“HOW TO SEE”

Across mediums and all stages of her practice, Asawa explored continuity, transparency, and the interchangeability of seemingly contradictory concepts like figure and ground, and abstraction and representation. She first articulated these core ideas at Black Mountain College, a multidisciplinary school with a sensory- and materials-based curriculum that she attended in 1946–49. There, Asawa took courses in mathematics, philosophy, music, and dance. She studied art under Josef Albers, among others, from whom she learned “how to see,” as she later put it. She drew on her childhood experiences—especially the repetitive labor she’d performed while working on her parents’ farm and the calligraphy lessons she took at a Japanese language school—in her early investigations of line, form, and space.

Black Mountain’s unique pedagogical model foregrounded both independent and community work, which showed the young artist, as she later wrote, that “there is no separation between studying, performing the daily chores of living, and creating one’s work.” This gallery primarily presents works from Asawa’s time at the college, which demonstrate her holistic approach to making a composition and commitment to refining ideas through an iterative process.

“EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED, CONTINUOUS”

In 1949 Asawa moved to San Francisco, which became her permanent home. Following California’s repeal of laws prohibiting interracial marriage, she married architect and fellow Black Mountain alumnus, Albert Lanier, and together they started a family. In tandem Asawa began building her art career, dedicating herself full-time to experiments with form building both in space with her looped-wire sculptures and on a flat plane in drawings and prints.

The artist’s unyielding search for new possibilities within her chosen processes resulted in her signature sculptural motif: a “continuous form within a form,” which she described as “a shape that was inside and outside at the same time.” In a single lobe, a sequence of spheres enclose one another, creating one uninterrupted surface. Asawa would continue to elaborate on this motif for decades to come, foregrounding continuity as a through line for her work. “You can show inside and outside, and inside and outside are connected,” she said. “Everything is connected, continuous.”

“WHAT THE MATERIAL CAN DO”

From her home base in San Francisco beginning in the early 1950s, Asawa launched a multidisciplinary career that quickly gained momentum. As she began participating in exhibitions and taking private commissions, her creative output exploded in number and scope. Her work resonated not only with fine art circles but also with designers, architects, and the fashion industry. Unconcerned with traditional distinctions between disciplines, Asawa also tried her hand at interior decoration, producing designs that she based on her prints and paper reliefs.

Asawa described her process as “taking one simple element and carrying that idea through many materials and finally coming out with a new form.” Wire allowed her to pursue line in three dimensions—she considered the continuously looping lines of her sculptures to be “an extension of drawing.” Guided by the properties of her materials, whether wire, paper, plastic, or screentone, Asawa found new ways of expressing the core ideas of her practice and of bringing her work into the world. “I’m interested in what the material can do,” she said. “So that’s why I keep exploring.”

“VOCABULARY OF MY SCULPTURE”

The works on view here offer a partial inventory of the vast array of sculptural forms Asawa invented throughout the 1950s using industrially sourced, hand-looped wire—what she described as the “vocabulary of my sculpture” in 1955. These forms by turns layer, nest, interlock, ruffle, and cascade, creating continuous surfaces that delineate volume while remaining porous to surrounding space. Though their composite structures are symmetrical and balanced, the viewer’s experience of their shapes can change depending on vantage point, proximity to other works, and the quality of light as it shifts over the course of a day.

Most of the works in this gallery were chosen by Asawa to be exhibited in one of three solo shows at Peridot Gallery in New York in 1954–58, which introduced her art to a broader audience. Considered together, they shed light on the iterative nature of the artist’s practice. “The work is one which dictates a way of growing,” she wrote in 1952, “and the more one learns about this way of growing the more possibilities are opened up for the creating of sculpture peculiar to the process.”

TAKING CARE OF SPACE

Asawa tended to negative space in both two and three dimensions. As the child of Zen Buddhists, she trained from a young age in calligraphy. In this meditative practice, "you're not watching what your brush is doing, but you're watching the spaces around it," she reflected. "You're watching what it isn't doing, so that you're taking care of both the negative space and the positive space." Asawa continued to experiment with calligraphic techniques as an adult, such as in a group of abstract drawings from the late 1950s. Inspired by trees in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park—where the artist drew regularly, alone or with friends—these works are composed of ink pools, strokes, splatters, and splashes.

The world around Asawa provided endless subject matter and possibilities for exploring line, form, and space—no idea was too ordinary to pursue. She often depicted furniture in her home—particularly chairs—in drawings that merge figure and ground through a range of gestures and marks.

“DOING IS LIVING”

To Asawa, all acts, including daily activities, held creative potential. The artist’s home and studio inspired this gallery, which brings together works in different mediums from across the arc of her career, paying testament to her boundless practice. In 1960 Asawa, her husband, and their six children moved to a house in San Francisco’s Noe Valley, where she set up her studio. Both within and outside the studio, Asawa never stopped working: She sketched and drew her surroundings, coiled or bundled wire in preparation for the next sculpture, folded paper for origami, and cast the faces of family and friends to create masks that became an ever-evolving record of her many vital relationships.

