

## Ruth Asawa *All Is Possible*

Organized by Helen Molesworth

November 4–December 18, 2021  
537 West 20th Street, New York



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.237, Hanging Six-Lobed, Interlocking Continuous Form)*, c. 1958. Artwork © 2021 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner.

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Ruth Asawa: All Is Possible* at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York. Organized by Helen Molesworth, this exhibition will situate Asawa's iconic looped- and tied-wire sculptures in the context of her extraordinary drawings and her lesser-known sculptural forms, offering viewers one of the most comprehensive looks at this artist's work to date. This larger context illuminates an artist in pursuit of form as a means to reshape how we see and perceive the world as well as offering a model for thinking about the avant-garde's long-held desire to place art and life in a permanently dynamic conversation.

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. 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.

Included in this exhibition will be a selection of "meander" drawings, a motif that emerged from exercises assigned by Josef Albers in his legendary Basic Design class at Black Mountain College, which Asawa attended in the late 1940s. This undulating pattern, created with a spiraling line, suggests a field

of fluctuating positive and negative forms akin to the interplay of inside and outside that Asawa would conjure in her “continuous” looped-wire sculptures. The meander found perhaps its greatest expression in the two enormous redwood panels, also on view, that Asawa meticulously carved on both sides with her children as the doors for their family home over the course of the summer of 1961.

A selection of looped-wire sculptures—works often made while sitting at her kitchen table or looking after her children—in a range of scales and formats will additionally be featured. An exceptional six-lobed continuous form made of copper and brass wire that was originally owned by Mae Lee, Asawa’s friend, neighbor, and sometimes assistant who helped her with a number of her public commissions, including the fountains she designed for San Francisco’s Ghirardelli Square and the Grand Hyatt Plaza, will be presented publicly for the first time since 1958. Likewise, one of the few groupings in her oeuvre, three “open-window” forms—one of the most technically complex shapes in Asawa’s repertoire—last seen in the 1960s, will be included.

Asawa’s lesser-known drawings of the minutiae of everyday life—sleeping children, garden plants, and cane and wicker chairs—as well as the ceramic masks of her friends and many visitors to her home, which she would habitually cast in plaster, provide an intimate glimpse into the day to day. Placed in dialogue with the voluminous tied-wire sculptures she devised in 1962, frustrated by her attempts to draw in two dimensions a desert plant whose branches split exponentially, these works illuminate Asawa’s near-constant devotion to her creative pursuits and distinct way of seeing the world around her.

Curator Helen Molesworth notes: “This exhibition aims to recast Asawa as an artist as interested in representation as she was in abstraction, as compelled by the drawn line as the sculptural form, an artist perpetually curious about the intimate relationship between what the eye sees and what the hand can produce.”

As Asawa’s future husband, Albert Lanier, wrote to her in a letter in November 1948, “The life of the artist-scientist-explorer ... is truly the only life worth living. You give me the courage—just the word ‘Ruth’ gives me an ‘all is possible’ feeling.”<sup>1</sup>

On the occasion of the exhibition, an exhibition catalogue is forthcoming from David Zwirner Books with new scholarship on the artist by Helen Molesworth, Makeda Best, Taylor Davis, Ruth Erickson, Briony Fer, Jennifer Roberts, and John Yau.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Lanier, letter to Ruth Asawa dated November 22, 1948. The Estate of Ruth Asawa.

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 synthesizes 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 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 Norton Simon Museum) in California, where Asawa 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 (2001; traveled to Oakland Museum of California, 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 to 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. The two-person exhibition *Lineage: Paul Klee and Ruth Asawa* is currently on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through December 5, 2021. In 2022, *Ruth Asawa: Citizen of the Universe* will open at Modern Art Oxford, England, and will subsequently travel to the Stavanger Kunstmuseum, Norway.

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, 2016–2017); *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).

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 (1966–1968) in Ghirardelli Square and the *San Francisco Fountain* (1970–1973) outside the Grand Hyatt on Union Square, 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.

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. 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 the 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. 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.

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