

Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective

Over six decades, Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) developed a diverse body of work built on the principles of constant experimentation, an unabating curiosity in materials, and close observation of nature. Ever open to new techniques, Asawa produced sculptures, drawings, prints, paintings, and public art that redefined the possibilities of the very building blocks of art—line, form, and space. Challenging distinctions between abstraction and representation, figure and ground, and negative and positive space, her work invites us to contemplate how disparate elements interact in a composition, which in turn engages with its surroundings. Asawa's wholly interconnected practice offers a model for how making art can serve as a way of being in the world. "How one sees, one does," she wrote in 1946. "How one does, one is."

Born to Japanese immigrant parents in Norwalk, California, Asawa became an artist both as a result and in spite of a series of injustices. In 1942 her family was uprooted and incarcerated under a wartime federal policy that targeted people of Japanese ancestry. During this period, she learned to draw from life in art classes taught by fellow detainees. In 1946, after being denied an art teaching degree because of anti-Japanese prejudice, she enrolled at the progressive Black Mountain College in North Carolina. In the school's democratic environment, she forged a creative path grounded in experimentation and an ethos of hard, continuous work. From her time at Black Mountain through the end of her life in San Francisco, where she moved in 1949, Asawa situated her practice within set parameters to investigate ideas of transparency, continuity, and space. Beginning in 1968, she expanded her artistic project to directly engage her community through public artworks, arts education, and civic advocacy.

Taking its cue from the artist's multifaceted work, this retrospective traces the arc of her career while offering multiple entry points into her art and highlighting her many inspirations.

Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective is an exhibition partnership between the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA). The exhibition is organized by Cara Manes, Associate Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, MoMA, and Janet Bishop, Thomas Weisel Family Chief Curator, SFMOMA; with Dominika Tylcz, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, MoMA; and Marin Sarvé-Tarr, Assistant Curator, and William Hernández Luege, former Curatorial Associate, Painting and Sculpture, SFMOMA.

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For more information, visit momab.org/asawa.