As the artist deepened her engagement with her wider community in the Bay Area, her house also became a space for collaboration with other artists, educators, and activists. Asawa saw both life and art as practices that come into being through action: “Doing is living,” she said. “That is all that matters.”

THE TAMARIND PRINTS

For two months in 1965, for the first and only time in her career, Asawa focused on one medium: lithography. She immersed herself in this new technique as part of a residency at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. Founded by June Wayne in 1960, the workshop brought together artists and printers in an effort to revitalize the field of lithography in the United States. During her short time there, Asawa worked closely with seven printers to produce fifty-four radically experimental prints.

Lithography relies on the incompatibility of oil- and water-based substances to create an image on a stone or metal matrix, which is then transferred to paper. Asawa let the printmaking materials—liquid washes and greasy crayons—inform her subject matter, which included her loved ones, flora around her, and abstract forms. Her interest in reversing images, a possibility unique to the chemically responsive nature of lithography, prompted the printers to expand their use of transposition techniques. The result was a unique body of work exploring the intimate relationship between positive and negative values.

“COMPLETING THE CIRCLE”

In the late 1960s, Asawa’s practice took a decidedly social turn. She began volunteering at her children’s elementary school, teaching art with affordable materials. This experience led Asawa to cofound the Alvarado School Arts Workshop, a coalition of artists and parents striving to bring a hands-on approach to arts education. The program grew to include dozens of schools in San Francisco, culminating with the establishment of the School of the Arts, a multidisciplinary arts curriculum within a public high school, in 1982. Through art, Asawa and her colleagues cultivated a sense of independence based on “using the body and the mind, not separating [them].”

In 1968 Asawa began advocating for the role of art in society through her tenures on the San Francisco Arts Commission, California Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She also enriched the urban fabric of cities across the Bay Area with numerous public commissions. These sculptures, often collaborative in nature, became places where communities could gather for moments of remembrance and celebration. Asawa articulated her foundational philosophy as “completing the circle—learn something, apply it, pass it on.”

“NATURE IS MY TEACHER”

Observation of the natural world was central to Asawa’s approach to making art. “Nature is my teacher,” she once said. “I have used materials that are a product of our twentieth century to study her growth patterns.” In her wire sculptures, drawings, and daily sketching practice, Asawa turned naturally occurring geometries and structures—such as “the shapes of the flowers and the vegetation” or “the translucence of a dragonfly’s wing when the sunlight pours through it”—into abstract compositions.

In 1962, inspired by a dried desert plant, she discovered a new way of sculpting with wire by tying together bundles of strands and splaying their ends into branching networks. In this body of work, which also spawned a series of related drawings, Asawa continued her lifelong explorations of negative space and the generative qualities of line. With each split of the branches in these works, either on the page or in three dimensions, Asawa also multiplied the shapes created by negative space.

“LIFE DRAWS”

Over the course of her career, Asawa tirelessly returned to depicting plants and flowers, tracing the shapes of irises, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, and other flora from her garden in sketchbooks and works on paper. For Asawa, drawing from life was more than simple observation; it became a value and mode of engaging with the world and present moment. “Life draws,” she once wrote, expressing how the events and objects around her defined her work.

In the last decades of her career, Asawa concentrated her creative output on botanical drawings, some of which are gathered in this gallery. These intimate works, at times extremely realistic, at others abstract, often began with a gesture of generosity: gifts of plants from the artist’s friends and family, after whom many works are titled. Through the daily routine of recording the natural world around her, Asawa documented the extended community she shared it with, as well as the passage of time.

CONTINUOUS RETURNS

Although there are no two identical works by Asawa, her practice was underpinned by the concepts of continuity and repetition. The artist's experimentation unfolded through iteration—she returned to forms across time and in different mediums, ever expanding the possibilities of her sculpture. She frequently revisited the "continuous form within a form," for example, increasing its complexity over the decades. In the sculptures on view here, she innovated on the core concept of this form, doubling and interlocking interior shapes, weaving together multiple strands of wire, or splitting them to create individual layers (in a manner similar to how she divided branches in her tied-wire sculptures).

MINIATURES

In the late 1970s, Asawa began a series of miniature sculptures made with extra thin, intricately looped wire. The idea to work on a smaller scale and test both her vision and dexterity came to Asawa as she realized the effects of aging on her sight. “I am going blind making these crocheted miniatures,” she wrote in a letter to a friend. “I’ve decided to make them before my eyes change any more.” In the nine miniature works shown here, Asawa drew from her diverse sculptural vocabulary, presenting her signature forms on a different scale. She continued to produce miniatures until the 2000s.