

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Landmark Exhibition Examines Work of Ruth Asawa

Career-Spanning Presentation is First Major Museum Show of Artist's Work in Over a Decade and First Ever Presented Outside of the West Coast

Ruth Asawa: Life's Work Opens September 14, 2018. Pulitzer Arts Foundation is only venue

PRESS PREVIEW: Friday, September 14, 2018; 10am

ST. LOUIS, MO, JUL 11, 2018— The Pulitzer Arts Foundation presents *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work*, a career-spanning exhibition devoted to the important yet under-recognized artist. With some 60 sculptures and 20 drawings and collages, the exhibition will for the first time tell the story of how Asawa (1926-2013) developed her technique and form, tracing her artistic trajectory from her years studying at Black Mountain College until the end of her career.



Untitled (S.077, Hanging Miniature Seven-Lobed Continuous Form within a Form), ca. 1978

On view from **September 14, 2018 through February 16, 2019**, the exhibition has been curated by Pulitzer Curator Tamara H. Schenkenberg.

Pulitzer Director Cara Starke states, “Though she has, until recently, been largely overlooked by the art establishment, Ruth Asawa was one of the most rigorous and inventive artists of her day. With this exhibition we hope to shed light on how she came to create sculptures that are, in essence, transparent, voluminous yet light, and unique among the work of her peers.”

Schenkenberg adds, “Ruth Asawa explored wire and its properties to their fullest extent, manipulating this single, untraditional material by looping it, tying it, casting it, and more. In so doing she created works that are nothing less than poetic meditations on such

concepts as figure and ground, weight and volume, light and material. Moreover, Asawa refused to change her life in order to meet the traditional notion of what artists are supposed to do and how they are supposed to live and work. In tracing her career from its beginnings at Black Mountain College through six decades in San Francisco, *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work* is intended to reveal not simply her working methods, but also the deep intelligence, probing nature, and, yes, work ethic, that informed her art.”

Background

Born in Southern California in 1926, Ruth Asawa was a first-generation Japanese-American, the child of truck farmers who, due to discriminatory laws, were not allowed to become U.S. citizens or to own land in California. As a child during the Great Depression, Asawa worked long hours on the family's farm, where she both learned the value of hands-on labor and witnessed the transformative powers of nature, which inspired much of her work. In 1942, following the attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor and the resulting Executive Order 9066, her father was sent to an internment camp. Later that year Asawa, her mother, and five of her six siblings were themselves detained in a series of camps.



Untitled (S.095, Hanging Single-Lobed, Six-Layer Continuous Form within a Form), ca. 1952

In 1946, Asawa enrolled in Black Mountain College, where over the course of three years she trained under such pioneering artists and thinkers as Josef Albers, R. Buckminster Fuller, and Merce Cunningham. A trip to Mexico during the summer of 1947 would prove critical to Asawa's development as an artist. There, she became fascinated with wire baskets that were used to hold eggs and produce, and, working with a local craftsman, she learned the looping technique that would serve as her primary means of expression for over a decade.

After leaving Black Mountain, Asawa moved to San Francisco, where she would marry a fellow BMC alum, Albert Lanier. In the 1950s and 1960s, she combined her devotion to leading the life of a working artist with

the work of raising her six children; in the late 1960s she became an active advocate for arts education in the San Francisco public schools, and fulfilled a number of public commissions.

Exhibition

Ruth Asawa: Life's Work unfolds in roughly chronological order, following Asawa as she moves beyond the open, looped wire baskets she learned to make in Mexico to create increasingly complex constructions using the same technique. Comprising spherical or lobe-like forms that are nested within each other or connected by a chain, this early body of work was already repudiating prevailing notions of what sculpture is: They are freely suspended in space rather than resting on a solid surface, they appear to be at once three-dimensional form and two-dimensional line, they are both self-enclosed and open, and they are voluminous yet light.

The exhibition opens with a display of single- and double-lobed looped-wire sculptures. These include Asawa's first documented fully-enclosed form, created in 1949 (this sculpture, like most of Asawa's work, is untitled). For this, she looped a single strand of wire into a teardrop shape, starting from the bottom and tapering the top into a long, narrow neck, at the uppermost end of which she repeated the teardrop form. Also present is a work that likely represents her first continuous "form within a form" sculpture, created by a process wherein, using a single strand of



Untitled (S.089, Hanging Asymmetrical Twelve Interlocking Bubbles), ca. 1957

wire, the innermost sphere is connected to the outermost in a continuous surface. Other works on view include a group of four sculptures that Asawa realized in 1961 as a commission for a San Francisco department store. Conceived as a single work, these convey the artist's interest in transparency and the spatial relationships created when multiple sculptures are displayed in close proximity to one another.

Ruth Asawa: Life's Work continues in the Pulitzer's light-filled main gallery, where several groupings illuminate the artist's more complex looped-wire sculptures. Here a wide array of multi-lobed works shows Asawa experimenting with layering and construction techniques; with different types of wire, including copper, iron, aluminum, brass, and gold; and with a variety of colors, as she created more complex plays of light and of positive and negative space. Highlights include a work in aluminum wire in which the artist experimented with how wide a sculpture she could construct in her chosen technique; examples of Asawa's

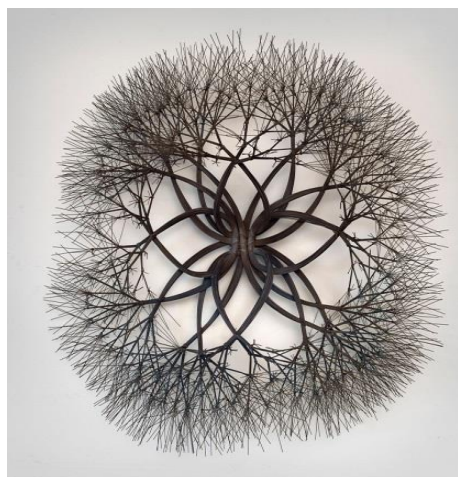
"open window" forms, wherein she opened up the closed architecture of her looped-wire sculptures to further explore ideas of transparency and permeability; and a nearly ten-foot tall work created for the home of Buckminster Fuller, architect, theorist, and mentor to Asawa.

