

RUTH ASAWA
THROUGH LINE



Best known today for her looped-wire sculptures, American artist Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) considered drawing as the center of her creative practice, an indispensable and generative daily exercise she likened to “scales for musicians.” Through drawing, Asawa explored the world around her and the boundaries of the medium itself. She turned everyday encounters into images of profound beauty and endowed ordinary subjects with new aesthetic possibilities. *Ruth Asawa Through Line* is the first exhibition to focus on the artist’s lifelong commitment to drawing, which she described as her “greatest pleasure and the most difficult.” The show demonstrates the breadth of the artist’s innovative practice, positioning drawings, collages, watercolors, and sketchbooks alongside stamped prints, paperfolds, and copper-foil works. A few three-dimensional objects are also on display, for as early as the 1950s Asawa saw her sculpture as “an extension of drawing...almost like drawing in space.” Organized thematically, this retrospective emphasizes key approaches and specific motifs that Asawa returned to and developed throughout her career. Her motivations to draw, beyond mere pleasure, were manifold: to see, to know, to record, to heal, and to nurture, as well as to imagine what is or might be beyond the visible.

Born in Norwalk, California, Asawa was raised in a Japanese American household and attended weekly calligraphy lessons from a young age. Drawing became a sustaining activity for her during the sixteen months she and her family were forced to spend in incarceration camps in California and Arkansas during World War II. She brought this sense of purpose to Milwaukee State Teachers College, where she studied with hopes of becoming an arts educator. Then, from 1946 to 1949, she attended the experimental liberal arts school Black Mountain College in North Carolina, absorbing and building upon foundational lessons in her extensive coursework with the former Bauhaus professor Josef Albers and the architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller. She described this pivotal experience as one of learning to see, a quest she would continue to pursue for the remainder of her career.



ABOVE *Untitled* (BMC.56, Dancers), ca. 1948–49. Oil and gouache on paper, 12 × 19 in. (30.5 × 48.3 cm). Private collection. Photo: Dan Bradica

