

## The Menil Collection Opens *Ruth Asawa Through Line* at the Menil Drawing Institute on March 22

*Co-organized with the Whitney Museum of American Art, the exhibition is the first to focus on Ruth Asawa's lifelong drawing practice*



**HOUSTON**—*February 29, 2024*—For Ruth Asawa (1926–2013), drawing marked the beginning of a lifelong interest in and commitment to art, playing a foundational role as she experimented with diverse materials and processes to develop a distinct visual language. Co-organized by the Menil Collection and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and in close collaboration with the estate of Ruth Asawa, the exhibition presents drawings, collages, watercolors, and sketchbooks alongside stamped prints, paperfolds, and copper-foil works, showing the breadth of Asawa's innovative practice. ***Ruth Asawa Through Line* will be on view at the Menil Drawing Institute March 22–July 21, 2024.**

Rebecca Rabinow, Director, The Menil Collection, said: “Ruth Asawa’s drawings are complex and rich, owing much to her striking creativity, her curiosity about the world around her, her cultural background as an American artist of Japanese descent, and her European-based artistic training in the Bauhaus tradition. The Menil Collection and the Whitney Museum of American Art are honored to present this first retrospective survey of her drawings.”

A known sculptor, Asawa described drawing as the center of gravity for her creative journey, likening it to an everyday exercise such as “scales for musicians.” The artist spent part of her

childhood on a farm in California, enticing her to closely observe nature. “The shapes of the flowers and vegetation, the translucence of the dragonfly’s wing when the sunlight pours through it—these things have influenced my work,” Asawa once said. Calligraphy lessons at a local Japanese school further honed her agility and laid the groundwork for her later training at Black Mountain College.

Edouard Kopp, the John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator of the Menil Drawing Institute, said: “Ruth Asawa drew daily, turning everyday encounters into moments of profound beauty. She referred to drawing as her ‘greatest pleasure and the most difficult.’ For her, drawing was an essential way to see, to know and to nurture the world around her, and to imagine what is or might be beyond the visible.”

*Ruth Asawa Through Line* touches upon eight themes that illuminate the artist's techniques and motifs.

### **Learning to See**

Asawa’s time at Black Mountain College was an influential period that impacted the way she understood her surrounding environments. From the summer of 1946 through the spring of 1949, Asawa studied under groundbreaking artists and thinkers like Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller, who encouraged her to push material boundaries. Asawa credited Albers’s lessons with teaching her not only how to draw but “how to see.” Throughout her time at the experimental liberal arts school, Asawa returned to certain subjects and technical challenges, and their lessons reverberated across later bodies of work.

### **Found and Transformed**

Asawa’s penchant for scavenging and perennial resourcefulness prompted her to recognize the aesthetic potential in found objects, which she often used to explore interactions of color and texture. During her 1948 summer job working in the laundry room at Black Mountain, she borrowed the rubber stamps used to mark linens to create evocative abstractions for Albers’s class. When Asawa moved to San Francisco, bike pedals and potatoes offered unexpected methods of mark-making. In the resulting stamped drawings, such as *Untitled* (BMC.75, Double Sheet Clusters), 1948–49, Asawa transformed recognizable symbols into abstract compositions.



### **Forms within Forms**

Asawa described her form-within-a-form looped-wire sculptures as three-dimensional drawings in space, explaining that for her, “sculpture was just an extension of drawing.” Perhaps her best-known body of work, these rhythmic wire sculptures stem from her drawing practice, particularly her early graphic experiments with nested biomorphic forms, based in part on the figure of a dancer she observed at Black Mountain. This section brings together line drawings and watercolors alongside embossed copper sheets and collages that show Asawa exploring transparency, layering, and compositional balance in two dimensions.