In 1962, friends brought Asawa a plant from Death Valley that they thought she would like to draw. Finding herself unable to capture the form on paper, she began bundling, dividing, and tying wire to create an image of the plant. Thus began her tied-wire works, several of which are on view in the main gallery and the gallery that follows. Many of these carry explicit references to nature, resembling forms including branches, tumbleweeds, or wreaths. Beginning in 1963, Asawa began experimenting with electroplating some of these works, submerging them in an acid concoction that caused a thick, greenish patina to grow, as seen in *Untitled (S.091, Hanging Spherical, Electroplated Tied-Wire Multi-Branched Tied in the Center Form Based on Nature)* and *Untitled (S.132, Free-Standing, Electroplated, Tied-Wire Organic Form Based on Nature)*.

Moving to the lower level galleries, the exhibition continues with an installation focused on Asawa's looped-wire variations on the cone, dating mostly to the early 1950s. These make clear her restless investigation; her experimentation with different types, colors, and weights of wire; and the iterative nature of her practice, as she describes the form and then takes it through its paces. Beginning with a simple work in which the cones are linked by a chain, visitors are also able to observe examples highlighting the artist's efforts to articulate and morph the forms by

interpenetrating, stacking, and enclosing them in lobes. This gallery also contains a stamped work she created while at Black Mountain College and a late 1950s painting inspired by a pattern she created with a row of stacked thorns, both of which show her working through similar variations on the same conical form.

The exhibition's final gallery places Asawa's drawings and paintings in dialogue with her sculptures, elucidating the affinities between two- and three-dimensional works. *Untitled (BMC.83, Dogwood Leaves)* and *Untitled (SF.003, Undulating Parallelograms)* demonstrate a marked interest in repetition, transparency, color, movement, and geometry while others, such as *Dancer Motif*, *Double Sheet*, and *Collage* seem to prefigure the shapes that her looped- and tied-



Untitled (S.557, Wall-Mounted Tied-Wire, Closed-Center, Twelve-Petaled Form Based on Nature), ca. 1965-70

wire works would eventually take. The gallery also features several looped-wire forms that Asawa cast in bronze, a technique with which she experimented in order to further transform wire. For example, *Untitled (S.130, Free-Standing Form Based on Nature)* references the artist's single-lobed looped-wire works while *Untitled (S.004, Free-Standing Stalagmite Form)* finds its origins in her "open" forms.

Catalogue

Ruth Asawa: Life's Work will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, published by Yale University Press, with essays by Tamara H. Schenkenberg, Curator; Helen Molesworth, independent curator; and Aruna D'Souza, writer and critic.

About the Pulitzer Arts Foundation

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation presents historic and contemporary art in dynamic interplay with its celebrated Tadao Ando building, offering unexpected experiences and inspiring new perspectives. Since it was established in 2001, the Pulitzer has presented a wide range of exhibitions featuring art from around the world—from Old Masters to important modern and contemporary artists—and exploring a diverse array of themes and ideas. Highlights have included the exhibitions *Blue Black*, curated by artist Glenn Ligon (2017); *Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form* (2016-17); *raumlaborberlin: 4562 Enright Avenue* (2016); *Reflections of the Buddha* (2011-12); *Urban Alchemy / Gordon Matta-Clark* (2009-10); and *Branconi and Serra in Dialogue* (2005). In addition, these exhibitions are complemented by programs that bring together leading figures from fields ranging from art, architecture, design, urban planning, and the humanities to social work.

Located in the Grand Center Arts District of St. Louis, Missouri, the Pulitzer is free and open to the public between 10am–5pm on Wednesday through Saturday, with evening hours until 8pm on Friday.

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Image Captions:

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Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.077, Hanging Miniature Seven-Lobed Continuous Form within a Form)*, ca. 1978. Copper wire. 33 x 5 ½ x 5 ½ inches (83.82 x 13.97 x 13.97 cm). Private Collection. © Estate of Ruth Asawa. Photograph by Hudson Cuneo

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Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.095, Hanging Single-Lobed, Six-Layer Continuous Form within a Form)*, ca. 1952. Iron wire. 15 ½ x 17 x 17 inches (39.37 x 43.18 x 43.18 cm). Private Collection. © Estate of Ruth Asawa. Photograph by Laurence Cuneo

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Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.089, Hanging Asymmetrical Twelve Interlocking Bubbles)*, ca. 1957. Galvanized steel, brass, and iron wire. 26 x 22 x 17 inches (66.04 x 55.88 x 43.18 cm). Private Collection. © Estate of Ruth Asawa. Photograph by Laurence Cuneo

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Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.557, Wall-Mounted Tied-Wire, Closed-Center, Twelve-Petaled Form Based on Nature)*, ca. 1965-70. Bronze wire. 38 x 38 x 12 inches (96.52 x 96.52 x 30.48 cm). Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2011.39. © Estate of Ruth Asawa