

## **Recycled Resonance**

The Wasted Art of Sophia Ainslie

***By Christina Leonard***

She wanted to get paint off of the wall. To release the stasis of a painting into something more alive. Something you can feel. And so, Sophia Ainslie came to Boston and found just that. When she arrived, she watched the people around her and was especially fascinated by people on the T. "It was this mechanical, meaningless routine of going to work every morning, going home, eating, sleeping, getting up in the morning and going to work," said Ainslie.

As Ainslie found herself in the midst of this mechanization, she could not escape the persistent cycle of junk mail flowing in to her mailbox everyday. The rhythm was all around her. Her studio started filling up with junk mail, and so she succumbed to the mechanical rhythms of the postal system. "I tore up the paper, crumpled it up, and stuck it into the holes of chicken wire," said Ainslie. "I thought I was working out of the structure, trying to break the rhythm."

Ainslie was in a new environment. She had to resound what she knew, and she worked with the structures that were around her. Two years later she ended up with a 25 by 30 foot quilt of junk mail catalogs stuffed in a wirey terrace. This was the beginning of Ainslie's work with what she calls, "found materials."

She was in the Museum School's degree program at Tufts when she had her first installation in Boston. "It was a kinetic piece," Ainslie said. "As you walked through the doors of the gallery you walked through this structure that was on the floor, on the walls and hanging from the ceiling." Imagine this: chicken wire that is levitated off of the floor, with the invasive brightness of commercial advertisements erupting from each orifice. This creation speaks to the waste in our everyday lives. As it comes in our front door and goes out the back, we fail to realize the abundance in which it manifests itself. Ainslie's work is the interplay of consumerism, waste, and an artist's mark on the world around her. Her focus on found materials brings light to the ease in which we are able to rid ourselves of the waste in our lives: out of sight, out of mind, but not out of the Earth.

It was not until Ainslie was in the rapid pace of Boston life that she obsessed over this pattern, and thus broke away from the style of art to which she had always been accustomed. Her background consisted mostly of painting and sketches, "but Boston wasn't conducive to painting," she said. She grew up in South Africa in an artist's utopia. Her father, Bill Ainslie, founded the Johannesburg Art Foundation in 1964. It was a haven for South African artists to develop their ideas, regardless of race. The Johannesburg school was in opposition to the conservative regime in South Africa during apartheid, and it was also Ainslie's home.

Her father put together a proposal for a trust to purchase two buildings in a white village where her family lived, worked, and thrived within the art school. "He created this forum where people would come together across the racial barriers and have art as the common denominator," Ainslie said. The school was open to anyone. There was no accreditation required to get in, and the school offered full and part time programs dealing with all of the arts. By the time Ainslie was a young girl, Johannesburg had more than 500 students.

Bill Ainslie purposefully established the school in an all-white region. "He decided it was better to keep it in an area that was kept beautiful," said Ainslie. This gave people a chance to leave the townships and come in to a place they were normally barred from, which drew constant scrutiny from the government. "We had our phone tapped, and the special branch was constantly watching the house, patrolling the end of our driveway," said Ainslie. In addition, the Ainslie family was subject to random searches of their house, which Ainslie says usually took place at 2 a.m.

Ainslie's environment looked past the black and white that was apartheid. Most white children growing up in apartheid were subject to censored newspapers and had little knowledge of townships. "They grew up in a different world, so there was no desire to communicate with blacks on a personal level," said Ainslie. But Ainslie's life was different. She has a younger brother who is black. He and his mother grew up in the Ainslie home, and he used to come to school with her to perform plays that Ainslie wrote as a child. "I would introduce him as my brother, and people would say, 'Is he really your brother?' and I remember thinking, 'are these people stupid?'"

Ainslie's work during apartheid was not created with political intentions, but it inherently spoke to the situation at hand. She says that her father's motivation in creating the Johannesburg school was to create a world that excluded the abnormality of South Africa. By focusing on a strictly political message, Ainslie says, you are giving in to the very political system to which you are opposed. "My father used to tell us that by supporting the oppressor, even through opposition, you are letting them in to your soul," said Ainslie.

Ainslie worked with the life that was around her, and if that reflected something political, then so be it. "I spent my nights at a club, Jamison's, where there was this amazing renaissance," said Ainslie. Surrounded by black artists, musicians, and poets in one of the only places in which they were allowed to perform, Ainslie absorbed this atmosphere and reflected it in her work. "I took my sketches and would blow them up bigger with all sorts of black and white distortion," she said. "I was documenting my life as I knew it." But many artists from England and America were not accepting Ainslie's work once they discovered that she was just another white woman in South Africa. "A lot of people just saw it as being political, but I was just making work that resonated with me," said Ainslie.

Ainslie's current work appeals to the same philosophy. She is working with found materials and currently exhibits her work at the Kingston Gallery in South Boston. She strives to bring light to the waste cycle in our society, and she cannot stop asking, "Where does it all go?"

Ainslie's most recent finds have been at a recycling yard in Charlestown. Letting out a long whistle, Ainslie sits back in her chair at the mention of this place. "It's got a really good smell. Real stinky," she said. These are the things that inspire her. The trucks arrive, weigh their goods, empty their goods, and leave the yard. It is a vicious cycle in itself that must continue to keep up with the momentum of our waste cycle. "I feel rejuvenated when I'm there," said Ainslie. "It's brilliant."

Picture the detergent aisle in your local supermarket. The colors are bright, invasive, but alluring. They are lined up neatly on a shelf, bearing the most familiar titles. But when the liquid is gone, they are sent to the curb. When the recycling yard receives enough bottles (this cycle is repeated several times each day), they are crushed flat and put into

a bail that weighs one ton.

Ainslie's exhibits with the detergent bottles are stunning. She uses an entire bail (which contains about 4,000 bottles) and props them up in all distortions. They strike an immediate connection with the viewer; the vibrancy and seduction of such bright colors and the feeling that "I've seen these bottles before." And these objects have been somewhere before. We have seen them new on the shelf, used on our washers, sitting empty on recycling day, but we usually don't see them after that. They have a history, and they are part of a cycle that is purposely hidden from the public's eye.

"Color has been difficult in Boston," said Ainslie, but that has not stopped her from working on other pieces. She exhibits charcoal drawings that are juxtaposed with the plastic beast in the middle of the gallery. The charcoals portray the detergent bottles, some crushed, some like new, and there are little bits of fluorescents that creep in. "Those colors are all about seduction," said Ainslie.

Ainslie's exhibit speaks to the consumer, the recycler, and the waster in all of us. She puts these items in a space that is confined, and you are trapped in this small exhibit, surrounded by 4,000 vibrant detergent bottles and white walls. You are forced to take them in, but she does it in such a way that you do not want to leave. The plastic is tattered and torn, yet appears indestructible, and you want to know where these bottles came from, and where they are going, because the cycle never ends. "It touches my heart when I see people in the situation of mechanization."