

Ruth Asawa *Doing Is Living*

November 19, 2024–February 22, 2025
5/F, H Queen's,
80 Queen's Road Central,
Central, Hong Kong



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.210, Hanging Single-Section, Reversible Open-Window Form)*, 1959. Artwork © 2024 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner

I study nature, and a lot of these forms come from observing plants. I really look at nature and I just do it as I see it. I draw something on paper. And then I am able to take a wire line and go into the air and define the air without stealing it from anyone. —Ruth Asawa¹

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of sculptures and works on paper by American artist Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) at the gallery's Hong Kong location. The first solo presentation of Asawa's work in Greater China, the exhibition provides an overview of the artist's wide-ranging practice, focusing in particular on her affinity for the natural world, which in turn provided a constant source of inspiration in her art.

An artist, educator, and arts advocate, Asawa is celebrated for her extensive body of wire sculptures that challenge conventional notions of material and form through their emphasis on lightness and transparency. Born in rural California, Asawa first studied under professional artists while her family and other people of Japanese descent were detained at Santa Anita, California, in 1942. Following her release from an incarceration camp in Rohwer, Arkansas, sixteen months later, she enrolled at 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; 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

¹ Interview with Katie Simon, June 26, 1995, Ruth Asawa Papers at Stanford Special Collections: Series 7, Box 127, Folder 7, statements 1994–1995.

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 synthesizes a wide range of aesthetic preoccupations at the heart of postwar art in America.

Relentlessly experimental across a variety of mediums, Asawa moved effortlessly between abstract and figurative registers in both two and three dimensions, creating a vast and varied oeuvre that, despite its visual heterogeneity, reflects above all her belief in the total integration of artistic practice and family life. Spanning five decades, the works in this exhibition—many of which have never before been displayed publicly—exemplify the various and complementary facets of Asawa's prolific career.

Asawa began making her looped-wire sculptures in the late 1940s, while still a student at Black Mountain College. The unique structure of these sculptures was inspired by a 1947 trip to Mexico, during which local artisans taught her how to create baskets out of wire. Executed in a number of intricate, interwoven configurations and at different scales and formats, the looped-wire sculptures in this presentation range from elaborate multilobed compositions to small spheres and billowing conical forms that require extreme technical dexterity to achieve. Several examples of the artist's "form within a form" compositions will be on view, in which she created nested shapes from a single continuous surface of looped wire. Asawa considered this concept to be one of the most important in her work for both technical and conceptual reasons. As the artist later explained, "What I was excited by was that I could make a shape that was inside and outside at the same time."²

Also on view in the exhibition are examples of Asawa's iconic tied-wire sculptures, which she began making in 1962. Like many of the artist's constructions, the series explores organic forms and processes. After having been gifted a desert plant whose branches split exponentially as they grew, Asawa quickly became frustrated by her attempts to replicate its structure in two dimensions. Instead, she utilized industrial wire as a means of mimicking the form through sculpture and, in doing so, studying its shape. Asawa was compelled by the fact that one can see through these sculptures while experiencing them, like viewing the sky through the gaps between tree branches.

Additionally featured are drawings and works on paper that, placed in dialogue with the sculptures, illuminate Asawa's near-constant devotion to her creative pursuits and distinct way of seeing the world around her. She would habitually and constantly draw her everyday surroundings, producing in particular keenly observed images of plants and flowers, frequently from her own garden or brought to her by family and friends. On view along with a selection of these drawings are works on paper from the 1950s whose geometric, patterned compositions are defined by a small number of basic shapes and motifs, recalling the design principles espoused by Albers that privilege the articulation of form through color. Like her wire sculptures, Asawa's works on paper are built on simple, repeated gestures that accumulate into complex compositions.

Ruth Asawa's (1926–2013) work has been exhibited widely since the early 1950s, including early solo exhibitions at Peridot Gallery, New York, in 1954, 1956, and 1958. In 1965, Walter Hopps organized a solo exhibition of the artist's sculptures and drawings at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum) in California; Asawa completed a residency at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles the same year. Other solo presentations include those held at the San Francisco Museum of Art (1973); Fresno Art Museum, California (2001; traveled to Oakland Museum of California through 2002); de Young Museum, San Francisco (2006); Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas (2012); and the Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena, California (2014).

² Ruth Asawa quoted in Karin Higa, "Inside and Outside at the Same Time," in Daniell Cornell, ed., *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*. Exh. cat. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2006), p. 30.

In 2018 to 2019, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis presented the major museum exhibition *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work*. An accompanying catalogue published by the Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Yale University Press includes essays by Aruna D'Souza, Helen Molesworth, and Tamara H. Schenkenberg. The two-person exhibition, *Lineage: Paul Klee and Ruth Asawa* was on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2021. In 2022, *Ruth Asawa: Citizen of the Universe* was on view at Modern Art Oxford, England, and later traveled to the Stavanger Kunstmuseum, Norway. In September 2023, *Ruth Asawa Through Line*, a solo presentation of the artist's work, opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and traveled to the Menil Drawing Institute, Houston, in 2024.

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; traveled to Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, through 2017); *America Is Hard to See*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2015); *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016*, Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles (2017); *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2017); *The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists*, The Drawing Center, New York (2019); and *In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury*, Art Institute of Chicago (2019). A selection of the artist's work was presented at the 59th Venice Biennale, *The Milk of Dreams* (2022).

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 Andrea fountain in Ghirardelli Square (1966–1968) and the San Francisco Fountain outside the Grand Hyatt Union Square (1970–1973), 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 cofounded the Alvarado School Arts Workshop in 1968 and was instrumental in the creation 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. Additionally, Asawa served on the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and was a trustee of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Asawa was awarded a 2022 National Medal of Arts by President Joe Biden in 2024, only the second visual artist to receive this high honor posthumously.

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 the same year in New York. In 2020, the gallery's London location presented *Ruth Asawa: A Line Can Go Anywhere*, which was the first major presentation of the artist's work outside of the United States. In 2021, *Ruth Asawa: All Is Possible*, curated by Helen Molesworth, was on view at the gallery's West 20th Street location in New York.

In April 2025, *Ruth Asawa: Retrospective*, curated by Janet Bishop and Cara Manes, will open at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art before traveling to The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain; and Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Switzerland, through January 2027. The first international institutional and posthumous retrospective of the artist's work, the exhibition is accompanied by a forthcoming catalogue with new scholarship.

During her lifetime, Asawa received numerous prestigious awards. The artist's work is represented in prominent museum collections, including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; de Young Museum, San Francisco; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; 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.

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