

Press for Commission:



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## [Northeastern art professor and her students transform Boston-area home into abstract art](#)

### Editor's Picks

Northeastern art professor and her students transform Boston-area home into abstract art



Northeastern University computer engineering and computer science alumnus Alexander Langrock '22, assists Sophia Ainslie, Northeastern associate professor of art and design, in painting an abstract piece in a private home in Chestnut Hill. Ainslie and her students were given free reign on the commissioned piece to paint anywhere from floor to ceiling. Photos by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University

Walking into this mid-century modern Chestnut Hill home you might not expect to find abstract art literally flowing off the walls. But that's exactly where [Sophia Ainslie](#), a Northeastern University associate teaching professor of art and design, has created her next masterpiece.

Ainslie's abstract style, which combines bold pops of color and shapely-yet-formless flows of black and white, is impossible to ignore. It's why, on top of her work in the classroom, she also brings her art out into the world through commissioned, large-scale pieces. Her work transforms spaces like Northeastern's Ryder Hall, Boston City Hall and, now, a private home in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood west of downtown Boston.

"It's always been more about the two dimensionality of a space, and now it's interesting working more three dimensionally because it is more experiential," Ainslie says. "You get more engulfed in it."



Sophia Ainslie drew on the colors from the property owners' art collection to connect her piece to the character of the Chestnut Hill home she was working in for this project. Photos by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University

But Ainslie doesn't do this alone. She uses these projects as experiential learning opportunities, bringing her students along for the ride. The design is Ainslie's, but her students use their own brushstrokes and style to help bring her vision to life.

“She asks us to assist her, but it feels more like we’re partners or collaborators rather than assistants,” says Rene James, a second-year architecture student who worked on the Chestnut Hill project. She’s always asking us for our input and trusting us to add our own little personal touches to the artwork and use our personal judgment.”

“It’s her artwork, so she’s done all the thinking and everything for it, and I just like being a part of something bigger,” says Madeline Zhang, a third-year computer science and media arts student.



In order to weave together her students’ various brushstrokes, Sophia Ainslie has them work on certain areas and then switch places with their fellow artists. She says it helps them become “a team rather than an individual.” Photos by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University and Courtesy of Sophia Ainslie

For the Chestnut Hill project that was completed this month, Ainslie was invited by the owners, who are avid art collectors, to make something immersive, something that responded to the home, which was undergoing construction and redesign. She chose to weave reds and blues, colors that were common in the owners' art collection, into the design of the piece, alongside a flow and movement designed to draw people through the house.

The piece starts in the garage, which will become a gallery and entertaining space, where it sits on the walls but also crawls onto the floor and ceiling. It flows from the garage through a door that opens into a main floor hallway, running along the hallway wall and up a stairway to the second floor.

The piece not only accentuates the architecture and physical space but serves as a guide throughout it. The garage door becomes a portal, with a wave of color and form flowing into it and drawing you toward its source, the house itself.

“It’s pulling the energy towards the door so that people would walk through,” Ainslie says. “Also on the floor, it’s suggesting a pathway in a way. ... It’s part of the way that I create something, thinking about movement and direction.”



Photos by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University



Northeastern computer engineering and computer science alumnus Alexander Langrock '22, assists Northeastern associate professor of art and design Sophia Ainslie in painting a piece in a private home in Chestnut hill. Photos by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University.

The piece stretches from the garage into this main floor hallway, as well as on the poles seen here. By painting on the poles as well as the wall behind it, Sophia Ainslie hopes to achieve a collage-like effect.

Ainslie enlisted four current students and a recent Northeastern graduate for this project, meaning there were a lot of cooks in the kitchen. She told her students that she was looking for bold, confident brushstrokes, but she embraces the fact that every person brings a unique “mark” to their work.

“At different parts of the process she’ll have you switch places with each other so you can integrate your lines with each other,” says Aubrey Nash, a third-year communications and media studies student. “She recognizes that even though we’re all tracing the same lines, everybody has a different brush stroke.”

Unlike her other commissions that exist in public spaces, this project will become an intimate part of one family’s life for years to come. Nash says that introduced an added layer of pressure to get things right. Every brushstroke becomes intertwined with the family’s everyday lives.

Ainslie hopes that her sprawling piece of abstract art will be more than just a background for the mundane. Art is surprising and transformative, it can break people out of their regular cycles and get them to look at the world, or their living room, a little differently.

“I hope that they would see new things in it all the time,” Ainslie says. “I think that’s one of the things that I strive for. How do you make something last through time?”

The homeowners aren’t the only ones that will be transformed by Ainslie’s work. She hopes the lessons her students learn from these projects stay with them for years to come. It’s about more than just becoming a better artist. That’s something Ainslie can teach in her classroom.

For Alexander Langrock, who graduated with a B.S. in computer engineering and computer science from Northeastern in 2022, working with Ainslie on multiple projects has shown him “that there are spaces for artists out there in the world to actually make art and make money off of it.”

Emily Kasumov is a second year chemical engineering and biochemistry student who enjoys making art when she’s not in the lab. Painting in the Chestnut Hill home over the past few months reaffirmed for her that art and science have a lot in common.

“After I was working on Sophia’s project, I would see the way tree branches swivel together, and it looks exactly like the lines that I’ve been drawing,” Kasumov says. “That’s how art changes the way you look at the world, and science does the same thing.”

These projects are also networking opportunities for students. Last year, Ainslie worked with five students to create a 68-foot-long mural for a large tech company’s Cambridge offices. The students working with her, some of whom were studying computer science, were able to meet, greet and eat with employees, who were eager to chat with them.

“It’s about interaction and networking, but it’s also about long working hours and understanding what eight hours a day means and how quickly that goes when you’re doing something you love,” Ainslie says.

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