

'Ruth Asawa: Retrospective' at San Francisco's MOMA, 5 April – 2 September 2025

Frances DeVuono

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Ruth Asawa making wire sculptures, California, United States, November 1954, image courtesy of Nat Farbman/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock; artwork © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc, courtesy of David Zwirner

This retrospective for Ruth Asawa, curated by both San Francisco's MOMA and MoMA in New York, will travel to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and then the Fondation Beyeler in Basel.¹ But it is fitting that it opened in San Francisco, as that is where Ruth Asawa lived for sixty-three years as an artist, a mother and an activist in arts education.

¹ 'Ruth Asawa: Retrospective' will be at New York's MoMA, 19 October 2025 – 7 February 2026; the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 20 March – 13 September 2026; and Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland, 18 October – 24 January 2027

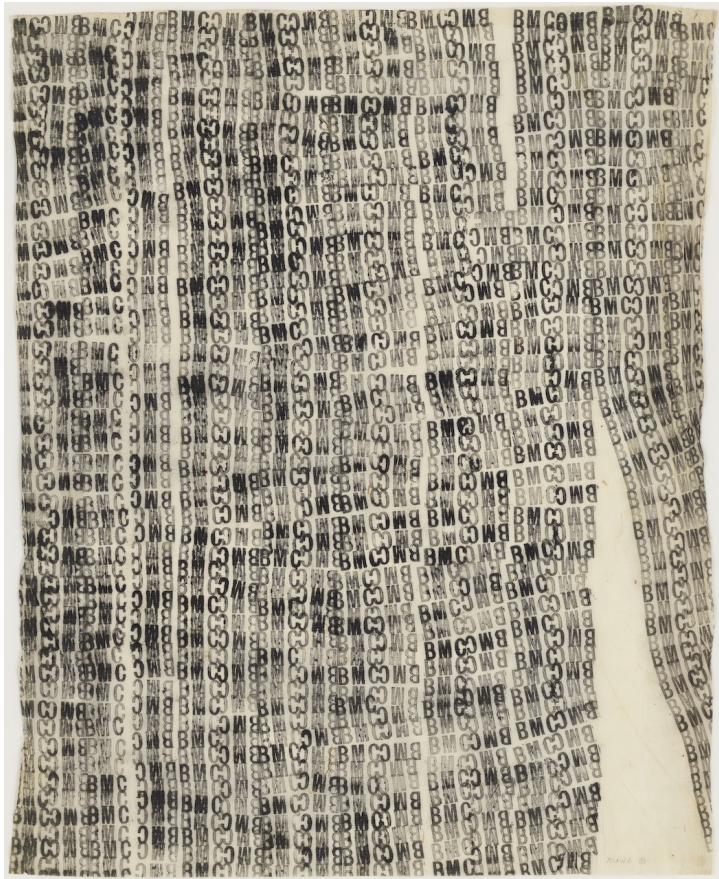
The 'Retrospective' is large. Not counting the entrance and a small section of plants on a terrace (designed to recall the artist's own garden), eleven gallery spaces take us through Asawa's life work. It opens with a narrow, short hall filled with blown-up photographs of the artist taken by Asawa's friend, Imogen Cunningham. Looking stylish, with red lipstick and smartly coifed hair, Asawa is shown as a glamorous, 1950s woman surrounded by her sculpture. But directly across from these images is a video of Asawa in her studio, wearing no makeup and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. The juxtaposition gives viewers an inkling of the curators' intent. This retrospective, the art and the accompanying biographical information, provides a portrait of an extraordinary and extraordinarily hard-working artist.

Asawa's life has been well documented. It fascinates because it touches on so many events of mid-twentieth century USA. Born in 1926, her parents were Depression Era tenant farmers who had emigrated from Japan to Southern California. Like many Japanese Americans during World War II, Asawa and her family were imprisoned in what were then rather euphemistically called 'Relocation Camps' – first at the Santa Anita Racetrack (its stables converted into shelters) in Arcadia, northeast of Los Angeles, and later at another in Arkansas. Former Disney animation artists, Tom Okamoto, Chris Ishii and James Tanaka were also interred at Santa Anita at the same time as Asawa, and they held drawing classes that she attended.² After the war, she received a scholarship to the Milwaukee Teachers College from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organisation dedicated to social justice. There she met Ray Johnson and dancer Ellen Schmitt, who became close friends. Both urged Asawa to join them at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the most radical liberal art school at the time – and arguably since.

