issues to increase public awareness, deals in a Zen-like fashion with abstract, as well as disparate, concepts of positive vs. negative, of presence vs. absence, of movement vs. stillness, and of interchangeability and balance. This is a tireless, ongoing, private conversation she conducts with herself, absorbed, spending hours alone in her studio delineating art.

Ainslie said that her current work has less political overtone, but one may

argue that the corpuscles of activism may well have been coursing in her blood since her childhood days growing up, witnessing the unconscionable injustice of apartheid in racist South Africa.

Her late father, William Stewart Ainslie (1934-1989), was a celebrated artist, beloved teacher, and an honored humanitarian who, along with Sophia’s mother, Fieka, in 1971 founded the nonprofit, multi-racial Ainslie Studio in order to provide learning opportunities for black artists and students. As a result, her parents were subjected to frequent police harassments and suffered untold indignities from bigots; only one year later, the world would see Nelson Mandela arrested and imprisoned.

Ainslie’s parents persisted under challenging circumstances; the school managed to thrive, and in time became the Johannesburg Art Foundation, seeing the enrollment of numerous talented students like William

Kentridge, who has since become widely recognized and celebrated for his animated visual and performance work.

In America, Ainslie is committed to teaching art as well. She has been a full-time faculty member at Northeastern University since 2001 and she has also taught at the School of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Tufts University and the New England School of Art and Design. In 2010, she completed a teaching fellowship at the Burren College of Art in Ireland.

“Visual arts are an imperative foundation in fostering creative thinking, critical evaluation and problem solving in any line of study,” Ainslie said. Of utmost importance to her is that students develop their own ideas, personal interpretations and connections to larger issues, and to think critically.

She guides and prods her students to break down preconceived ideas in order to see the world anew. The special challenge, Ainslie said, is to elevate a student’s creativity — to enhance their discovery of their own individuality and unique voices.

This academic theme runs through her prolific work in the last five years from her “Crawlers” series, to “Landmarks,” and to “Fragments,” whose images exist in smaller scale to her current work of “Inside Out.”

These new works are a continuing dialogue of ideas inherent in her



Fragment-F, 2010, India ink and flashe on paper.

previous, organic works exploring forms and relationships between landscape, the body and memory, which are stored and erased and recaptured. As the viewer gets closer to the surface of the artwork, a burst of galaxy in movement, energy and patterns are transformed, some into recognizable icons, while others remain as large abstract landscapes.

For “Inside Out,” which will be at the Kingston Gallery in Boston from March 31 through May 1, Ainslie incorporates Google Earth’s residential maps juxtaposed with images of a relative’s abdominal X-ray; some of the works in this vividly imaginative collection are as large as five to six feet in size. The vastness of urban texture converges with transparent, organic form to yield striking images delivered with India ink and Flashe on polypropylene.

To see more of Ainslie’s work, visit sophiaainslie.com.



LEFT: Fragment-I, 2010, flashe paint and India ink on polypropylene.
RIGHT: Fragment-Ireland-C, 2010, India ink and acrylic on polypropylene.