

THE SCULPTURE OF RUTH ASAWA: CONTOURS IN THE AIR

edited by Daniell Cornell. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, U.S.A., 2006. 205 pp., illus. Trade, paper. ISBN: 978-0520-25044-4; ISBN: 978-0520-25045-1.

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Published to accompany the first complete retrospective of her career, *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air* is a superb accomplishment. The book examines her pioneering modernist contributions and convinces the reader that Asawa's work is well deserving of the wide recognition it has received. Covering her early work on paper, her incredible wire sculptures, public commissions, and her activism in the arts and education, the volume is a must read for anyone who is interested in contemporary art and the history of Black Mountain College. Moreover, her artistic creativity is conveyed in the various essays that speak of her lifelong experimentation with wire, especially

its capacity to balance open and closed forms.

Asawa's unusual history is especially well done in the book. Having always characterized her in my mind as a Japanese-American artist, I learned how little I knew of her history and of the kinds of events that had shaped her life and her work. All of the essays conveyed the multiplicity of ways Asawa's heritage influenced the woman she became. A few events stand out in my mind. Born in America to Japanese parents, Asawa was among those interned during World War II. While in a camp in California, she met a few Japanese artists from the Disney studio who taught art classes there. One, Tom Okamoto, had an immense influence on Asawa's future development.

A second event that impressed me was the path that led her to Black Mountain College. She had attended Milwaukee State College with the intention of becoming an art teacher. Unable to get a teaching certificate because no one would hire a Japanese American even for practice teaching in 1946, she went to Black Mountain in North Carolina, where she studied with Josef Albers, Buckminster Fuller and Ilya Bolotowsky, and met her husband (the architect Albert Lanier). When she arrived at Black Mountain, Asawa had intended to become a painter. She learned to knit with wire during a summer break in Mexico. The transparency of the designs appealed to her artistic sensibility. Indeed, she so liked the way the interior and the exterior of knitted wire intertwine and how the material takes on a fluid, ever-changing shape that it came to define her artistic path.

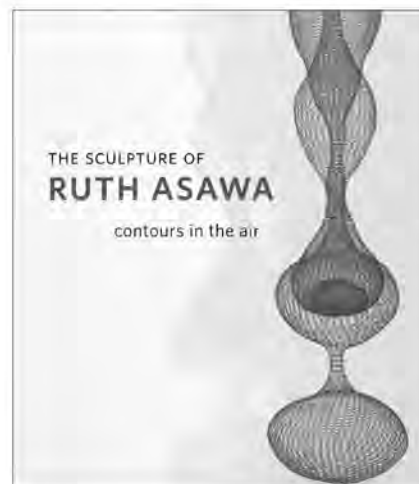
Perhaps the most thought-provoking chapter is "Critiquing the Critique:

Ruth Asawa's Early Reception," by Emily K. Doman Jennings, which deals with the significance of Asawa's Japanese-American identity to her art. Jennings argues that, on the one hand, it is correct to say that Asawa's Japanese-American ethnicity framed her experiences (e.g. spending time in the internment camps) and pointed her toward certain kinds of preferences in art and her activism. Yet, on the other hand, the development of her art is unique to her individuality and those who attempt to account for it in terms of her Japanese heritage are apt to misconstrue critical aspects of her history. For example, Asawa was born in the United States and did not develop her interest in Eastern thought and tradition primarily from her upbringing. Rather, it stems from her instruction by Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller. Jennings tells us that

while her work can be discussed in regard to the fundamental figure-ground relationships of calligraphy or the teaching of Lao-tze, categorizing her work in strictly Asian terms disregards its context within a larger body of contemporary artists, such as Mark Tobey, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham, who drew upon Asian philosophy as a creative source (p. 130).

Here I wanted to hear more about the relationship to three-dimensional modalities such as pottery than about the design and calligraphic influences that resonate with Asawa's mentors and the Black Mountain experience. Thus, it seems that this essay succeeds in capturing Asawa's recognition of the dialectic between an artist's technique and the resulting forms in terms of relationship to 3D modalities but misses an opportunity to explain how modernist work has elevated our appreciation of craft and design, including Japanese aesthetics. In some ways, Asawa sculptures are fairly equated with the delicate forms that often accompany Japanese accomplishments, particularly this culture's achievements in sculpture, pottery and ceramics. From this perspective, equating her work with Japanese traditions is not to denigrate it so much as to affirm the degree to which cross-fertilization has muted the lines among traditions. In other words, it is perhaps ironic that this influence came to Asawa through Western minds and practices because her art overall has a very Japanese flavor and aesthetic.

Indeed, the people Asawa knew at



Black Mountain had a great influence on her entire life and the modernistic path she chose. Later in life she also developed relationships with key players in the development of contemporary art. This is one of the reasons her story, as captured in this book, is so compelling. For example, this expansively illustrated book includes a photograph of the wedding ring designed for her by Buckminster Fuller (made by Mary Jo Slick Godfrey in 1949). Also included are a number of amazing photographs by her friend Imogen Cunningham (and others), capturing Ruth in her studio, with her children and in various settings.

The book itself is divided into several textual sections, a section of plates highlighting her drawings, paintings and prints (photographed by Joseph McDonald) and a section of plates that presents her sculpture (most of which was photographed by Laurence Cuneo). This approach is effective in capturing the breadth of Asawa's work, as well as her history and the work's chronology. The works on paper are particularly fascinating. These show her "design sense" and how her creative imagination in two dimensions carried over to her 3D projects. Pieces such as the undated *Curved Lines (Free Study)* that were produced during her time at Black Mountain College suggest the hanging wire sculptures generally associated with Asawa's name. Similarly, the dynamics represented in several of the lithographs (such as *Desert Plant Black Reverse*, conceived at the Tamarind Workshop in 1965) resonate with her later tied-wire works.

All of the above fails to convey the wealth of contributions Ruth Asawa made to education in tandem with her incredible artistic development. When San Francisco cut art education out of the city budget, she and Sally Woodbridge set up the Alvarado Art Workshop to bring art into the classrooms. In addition, her service includes 8 years on the San Francisco Art Commission, an appointment to Jimmy Carter's Commission on Mental Health, membership on the National Endowment for the Arts Task Force on the education and training of artists, and service on the California Arts Commission. Clearly, Asawa is not the kind of artist who isolates herself from society. Just as her work stresses connectedness, her life has been one in which she has worked to connect art with the community.

Finally, the task of writing a book

review is an unpredictable one. Many books are useful, worthwhile and welcome additions to my body of knowledge. Some are informative, but dense and difficult to read. On occasion, I find myself so disappointed that I wonder what I can say to hide my dislike. *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*, to be sure, is the kind of book that reminds me of why I write these reviews. Reading it was a total pleasure. Although I have known Ruth Asawa's name and reputation for years, this catalogue made it clear how little I knew about her life and work. All of the reproductions are excellent, and the essays are so informative that I found myself unable to put the book down, as though I were reading a novel. In other words, those who do not know Asawa's work will be in for a treat if they pick up this book. Anyone already familiar with her accomplishments will find that the publication effectively underscores what a remarkable woman Ruth Asawa is.

The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air. (Reviewed by Amy Ione, Leonardo, Volume 40, Number 5, October 2007, pp. 498-499.)