While the exhibition is not strictly chronological (which would make little sense given Asawa's experimentation, as well as her work in education and public art), it does begin by highlighting her years at Black Mountain. She was there from 1946–1949, at the same time as John Cage, Jacob and Gwen Lawrence, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Ray Johnson, and other well-known artists. Asawa took classes with Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller, studied dance with Merce Cunningham, performed with Robert Rauschenberg, made lifelong friendships, and it was there that she met her future husband, Alfred Lanier.

The first gallery indicates Asawa's direction early on. *Untitled Dancers* is one painting of many with the bold, bulbous shapes familiar to those who know her later sculpture. Consistently, when walking through the exhibition, one is struck by Asawa's seemingly effortless emphasis on form, materials and space in both her two-dimensional work and her sculpture. *Untitled (Study in Greek Meander)*, consisting of repeated marks, was an assignment from Albers's design class. The nearby *Untitled (BMC Laundry Stamp)* (BMC meaning 'Black Mountain College') must have been done shortly afterwards, and it is utterly remarkable. *Laundry Stamp* has the same black and white palette and repetitions as *Greek Meander*, yet here her stamped marks are reprised in slightly

² See Ruth Ozeki, 'A Letter to Ruth Asawa', in *Ruth Asawa: Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Janet Bishop and Cara Manes, eds, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut and London, 2025, p 32



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled BMC.76 (BMC Laundry Stamp)*, ca 1948–49, stamped ink on paper, 54.4 x 43 cm, The Asawa Family Collection, © Estate of Ruth Asawa, courtesy of David Zwirner



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.433, Hanging Nine Open Hyperbolic Shapes Joined Laterally)*, ca 1958, courtesy of the William Roth Estate, © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc, courtesy of David Zwirner, photo by Laurence Cuneo

curvy columns with two of them splitting open at the top and the bottom, like enormous leaves. It is a wonderful example of Asawa laboriously wresting natural movement from mundane materials and processes. We are told that during a summer trip to Mexico she became fascinated by the crocheted wire egg containers that she found in the markets there. Returning to Black Mountain, she spent the next year intent on making the same wire ‘crochet loops’ into sculpture. The room shows a few of her early attempts – mostly baskets, but then, like a harbinger for the work she is most known, the *Untitled (Hanging-Two Lobed Single-Layered Continuous Form)*, made in 1949, is suspended from the ceiling in a corner.

In a short hall off the next large gallery, Asawa’s equally short foray into the commercial world can be seen. In the early 1950s, *Vogue* magazine featured her sculptures as backdrops to fashion shoots. Signage states that ‘in the early 1950s... her work continued to gain local and national attention through exhibitions at the San Francisco and New York showrooms... of Laverne Originals’,³ who invited Asawa to mass-produce her work. She declined, stating that although she would continue producing work, she wanted to be able to experiment. This part of her history is an important inclusion as it reflects one of the many choices Asawa made as an artist.

The next two galleries are dedicated to the forms she created throughout the 1950s, full of what she called ‘continuous forms within forms’. Hanging from the ceiling, alone or in a cluster, they are quintessentially modernist shapes, both familiar and utterly fresh. The often-cited way Asawa’s open wire construction allows for light, and the way it casts shadows, is particularly true when experienced in real life. In more than one of her multi-lobed forms, I found myself squatting on the floor to better see the trajectory of how the shapes flow into one another. A vitrine holds newspaper clippings from the many national and international exhibitions early on in Asawa’s career. Her excitement is almost palpable, as the exhibition signage quotes her: ‘I’ve sold 4 pieces, 2 to Rockefellers, 1 to Phillip Johnson architect... I will be in the Whitney show...’

It is easy to forget that successful, mid-twentieth century women artists did not talk about their children, even if they had any (Louise Nevelson did; Jay DeFeo, Joan Mitchell, Elaine de Kooning did not). Asawa was different. Against the advice of her friend Imogen Cunningham, who counselled Asawa ‘to make sculptures, not babies’,⁴ the artist had six children between 1950 and 1959 – all the while continuing to make art.

