

Ruth
Asawa

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Citizen of
the Universe

About Modern Art Oxford

Located in one of the world's great cities of learning, Modern Art Oxford is a leading contemporary art space with an international reputation for innovative and ambitious programming. We promote creativity in all its visual forms as a progressive agent of social change. Our programmes, both in person and online, are shaped by a belief in dialogue between contemporary art and ideas, and celebrate the relevance of contemporary visual culture to society today.

Modern Art Oxford offers opportunities for audiences to be inspired, to enjoy, to learn, and to develop their creative potential.

Ruth Asawa Citizen of the Universe

“An artist is not special. An artist is an ordinary person who can take ordinary things and make them special.” – Ruth Asawa

American artist Ruth Asawa (b. 1926 Norwalk, California– d. 2013 San Francisco, California) was a pioneer in modern art. She made a lifelong commitment to professional art making as a transformative activity for individuals, in education and in the lives of communities.

For Ruth Asawa, teaching art and learning were vital activities for dynamically engaging with life. Asawa was born to Japanese parents who worked as farm labourers in rural Norwalk, California. In 1942, she and her family were forced into US concentration camps where people of Japanese ancestry were forcibly interned during World War II. But in her time there she met interned professional artists and Disney animators, who, along with other teachers, taught Asawa to draw directly from nature. She continued with this observational drawing practice throughout her life. She was released from the internment camp to train as an art teacher, then later enrolled at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. The experimental college promoted learning as a social process - with the arts at the centre, framed within humanities, sciences and community living. It was a radically progressive institution that intended to educate students to be “fully awake to life”, which for Asawa was revelatory.

Asawa attended Black Mountain College from 1946 to 1949. She excelled as an outstanding young artist with notable emotional maturity, and was also adept at farming and community living. At the college she was taught by international artists and progressive tutors who believed in expertise, collaboration, and individually learning from experience. Asawa said the teachers at Black Mountain College: “profoundly influenced my outlook on the value of life and the true nature of freedom.”

“Through the arts you can learn many, many skills that you cannot learn through books and problem-solving in the abstract.” – Ruth Asawa

From Asawa’s recollections, artists Anni and Josef Albers had a notable influence on her, along with inventor, environmentalist and architect R. Buckminster Fuller. Anni Albers, along with others, role modelled a modern feminism that was entirely new to Asawa, showing the importance of women having their own creative practice and social equality. Josef Albers was one of the most influential art educators of the 20th century, and Asawa’s mentor. His classes centred on making works from inexpensive materials in response to questions about visual perception, practically demonstrating with the students how colours interact, or how a three-dimensional form could be made from paper, or a line of wire. His teaching drew inspiration from Taoism and Zen Buddhism, which reconnected Asawa to her parents’ beliefs, but in her own fresh way.

In the summer of 1948, meeting R. Buckminster Fuller was galvanising for Asawa. Fuller argued for the invention of structures through learning from nature. He promoted living holistically as citizens of one planet, who are part of the universe, not nations at war. Through his lectures

Asawa’s relationship with student architect Albert Lanier blossomed, and the couple decided to wed. In 1949 Asawa joined Lanier in San Francisco where interracial marriage had recently been legalised. Fuller designed their wedding ring - three conjoined ‘A’ letters - to represent the synergistic energy of the universe being manifest in their union.

Asawa discovered a whole new way of being in the world through art. She became determined to have a thriving future as an artist and mother. In preparation, Asawa freed herself from feeling victimised and traumatised by the racial prejudices of her time through conscientious personal development. In her final months of study at Black Mountain College, she cast off the national and racial labels that had caused her such pain, privately rejecting the labels ‘American’ and ‘Japanese’ and instead choosing to identify as “a citizen of the universe”. Asawa’s growing sense of true inner freedom motivated her lifelong artistic and civic contribution to society.

From the late 1940s to the turn of the 21st century, Asawa created her distinctive hanging sculptures from lines of wire that she looped and tied into elegant new forms. Asawa’s sculptures are an exploration of structures within nature, and are born out of her close observations of organic life. Her concepts are informed by the artistic, scientific, and cultural insights – including environmentalism and Buddhism – that she learned at Black Mountain College. In Asawa’s words, “the shadow cast by the sculpture reveals as much as the sculpture itself. ... Many of the forms are inspired by plant growth, bone structures and patterns seen in water and oil, soap bubbles and smoke”. Made by hand, each of Asawa’s sculptures is a voluminous form ingeniously created with minimal materials. Her works aesthetically combine tangible,

visible lines of wire with the spaces between the lines so that they appear as one unified whole.

Asawa had considerable success as a young artist with exhibitions in New York, San Francisco and Oakland during the 1950s. She also briefly ventured into commercial design with fabric and wallpaper designs based on pattern work, including her recognisable BMC laundry stamp print, which she playfully made while at college. From the late 1960s Asawa prioritised civic engagement as an artist, whilst continuing her own solo practice and caring for her and Lanier's six children. She developed a form of social art practice working with communities, and was active in lobbying for policy changes at a local and governmental level. Creatively she worked on site-specific public sculptures made with and for local communities.

In 1968, Asawa and Sally Woodridge set up the Alvarado School Arts Workshops, which reached over 50 schools in ten years. Asawa served on multiple committees championing artists as active citizens, including the Role of the Arts committee for President Carter's Commission on Mental Health. In 1982, the date of 12 February was declared the annual Ruth Asawa Day. That same year, against the odds, she successfully founded a state art high school which, in honour of her contribution to the city, was renamed the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in 2010. She was formidable as an advocate for the importance of creative activity in community life. Asawa's sculptures and drawings asserted her individual sense of inner freedom, which in turn motivated her integration of art, family life and decades of civic engagement in San Francisco and beyond.

– Emma Ridgway

The exhibition is curated by Emma Ridgway, Chief Curator, Head of Exhibitions and Creative Learning at Modern Art Oxford, and Vibece Salthe, Senior Curator at Stavanger Art Museum, Norway where the exhibition will be on display from 1 October 2022 – 22 January 2023.

A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue of 'Ruth Asawa: Citizen of the Universe' is available for £28, published by Thames and Hudson.

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David Zwirner



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