David Zwirner

UNLESS YOU'RE A native San Franciscan, it's likely you haven't heard of Ruth Asawa. The sculptor and arts activist, who died in 2013 at age 86, was many things—a survivor of the Japanese internment camps, an alumna of Black Mountain College, a dedicated advocate for public arts education, and a mother of six. She was also a committed, visionary artist who worked primarily in one material—wire—and explored it to its fullest extent. In Asawa's artworks, wire is tied, cast, looped, bundled, and divided. It's woven into geometric shapes and intricately formed into delicate, branch-like sculptures.

Despite its uniqueness in both style and execution, her work has been generally overlooked. That is beginning to change, however. This fall, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis is presenting the major exhibition “Ruth Asawa: Life's Work,” featuring 60 sculptures and 20 works on paper that span more than 60 years of the artist's career.

“Up to this point she's been very largely unknown, except in San Francisco,” says Pulitzer Foundation curator Tamara Schenkenberg, who is curating the exhibition. “But if you look across her body of work, she has six decades of creating really innovative sculptures. That's what I was interested in bringing recognition to.”
Loosely divided into four groups, the art on display spans a wide variety of forms. Asawa’s best-known works, looped wire sculptures, are ethereal, transparent creations constructed of fine, almost mesh-like wire. Many are suspended from the ceiling, and the shadows they cast are as much a part of the pieces as the wire forms themselves. Asawa also made tied wire sculptures, in which she created delicate branching by dividing and bundling wires; electroplated wire sculptures, which used a chemical process to give her material a strikingly different expression; and cast bronze sculptures, within which are the same wire structures she used elsewhere, but in an entirely different form.

But “Life’s Work” is designed to look deeply into not only Asawa’s art itself, but also her methods and artistic values. Schenk-kenberg says, “She made it a lifelong goal to investigate the properties of wire. Ruth Asawa was very material-driven, and this exhibition will contribute to our understanding of her because it seeks to look more deeply into the material.”

Asawa was very much an artist by choice, not by upbringing. She was born in Southern California in 1926, a first-generation Japanese-American. From the time she was a small child, she worked on her family’s farm, helping with chores and spending a great deal of time outside. That immersion in nature and farm life was a lifelong influence.
on her artistic vision; in fact, she realized
in her later years that her sculptures, with
their geometric forms within forms, were
the same shapes that, as a child, she used
to trace in the dirt with her feet as she rode
along the back of the horse-drawn leveler.
Farm life ended cruelly for Asawa and
her family in the early 1940s, when first her
father, and then she, her mother, and her
siblings were sent to the Japanese intern-
ment camps. After graduating from high
school in the camp, and after her family
was released, she studied in Wisconsin to be
an art teacher. Discrimination against Jap-
inese-Americans, however, prevented her
from being hired as a student teacher, and
she left school without obtaining a degree.
At a crossroads, unable to become a teacher
but unsure of what else to pursue, she dis-
covered the experimental, art-centric Black
Mountain College in North Carolina. Home

*Untitled (S.095, Hanging Single-Lobed, Six-Layered Continuous Form within a Form), circa 1952, iron wire, 59.4 x 43.2 x 43.2 cm.*
to inspirational and avant-garde teachers like choreographer Merce Cunningham, inventor R. Buckminster Fuller, and artist Josef Albers, Black Mountain was a highly progressive community that encouraged interdisciplinary education. Ultimately, Asawa spent three years there and carried its ethos regarding the vitality of art in education with her throughout her life.

It was during this time that the seeds of her artistic practice were sown. In 1947, Asawa took what would be a life-changing visit to Mexico, where she became interested in the wire baskets that market sellers used to hold their wares. She learned how to craft them herself, using what was to become her signature looping technique, from a local crafts person. Wire became her material of choice, and her experiments with it, which began in Mexico and at Black Mountain College, continued throughout her life and career as she married, moved to San Francisco, and raised six children—all the while making a living as a working artist.

Asawa’s works are striking for a number of reasons. First, there’s the intricacy—many of her pieces are created with a single piece of wire that is looped over and over into a teardrop or lobe-like shape. Certain of these sculptures seem almost to travel within themselves, creating an interior shape that is connected to the larger one by a single, continuous surface. Then there’s the interesting play of transparency and self-enclosure. Despite being fully enclosed creations, Asawa’s looped wire sculptures are, indeed, transparent—you can see each form within the others, even when, as in some cases, there are five or six lobes nested together. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Asawa’s work, however, is that endless fascination she had with her material. “She was committed to fully investigating the character of wire,
and what it can express,” Schenkenberg says. “It’s a very simple means, but she’s able to achieve a huge range of expression.”

It’s easy to just how large that range is in Life’s Work. The tied wire sculptures, for example, are created out of as many as 1,000 bundles of wires that Asawa pulled apart and shaped into delicate, fine lines. They resemble the natural shapes of trees, tumbleweeds, even molecules. Although these pieces maintain the obvious interest in form and method that drove all of Asawa’s work, they look wilder and less geometric, than her looped wire creations. Then there are the electroplated pieces. This body of work consists of sculptures made with copper wire, which Asawa submerged in tanks of chemicals for months at a time. When they emerged, they were covered with gritty, green growths.

Visitors to Life’s Work will also see several of Asawa’s works on paper, as well as cast bronze pieces. These bronze sculptures are unusual because of the way she created them: by using her looping method to create the shape she wanted, then dipping it in wax, and finally casting the form in bronze. This method allowed her to transform the wire into something entirely new, creating a vastly different expression.

Taken as a whole, “Ruth Asawa: Life’s Work” is a nuanced exploration of how this radically curious, highly methodical artist developed her own unique voice. “She’s really multitalented, and very ambitious across different spheres,” Schenkenberg says. “We wanted to look at how Asawa built her form, how her artistic vision evolved. That’s what we’re doing with this show.”