The next room underscores how integral family was to Asawa’s art making, as one of the wall text quotes her: ‘I’ve always had my studio in my house... because I wanted my children to understand what I do and wanted to be there if they needed me.’ Two paintings, *Eggplants on*

³ See ‘The Invisible Designs of Erwine and Estelle Laverne’, *Beyond Shelter.com*, <https://beyondshelter.com/erwine-estelle-laverne-mid-century-modern>, accessed 25 April 2025

⁴ Jacqueline Hoefer, ‘Ruth Asawa: A Working Life’, in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*, Timothy Anglin Burgard and Daniell Cornell, eds, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and University of California Press, 2006, p 17 (a revised edition was published in 2020)

Orange Background (1959) and *Two Watermelons*, done in the 1960s, are perfect in this setting, simultaneously paying tribute to both domesticity and drawing. At the opposite end of the room are a pair of enormous carved redwood panels. These are the doors that Asawa, together with her older children, carved by hand for the house the family purchased in 1961.



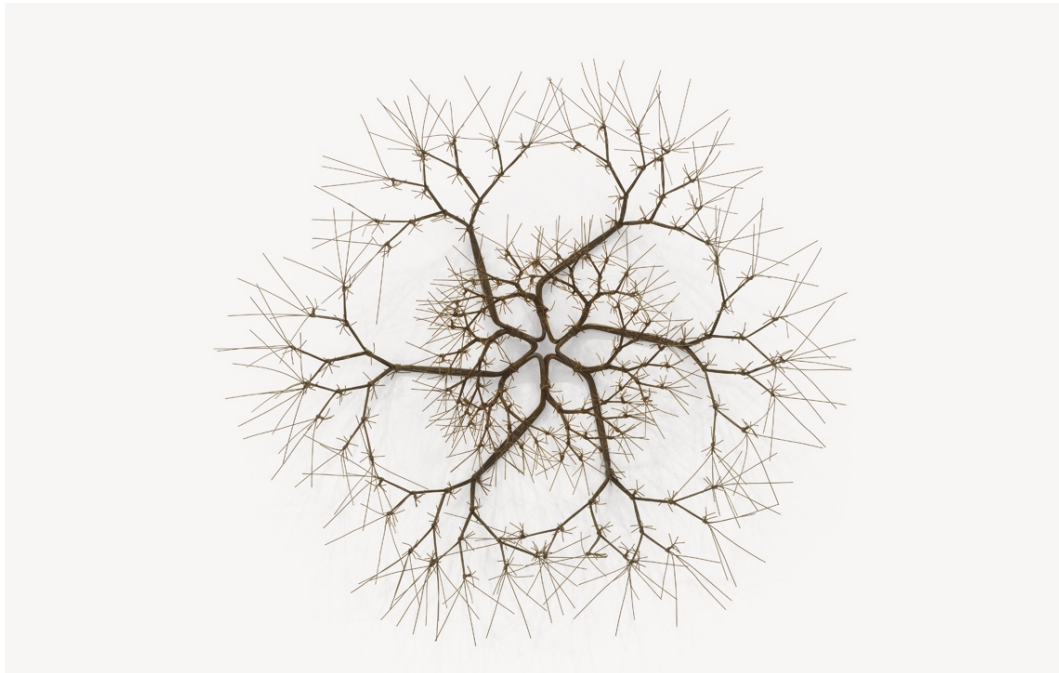
Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (WC.187, Two Watermelons)*, 1960s, pen, brush and ink on paper, 51 x 76 cm, Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland, © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc, courtesy of David Zwirner, photo by James Paonessa

Photographs of Asawa surrounded by her sculpture while working together with her children in their living room have been reproduced in many exhibition catalogues, including the one produced for this exhibition. It was part of how Asawa presented herself. A near-facsimile of that living room is set up midway through the exhibition. Based on a 1965 photograph by Rondal Patridge, the gallery is turned into a spacious, wood-panelled room replete with chairs and a low coffee table. Multiple wire sculptures by the artist hang from the ceiling just as they did in her home. There is art on the walls and in glass cases, many of which are by Asawa, but others are by friends such as Marguerite Wildenhain and Josef Albers.

Asawa continued to explore different constructions in form and process. ‘Retrospective’ has wonderful examples of her ‘tied-wire’ pieces in which Asawa was starting to bind multiple bundles of thin wire filaments together. Reportedly inspired by a desert plant given to her in 1962, some works have edges that fan out like branches of a tree; others are circular shapes reminiscent of dried tumbleweed.

Retrospectives always carry the burden of emphasis and artefacts. Here, the work for which Asawa is best known (her sculptures made with wire, especially the multi-lobed hanging pieces) is given its due. Her two-dimensional work, which she valued and is not as well known, is wonderful to see. Emphasising that her studio was always part of her living space is also key.