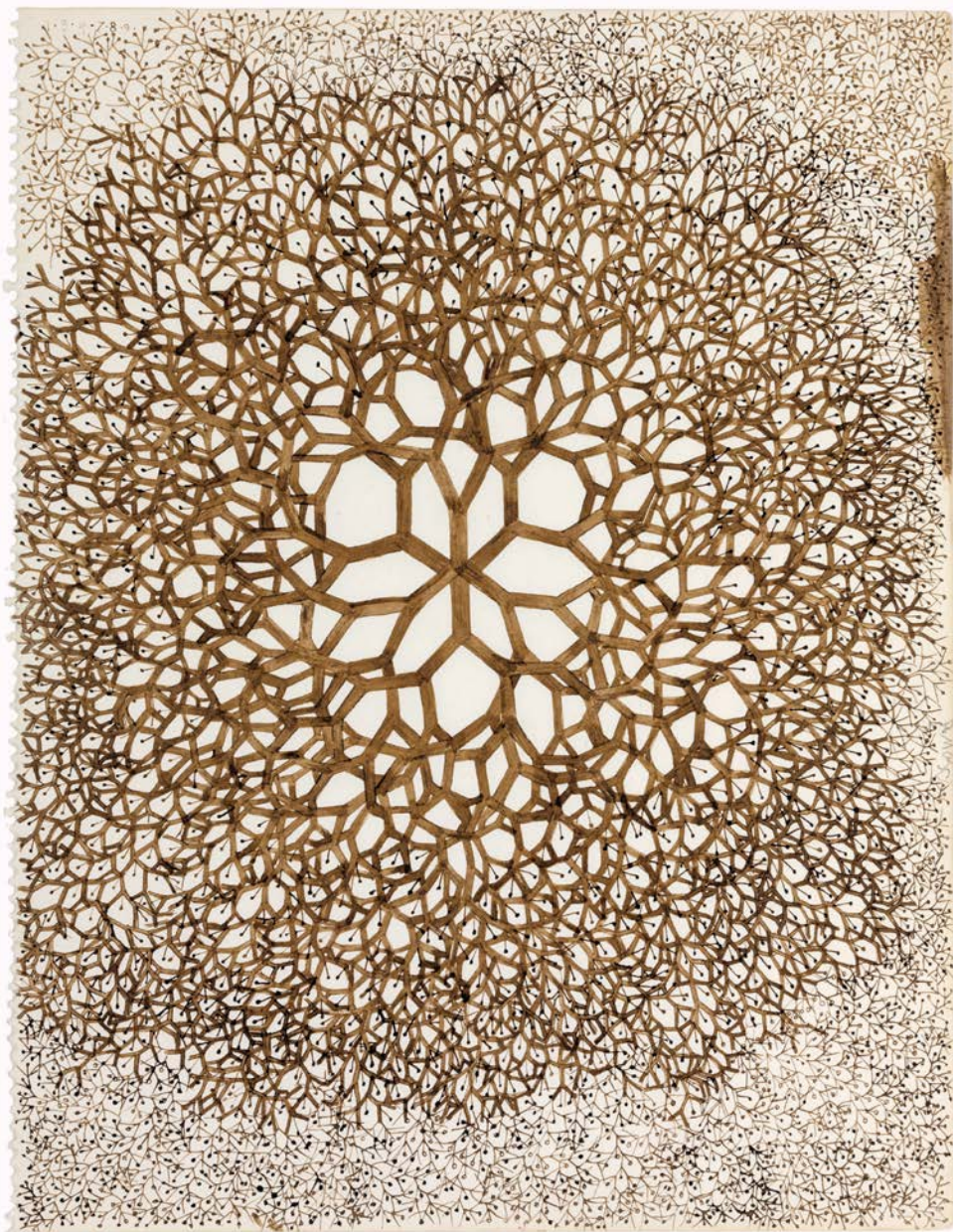


RIGHT *Untitled* (S.840, Mounted Paperfold of Alternating Columns of White and Black Triangles), ca. 1952. Ink on paper, 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 11 × 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (51.8 × 29.2 × 2.9 cm). Private collection. Photo: James Paonessa

Asawa developed a keen sensitivity to visual phenomena and a resourceful approach to materials. She pursued simple forms sourced from her immediate surroundings—fallen dogwood leaves, dancers with arms upraised—scrutinizing them in figure-ground relationships and for their aesthetic potential when layered, opaque, or transparent. The generative form of the dancer, for example, evolved in Asawa's oeuvre from vibrant painted studies done at Black Mountain to her later continuous Form within a Form sculptures and related drawings, rendered in washes of watercolor, stippled ink dots, or in relief on copper sheets. She used a wide range of materials and implements from traditional brushes and nib pens to laundry stamps, bicycle pedals, halved potatoes, and even an entire fish.

Asawa also investigated the properties of paper itself, not only as a surface to draw on but as a material with which to construct three-dimensional drawings. As a child, she learned to make origami and returned to paperfolding while at Black Mountain. She was perennially intrigued by the unexpected structural and visual possibilities of a sheet of paper. In her folded constructions, she explored line and form by manipulating the dimensionality of the sheet, a method akin to her approach to wire. For Asawa, working with wire was “a natural extension of drawing on paper—transferring the line of ink into metal and moving it into space.”

In her tied-wire sculptures and related drawings, Asawa explored the structural intricacies of plant forms, examining how different centers determine resulting structures of branching growth. The layered or spiraled patterns found in organic forms fascinated Asawa. She meticulously recorded the concentric growth rings of a giant redwood tree in ink on paper and used a stylus to draw on a metal sheet a sunflower's spiral disc and diverging ray florets.

