

For immediate release

RUTH ASAWA

September 13 – October 21, 2017

Opening reception: Wednesday, September 13, 2017, 6 - 8 PM



Ruth Asawa with hanging sculpture, 1952
Photo © 2017 Imogen Cunningham Trust
Artwork © 2017 Estate of Ruth Asawa

David Zwirner is pleased to announce the gallery's first exhibition dedicated to the work of Ruth Asawa since having announced the representation of the artist's estate earlier this year, which will take place at the 537 West 20th Street location. The exhibition will bring together a selection of key sculptures, paintings, and works on paper spanning Asawa's influential practice, as well as rare archival materials, including a group of vintage photographs of the artist and her work by Imogen Cunningham.

Born in rural California, Asawa began to make art while detained in internment camps for Japanese Americans at Santa Anita, California, and Rohwer, Arkansas, where she was sent with her family in 1942-1943. Following her release, she enrolled in Milwaukee State Teachers College, eventually making her way to Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1946, then known for its progressive pedagogical methods and avant-garde aesthetic milieu. Asawa's time at Black Mountain proved formative in her development as an artist, and she was influenced there in particular by her teachers Josef Albers, Buckminster Fuller, and the mathematician Max Dehn.

Asawa is best known for her extensive body of looped-wire sculptures that challenge conventional notions of material and form through their emphasis on lightness and transparency, which she began making in the late 1940s while still a student at Black Mountain. Their unique structure was inspired by a 1947 trip to Mexico, during which local craftsmen taught her how to

create baskets out of wire. While seemingly unrelated to the lessons of color and composition taught in Albers's legendary Basic Design course, these works, as she explained, are firmly grounded in his teachings in their use of unexpected materials and their elision of figure and ground: "I found myself experimenting with wire. I was interested in the economy of a line, enclosing three-dimensional space. The lesson taught us by Albers was to do something with a material which is unique to its properties. The artist must respect the integrity of the material. I realized that I could make wire forms interlock, expand, and contract with a single strand because a line can go anywhere."¹

Asawa executed her looped-wire sculptures in a number of complex, interwoven configurations throughout her career, a variety of which will be on view in the exhibition. These range from small spheres to long, elaborate examples of the artist's "form within a form" compositions, in which she created nested shapes from a single continuous line of looped wire; as well as lesser-known forms including hyperbolic shapes, suspended cones, and interlocking spheres.

Also on view will be examples of Asawa's related tied-wire sculptures, a series begun in 1962, which like much of her oeuvre explore 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 sculpting, and in doing so studying its shape. In the ensuing decades, she created numerous hanging and wall-mounted variations on this form.

A selection of the artist's rarely seen paintings and works on paper, executed during her time at Black Mountain, will be presented alongside her three-dimensional works. For example, in her "In and Out" compositions, Asawa creates variations on a chevron pattern, utilizing subtle modifications to create a sense of depth and motion within the otherwise flat picture plane. In another group of works, she incorporates the simple shape of the Dogwood leaf, folded and overlapped into varying configurations, to compose dynamic color studies. In still another

¹ Stephen Dobbs, "Community and Commitment: An Interview with Ruth Asawa." *Art Education* (September 1981), p. 15.

work, Asawa uses a "BMC" stamp from the school's laundry facility to create an allover, undulating composition. Seen in this context, the graphic optical effects deployed in these early compositions reveal the genesis of Asawa's interest in repeated forms, motion, and collapsing pictorial space that logically culminate in her wire sculptures.

On the occasion of the exhibition, a monographic catalogue will be published by David Zwirner Books, which will include new scholarship on Asawa's groundbreaking body of work by art historian Tiffany Bell, as well as an essay by Robert Storr, and an illustrated chronology.

Asawa's work will concurrently be on view in *Josef and Anni and Ruth and Ray*, the inaugural exhibition at David Zwirner's new Upper East Side location at 34 East 69th Street.

American sculptor, educator, and arts activist **Ruth Asawa** (1926-2013) is recognized both for her pioneering contributions to twentieth century sculpture as well as arts curricula in San Francisco and nationwide. She studied at Milwaukee State Teachers College, Wisconsin (1943-1946) and Black Mountain College, North Carolina (1946-1949); and later received Honorary Doctorates from the California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland (now California College of the Arts; 1974), the San Francisco Art Institute (1997), and San Francisco State University (1998).

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 comprises 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. Asawa believed that "Art will make people better, more highly skilled in thinking and improving whatever business one goes into, or whatever occupation. It makes a person broader."²

Asawa's work has been exhibited widely throughout the world since the early 1950s, including 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 the artist completed a residency at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop the same year. Other significant solo presentations include those held at the San Francisco Museum of Art (1973); Fresno Art Museum, California (traveled 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, California (2014).

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; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; 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 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. Asawa has been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards.

² Ruth Asawa quoted in Douglas Martin, "Ruth Asawa, an Artist Who Wove Wire, Dies at 87," *The New York Times* (August 17, 2013), section A, p. 20.

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