But equally important were her public sculptures and the work she did in the city schools from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. That is harder to display.



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.451, Wall-Mounted Tied-Wire, Open-Center, Six-Branded Form Based on Nature)*, ca 1965, private collection, © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc, courtesy of David Zwirner; photo courtesy of David Zwirner

Two small spaces are dedicated to the latter. In one, there is a video of her work in schools and a (test) fragment taken from a public artwork, *The Fountain*, installed in 1973. This piece was created by Asawa and 150 school children, who modelled the city's people, its streets, trams and cars out of baker's dough before it was cast into a bronze relief. Sited near downtown San Francisco's Union Square, it is enormously popular, and, like several other public works made by Asawa, it is narrative and figurative, highlighting her willingness to break from the abstract form when she felt it was needed. *Andrea*, commissioned a few years earlier for the newly developed Ghirardelli Square nearby, was controversial. Its landscape architect Laurence Halprin, who had been expecting a modernist piece in the style for which Asawa was known, was outraged with her completed commission of two mermaids and a baby, in a pool surrounded by frogs.⁵ But Asawa held firm. Later she stated, 'I wanted to make a sculpture that could be enjoyed by everyone'.⁶

Asawa's involvement in primary and high school art education was collaborative, practical and persistent. In 1968, along with fellow parents Sally Woodbridge and Nancy Thompkins, she began holding workshops at the Alvarado School in San Francisco. By 1973 their work had expanded to seven other schools and was called the Alvarado Workshop. Asawa had joined the

⁵ See Jennie Yoon and Marci Kwon, 'What Cannot Be Produced Alone: Ruth Asawa's Public Art', in *Ruth Asawa: Retrospective*, op cit, pp 53–55

⁶ For a recording of Asawa talking about *Andrea*, see <https://ruthasawa.com/andrea-ghirardelli-square-1966-1968>, accessed 25 April 2025



Ruth Asawa, *Andrea (PC.002)*, 1966–68, commissioned by developer William M Roth for the renovation of Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc, courtesy of David Zwirner, photo by Aiko Cuneo



Ruth Asawa teaching a Baker's Clay workshop at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA), 1973, photo courtesy of Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc

city's Art Commission by this time and worked to get federal CETA funds to pay the artist teachers of the Workshops a living (if low) wage.⁷ The catalogue points to her success: '[B]etween 1975 and 1980, 385 dancers, actors, musicians and visual artists were employed by CETA [locally]'.⁸

Interest in Asawa's work has grown tremendously in the twentieth-first century. Not including this exhibition's catalogue, there have been at least ten other books published on her life and work since in 2006. An additional one, by Jordan Troeller, entitled *Ruth Asawa and The Artist-Mother at Midcentury* is due for publication in May 2025.

There are reasons for this late attention. Asawa's work and the way she lived her life stands as a corrective to many of the troubling aspects of twentieth century art. Her work was clearly modernist yet used processes unashamedly close to craft. She was a woman of Asian descent in an artworld dominated by men of European descent. She seamlessly integrated family life into her studio practice. Her successful advocacy for art education changed her city. All of these indicate why Asawa's work is so meaningful now. She would variously refer to herself as a 'minority of one' and as 'a citizen of the universe'.⁹ This exhibition, and its catalogue, shows how those seeming contradictions worked in Ruth Asawa's life. She was both an iconoclast and an active community member, able to stand up against the tide and at the same time see herself as part of a larger whole – qualities urgently needed in the United States today.

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as in **Third Text Online**. She lives in Berkeley, California.

⁷ The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was signed by President Richard Nixon in 1973, ending in 1982. CETA is often compared to Roosevelt's WPA of the 1930s in that, like the WPA, so many artists were able to find employment through CETA. See 'Forgotten New Deal Legacies: CETA's Federally Funded Artists (1974–1982)' on the *Living New Deal* website: <https://livingnewdeal.org/art-preservation/ceta-and-the-new-deal>, accessed 25 April 2025

⁸ Dominika Tylcz, 'Chronology', in *Ruth Asawa: Retrospective*, op cit, pp 227 (1975)

⁹ Jennie Yoon and Marci Kwon, 'What Cannot Be Produced Alone: Ruth Asawa's Public Art', in *Ruth Asawa: Retrospective*, op cit, pp 54–55