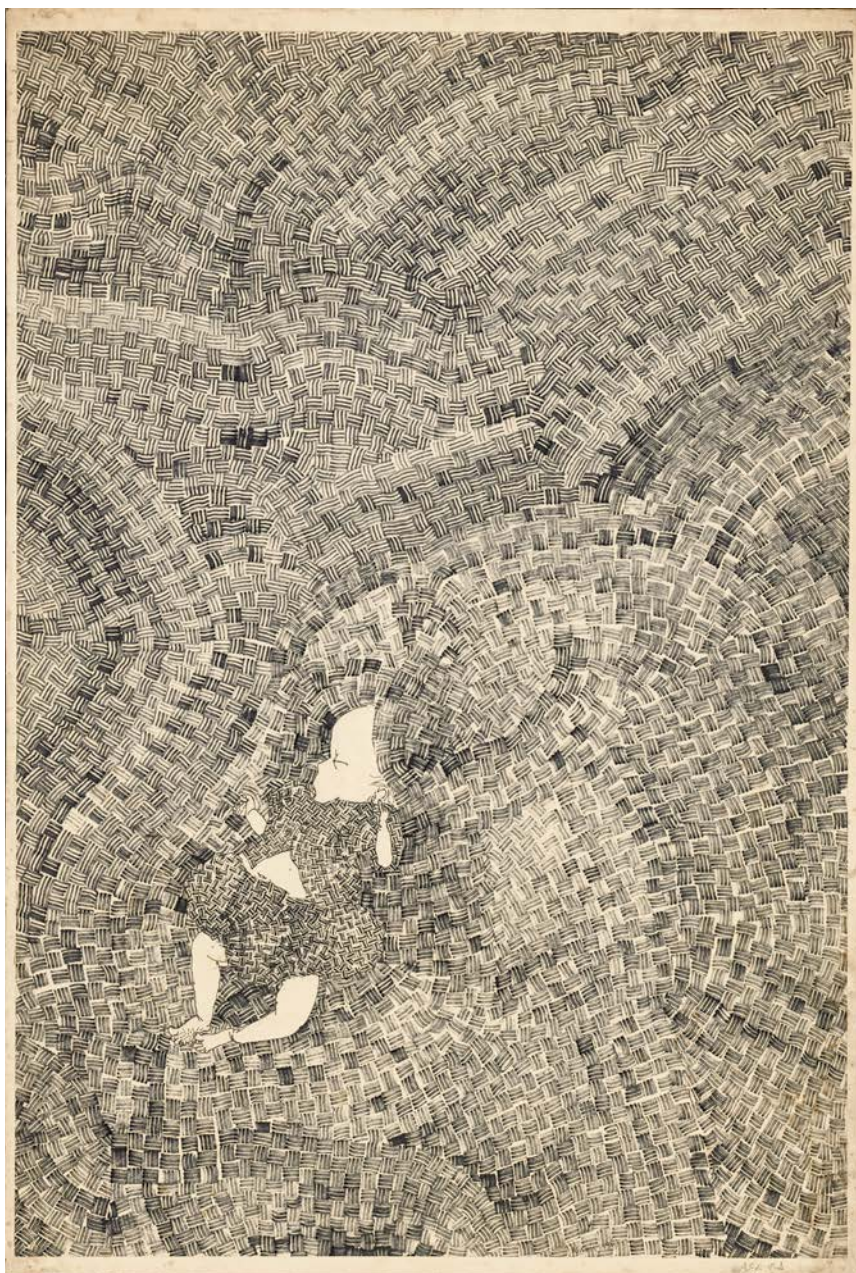


Untitled (SD.012, Tied-Wire Sculpture Drawing with Six-Branch Center and Drops at the Ends), ca. 1970s. Ink on paper, 14 × 10¾ in. (35.56 × 27.31 cm). Private collection. Photo: Hudson Cuneo

For Asawa, drawing was a means to connect with nature and weave a sense of community. In hundreds of individual drawings and in pages of sketchbooks, she made sensitive renderings of close friends and family, everyday objects, and flowers from her garden. A watercolor of persimmons, torn from a sketchbook, transforms the fruit into an exercise in color, composition, and control. Asawa selected the most intimate and immediately available subject matter—her infant son Paul—as the focus of a 1961 drawing. Experimenting with a felt-tip pen that she cut grooves into so that a single stroke made several parallel lines, she created a sophisticated pattern, elevating the tender depiction of her child into a timeless image of beauty.

When the Menil Drawing Institute opened its doors to the public in 2018, one of Asawa's looped-wire sculptures hung in the entry space, emphasizing the Drawing Institute's intent to challenge traditional definitions of drawing. It is therefore fitting to return to Asawa's embrace of an expansive notion of drawing, evident in the array of artworks on display, as the subject of a focused exhibition. *Ruth Asawa Through Line* offers insight into her open and inventive approach to drawing and her particular attention to material, line, surface, and space. It offers us all an opportunity to see through Asawa's eyes, opening, as it were, a window onto her world.

Text adapted from exhibition materials and essays in the accompanying catalogue, available at the Menil Bookstore.



Untitled (FF.1211, Paul Lanier on Patterned Blanket), 1961. Felt-tipped pen on paper on board, 31 × 21 in. (78.7 × 53.3 cm). Private collection

Ruth Asawa Through Line is cocurated by Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator of the Menil Drawing Institute and Kim Conaty, Steven and Ann Ames Curator of Drawings and Prints at the Whitney Museum of American Art, with Kirsten Marples, Curatorial Associate at the Menil Drawing Institute, and Scout Hutchinson, Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Museum.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All programs will be held at the Menil Drawing Institute unless otherwise stated.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

DACAMERA Stop, Look, and Listen!

Saturday, March 23, 3–4 p.m.

LECTURE

Jordan Troeller, “Durable Fragility”: Ruth Asawa and the Materiality of Line

Thursday, April 11, 7 p.m.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Ruth Asawa, Art & Life

Aiko Cuneo and Addie Lanier, the artist's daughters, with Marilyn Chase, biographer

Thursday, May 9, 7 p.m.

CURATOR'S TALK

Edouard Kopp on Ruth Asawa

Sunday, May 19, 3–3:30 p.m.

PAPER-FOLDING WORKSHOPS WITH JOAN SON

Beginner: Saturday, June 1, 9:30–11 a.m.

Intermediate: Saturday, June 29, 9:30–11 a.m.

Advanced: Saturday, July 13, 9:30–11 a.m.

All public programs are free and open to everyone.

Please visit menil.org/events for more information.

Exhibition Dates

March 22–July 21, 2024

COVER *Untitled* (WC.252, Persimmons) (detail), ca. 1970s–80s. Watercolor on paper, 14 × 17 in. (35.6 × 43.2 cm). Private collection. Photo: James Paonessa

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