

Ruth Asawa *A Line Can Go Anywhere*

10 January– 22 February, 2020
24 Grafton Street
London

Director-led walkthrough: Thursday 9 January, 5-6 PM
Private view: Thursday 9 January, 6–8 PM



Ruth Asawa and Her Wire Sculpture, 1951. Gelatin silver print 11.4 x 8.9 cm
Photograph by Imogen Cunningham © Imogen Cunningham
Courtesy The Estate of Ruth Asawa and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of work by American artist Ruth Asawa at the gallery's London location. This will be the first major presentation of her work outside the United States and will include a number of key forms spanning more than five decades of the artist's career, focusing in particular on the relationship between Asawa's wire sculptures and her wide-ranging body of works on paper.

An influential artist, devoted activist, and tireless advocate for arts education, Asawa is best known for her extensive body of hanging wire sculptures. These intricate, dynamic, and sinuous works, begun in the late 1940s, continue to challenge conventional notions of sculpture through their emphasis on lightness and transparency. Relentlessly experimental across a range of mediums, Asawa also produced numerous drawings and prints that, like her wire sculptures, are built on simple, repeated gestures that accumulate into complex compositions. Although she moved between abstract and figurative registers in her sculptures and drawings, respectively, viewed together, the works in this exhibition nevertheless incite a rich dialogue and find commonality in their sustained emphasis on the natural world and its forms, as well as in their deft use of the basic aesthetic concept of the line. As she noted, "I was interested in it because of the economy of a line, making something in space, enclosing it without blocking it out. It's still transparent. I realised that if I was going to make these forms, which interlock and interweave, it can only be done with a line because a line can go anywhere."¹

The works on view include examples of Asawa's well-known looped-wire sculptures, which she began while still a student at Black Mountain College. Their unique structure was inspired by Asawa's 1947 trip to Mexico, during which a local craftsman taught her how to create baskets out of wire. Suspended within the gallery space both in clusters and individually, these works range from elaborate multi-lobed compositions to nested shapes made from a single continuous length of wire, miniature spheres, and open-window forms that require extreme technical dexterity to achieve.

¹ Ruth Asawa, cited in Daniell Cornell, "The Art of Space: Ruth Asawa's Sculptural Installations," in Cornell, ed., *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*. Exh. cat. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2006), p. 138.

Presented alongside these will be Asawa's tied-wire sculptures, a body of work begun in 1962. After having been gifted a desert plant whose branches split exponentially as they grew, Asawa quickly became frustrated by her attempts to draw its structure. Instead, she utilised industrial wire as a means of sculpting its form and, in doing so, was able to create her signature abstractions.

Additional highlights include a rare work on paper inspired by Asawa's time at Black Mountain in which she used the 'BMC' laundry stamp to create intricate and undulating compositions that derive from a series of exercises assigned by Josef Albers in his Basic Design class. Rather than emphasising technique, Albers pushed his students to focus on—as he did in his own work—the articulation of form through colour by asking them to limit themselves to a small number of basic shapes and motifs. Likewise, Asawa's spare but elegant drawings of plants and flowers, made over the course of her life, echo this idea.

Also featured will be a group of vintage photographs of Asawa and her work by noted photographer Imogen Cunningham (1883–1976), her close friend and ardent supporter for more than two decades.

Born in rural California, American sculptor, educator, and arts activist Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) was first exposed to professional artists while her family and other Japanese Americans were detained at Santa Anita, California, in 1942. Following her release from an internment camp in Rohwer, Arkansas, eighteen months later, she enrolled in 1943 in Milwaukee State Teachers College. Unable to receive her degree due to continued hostility against Japanese Americans, Asawa left Milwaukee in 1946 to study at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, then known for its progressive pedagogical methods and avant-garde aesthetic environment. Asawa's time at Black Mountain proved formative in her development as an artist, and she was particularly influenced by her teachers Josef Albers, Buckminster Fuller, and the mathematician Max Dehn. She also met architectural student Albert Lanier, whom she would marry in 1949 and with whom she would raise a large family and build a career in San Francisco. Asawa continued to produce art steadily over the course of more than a half century, creating a cohesive body of sculptures and works on paper that, in their innovative use of material and form, deftly synthesises a wide range of aesthetic preoccupations at the heart of twentieth-century abstraction.

Asawa's work has been exhibited widely since the early 1950s, including in early solo exhibitions at Peridot Gallery, New York in 1954, 1956, and 1958. In 1965, Walter Hopps organised a solo exhibition of the artist's sculptures and drawings at the Pasadena Art Museum (now Norton Simon Museum) in California, where she completed a residency at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop the same year. Other solo presentations include those held at the San Francisco Museum of Art (1973); Fresno Art Museum, California (travelled to Oakland Museum of California; 2001–2002); de Young Museum, San Francisco (2006); Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas (2012); and Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena, California (2014).

In 2018–2019, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis presented *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work*, the first major museum exhibition of the artist's work in more than a decade. An accompanying catalogue published by Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Yale University Press includes essays by Aruna D'Souza, Helen Molesworth, and Tamara H. Schenkenberg. In May 2020, *Ruth Asawa: Citizen of the Universe* will open at Modern Art Oxford, England, and will subsequently travel to the Stavanger Kunstmuseum, Norway, the following October.

The artist's works have also been included in significant group exhibitions, including *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2015; travelled to Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio); *America is Hard to See*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2107); *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016*, Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles; *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (both 2017); *The Pencil is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists*, The Drawing Center, New York; and *In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury*, Art Institute of Chicago (both 2019).

In addition to her wire sculptures, Asawa is well known for her public commissions, particularly in San Francisco and the wider Bay Area. These include the much beloved fountains in Ghirardelli Square (1968) and outside the Grand Hyatt San Francisco (1973), the latter of which includes hundreds of baker's clay images molded by local schoolchildren, friends, and other artists cast in bronze. Upon moving to San Francisco in 1949, Asawa, a firm believer in the radical potential of arts education from her time at Black Mountain College, devoted herself to expanding access to art-focused educational programs. She co-founded the Alvarado Arts Workshop in 1968 and was instrumental in the opening of the first public arts high school in San Francisco in 1982, which was renamed the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in her honor in 2010.

The artist's work is represented in prominent museum collections, including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; San Jose Museum of Art, California; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Asawa has been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards.

The Estate of Ruth Asawa has been represented by David Zwirner since 2017. The gallery's inaugural solo exhibition of the artist's work took place that same year in New York, and was accompanied by an extensive publication that includes texts by Tiffany Bell and Robert Storr and features an illustrated chronology.

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