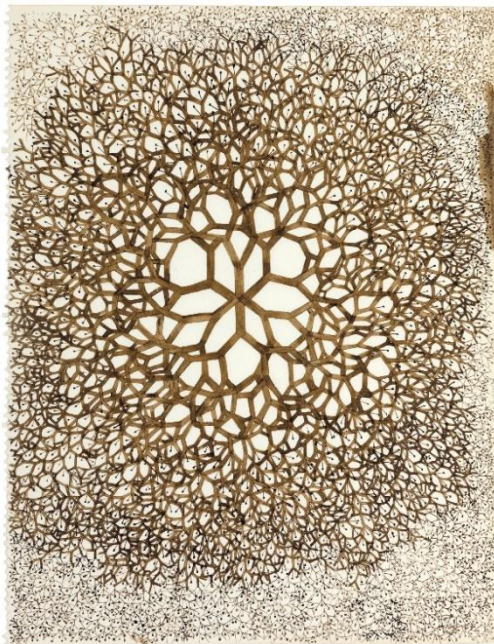


## In and Out

Asawa learned to make origami as a child, later encountering the art form at Black Mountain, where she tested the structural and visual possibilities of paper. Through folding paper, Asawa found that she could “redefine what paper does” while respecting its inherent properties. Her oil-on-paper studies feature rows of parallelograms in varying color combinations, which oscillate between figure and ground. Asawa’s studies of triangles, such as *Untitled* (BMC.128, Study in Repeated Vertical Angular Lines [Triangles]), ca. 1948–49, emphasize the connection between art, nature, and geometry.

## Rhythms and Waves

Throughout her career, Asawa maintained a love of patterns, starting at Black Mountain, where she encountered the Greek meander. This repeating geometric pattern, composed of a line that curls in on itself that then uncoils, required skilled hand-eye coordination to ensure negative and positive spaces were treated equally. Asawa was drawn to the rhythmic structure and repetitive nature of patterns, especially apparent in her series of marker drawings. In these works, such as *Untitled* (FF.1211, Paul Lanier on Patterned Blanket), 1961, the artist cut grooves into the felt tips of markers, making staccato or undulating marks that echo patterns she observed around her, including ocean waves, woven blankets, and San Francisco’s row houses.



## Growth Patterns

Intrigued by the growth patterns she observed in nature, Asawa created layered and radiating compositions inspired by tree rings, flowers, and vegetables from her garden. One particularly generative drawing challenge Asawa grappled with was accurately depicting a dried desert plant’s branching forms and delicate contours. Her struggle to render the plant in two dimensions motivated Asawa to turn to sculpture to understand its structural intricacies better. Beginning with a bundle of wire at the center and dividing it as she worked outwards, she untangled the plant’s complexities in her tied-wire sculptures, one of which is presented in this exhibition. She then turned back to the page, creating a series of related drawings, such as *Untitled* (SD.012, Tied-Wire Sculpture Drawing with Six-Branch Center and Drops at the Ends), c. 1970s, demonstrating her concern for connectedness and consequence.

## Curiosity and Control

Asawa’s luminous watercolors and ink paintings on paper testify to the artist’s nimble balance of chance and control, executing meticulous brushwork while embracing effects like blooms, tide lines, and cockling paper. At a young age, Asawa attended calligraphy classes, which she credited with developing her interest in watercolor. She would rely on this early training while learning about transparency, economy of means, and color theory in courses at Black Mountain.

In San Francisco, she looked for forms that resonated with her material explorations of drawing on coated paper, a support that encouraged ink to run and gather in pools. The mesmerizing effect of the fluid medium stilled in its tracks inspired depictions of rippling water and gnarled trees, such as *Untitled* (PT.106, Plane Tree #12), 1959, and reappears in Asawa's cast looped-wire sculptures.

### **Life Lines**

As a young parent and an increasingly active arts educator in San Francisco, Asawa drew as she raised her children, attended meetings, and worked in her garden. A selection of Asawa's sketchbooks is displayed alongside her drawings of family, friends, and colleagues. Employing her keen observational skills, Asawa captured the character of her subjects, conveying the distinctive quality of a suit jacket's folds or an infant's downy hair. Also featured are drawings of the flowers and vegetables she and her husband Albert Lanier tended in their backyard garden. In other drawings, Asawa recorded bouquets she received, which can be seen as portraits of the givers. Together, these works illustrate the value Asawa placed in creative labor, the natural world, and her extensive Bay Area community.

This exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue. *Ruth Asawa Through Line* is co-curated by Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, 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, The Menil Drawing Institute, and Scout Hutchinson, Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Museum.

### **About the Artist**

American artist, educator, and arts advocate Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) grew up on a working farm in rural southern California with her parents and six siblings. She took art classes throughout elementary school in Norwalk and attended weekly Japanese language and calligraphy classes as a child. In 1942, when she was in high school, Asawa's family and other Japanese Americans were forcibly detained at Santa Anita Racetrack, California, and later sent to an incarceration camp in Rohwer, Arkansas, as part of the U.S. government's isolation policies during World War II. She continued to pursue art while incarcerated, learning from accomplished Walt Disney Studio animators also detained at Santa Anita, and from art instructors at Rohwer High School. After studying at Milwaukee State Teachers College, Asawa enrolled at Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts school outside of Asheville, North Carolina. There she took courses with avant-garde artists and thinkers, including Josef Albers, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, and Max Dehn. She remained at the school from 1946 through 1949 when she moved to San Francisco and married her husband, Albert Lanier. The Bay Area would remain the nexus of her career, community, and family for over sixty years. Alongside her work in sculpture, drawing, printmaking, and public commissions, Asawa was invested in local arts education, leading workshops for students and co-founding the Alvarado School Arts Workshop in 1968. She was also an active member of organizations like the California Arts Council and the San Francisco Arts Commission, and she served on education task forces at the National Endowment for the Arts.

The artist's work is represented in museum collections across the United States. Her public commissions can be found throughout the Bay Area. During her lifetime, Asawa received grants and awards from the American Institute of Architects, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Asian Heritage Council, and the Women's Caucus for the Arts, among others. Asawa was posthumously inducted into the California Hall of Fame in 2021 for her transformative service as an arts educator and advocate in California.

### **About the Menil Collection**

Philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood in central Houston. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. [menil.org](http://menil.org)

### **About the Menil Drawing Institute**

The Menil Drawing Institute was established in 2008 in recognition of drawing's centrality in the lives of artists and its crucial role in modern and contemporary artistic culture. The Drawing Institute has since developed an international profile for exhibitions, scholarship, and collaboration. In 2018, a dedicated building for the Menil Drawing Institute, designed by Johnston Marklee, was inaugurated. It is now the site of regular drawings exhibitions, an annual monumental wall drawing commission, public programs, and study. [menil.org/drawing-institute](http://menil.org/drawing-institute)

### **Related Programs**

Menil programs are free and open to everyone. Learn more at [menil.org/events](http://menil.org/events).

#### **Lecture: "Durable Fragility": Ruth Asawa's Practice of Drawing**

With Prof. Dr. Jordan Troeller

Thursday, April 11, 7 p.m.

#### **Panel Discussion: Ruth Asawa, Art & Life**

Panelists include Aiko Cuneo and Addie Lanier, the artist's daughters, and Marilyn Chase, the artist's biographer.

Thursday, May 9, 7 p.m.

#### **Paper Folding Workshops with Joan Son**

Saturday, June 1, 9:30 a.m. (Beginner)

Saturday, June 29, 9:30 a.m. (Intermediate)

Saturday, July 13, 9:30 a.m. (Advanced)

### **Funding**

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### **Images**

1. Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (BMC.56, Dancers), ca.1948–49. Oil and gouache on paper, 12 × 19 in. (30.5 × 48.3 cm). Private collection. © 2024 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner. Photo: Dan Bradica

2. Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (SF.045a, Potato Print - Branches, Magenta/Orange), ca. 1951–52. Stamped ink on Japanese paper, 14 1/4 × 10 1/4 in. (36.2 × 26 cm) (approximate). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of the Artist. © 2023 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner. Photo: Jorge Bachmann
3. Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (SD.012, Tied-Wire Sculpture Drawing with Six-Branch Center and Drops at the Ends), ca. 1970s. Ink on paper, 14 × 10 3/4 in. (35.56 × 27.31 cm). Private collection. © 2024 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner. Photo: Hudson Cuneo

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