



Who's Who In Crochet

A focus of interest on those that have inspired crochet

Ruth Asawa, Sculptor and Arts Advocate 1/24/1926-8/6/2013



The Sculptures of Ruth Asawa: *Contours in the Air* organized by the deYoung Museum and curated by Dr. Daniell Cornell of Fine Arts Museums San Francisco in 2006 is the first complete retrospective of her enduring and richly varied career. The exhibition traces Asawa's trajectory from her student drawings and paintings created while at Black Mountain College to her career as a pioneering modernist artist recognized nationally for her wire sculpture, public commissions, and activism in education and the arts.

Contours in Air establishes the importance of Asawa's work within the larger national context of artists who redefined art as a way of thinking and acting in the

world rather than as a mere stylistic practice. The full scope and stature of Ruth Asawa's work is brought into brilliant focus in this exhibition of 52 sculptures and 44 works on paper, with additional documentary source materials including notebooks and vintage photographs by Imogen Cunningham."

"Ruth is a groundbreaking modernist sculptor of abstract forms. Although widely lauded in the 1950s and 1960s, and today considered a San Francisco treasure, Asawa has been under-represented by most art history surveys of 20th-century sculpture. Because her work uses nontraditional materials and a manual method that appears related to knitting, weaving and craft, it is often overlooked in discussions of modernist sculpture," says Dr. Cornell, Director of Contemporary Art Projects and Curator of American Art. "Furthermore, her decision to create works that hang, often meant to be seen from below, challenges the standard conventions of sculpture."



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Ruth Asawa was among the Japanese American internees during World War II when she was 16. She and her family were sent to an internment camp at the racetrack at Santa Anita in California. They lived in the stables; and she recalled that the stench of horse manure hung heavily in the air. Later, the family was moved to a camp in Arkansas. But it was in this unpromising environment that Asawa found her calling and spent her days drawing and painting.

Well after the war, Ruth studied to become a teacher, but she was told that she would not get hired because she is Japanese American. She followed friends' advice and then entered a course of study at Black Mountain College where she met incredible artists such as Buckminster Fuller, the architect; Merce Cunningham, the choreographer and dancer; and the artist Josef Albers who were all among her teachers. Albers, the father of modern color theory was a very difficult teacher and taught a very detailed, exacting drawing class.



The sculpting with wire that she became so known for resulted from a trip to Mexico. There she saw wire baskets being made to carry eggs, and she learned how to loop the



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wire, almost like crocheting. Back at Black Mountain she made one of these things; and Albers said, 'Keep making those.'

She began to crochet wire-mesh structures in 1948. The symmetrical structures themselves were intellectually rigorous, requiring discipline and technical precision. They were complex, varying, three-dimensional explorations of lines in space." In the 1950s, her career took off because of her unique use of wire and other unusual materials to crochet sculptures. She is famously known for her ceiling-mounted sculptures.

Asawa: 'I was interested in ... the economy of a line, making something in space, enclosing it without blocking it out. It's still transparent. I realized 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.'

"The essence of Asawa's art in wire has to do with transparency and interpenetration, with overlapping, shadow, and darkening. Her forms appear simultaneously inside and outside, sometimes revealing their inner space, sometimes their outer. This shifting perspective makes the forms dynamic and gives them a quality of vision-in-motion. Hanging individual works in series adds further layers of complexity, as the overlapping compositions become artworks themselves, which change as the viewer changes position.

The repetitive, mechanical aspect of Asawa's technique may have troubled critics; but I would argue that her art occurred precisely at the intersection of the mechanical and the organic, and so addressed a central problem of early postwar modernism. Asawa spun living forms out of base materials. She transformed a mechanical process into a richly organic oeuvre, echoing and marking the process of cultural rebuilding and renewal that followed the Machine Age and World War II.

'My curiosity was aroused by the idea of giving structural form to the images in my drawings. These forms come from observing plants, the spiral shell of a snail, seeing light through insect wings, watching spiders repair their webs in the early morning, and seeing the sun through the droplets of water suspended from the tips of pine needles while watering my garden. — Ruth Asawa, June 5, 1995

Ruth Asawa raised six children while working out of a studio at home. This lack of separation between art and life was intentional and reflected Black Mountain ideals. In a profound way, Asawa's interior and exterior life was as seamlessly interwoven as her wire sculptures."



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In San Francisco Ruth is known as the *Fountain Lady* because she designed so many of the city's fountains. And her intricate abstract sculptures, many of them crocheted from wire are now in the collections of many major museums."

Images:

Exploring the Heart of It

Installation view of Ruth Asawa: Life's Work; Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2018.
Untitled

Resources:

Artbook.com/blog-ruth-asawa

Block, Melissa. "Ruth Asawa Found Her Artistic Calling in an Internment Camp."
www.npr.org/8-19-13.

"In Remembrance of Ruth Asawa." CaliforniaFibers.blogspot.com; 8/27/2013

"*The Sculptures of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*. ArtDaily.com; 9/12/2019.

Weinberg, Larry. *The Wire Sculpture of Ruth Asawa*. *Interior Design*, 9/17/2018
www.ruthasawa.com