

Ruth Asawa, A Line Can Go Anywhere, David Zwirner, London, U.K.

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Ruth Asawa

← Installation view, *Ruth Asawa: A Line Can Go Anywhere*, David Zwirner, London, 2020.

Photo : Jack Hems, © The Estate of Ruth Asawa, courtesy of The Estate of Ruth Asawa & David Zwirner, London

† *Untitled (S.590, Hanging Open Undulating Form)*, c. 1960.

Photo : © The Estate of Ruth Asawa, courtesy of The Estate of Ruth Asawa & David Zwirner, London

Ruth Asawa

A Line Can Go Anywhere

At present, mired in the tumultuous particularities of our contemporary moment, so much to admire about Ruth Asawa—her work and her life, which were intertwined with organic and committed rigour. “Art is doing. Art deals directly with life,” said Asawa; and “sculpture is like farming. If you just keep at it, you can get quite a lot done.” So she did, creating a huge body of work over more than half a century, much of which has only recently, since just before her death in 2013, gained widespread attention in the art world. A 1956 photograph taken by Asawa’s friend, the photographer Imogen Cunningham, shows the artist in her studio with a vast array of her best known medium, intricate looped and tied wire sculptures, hovering behind her, suspended from the ceiling and affixed to the walls: a hint at the degree to which Asawa lived immersed in her work, a tireless and devotional manual practice.

At David Zwirner, a large collection of these types of sculpture are on display, hanging in tensile groups of bronze, copper, brass, iron, and stainless steel, made from single, seemingly endless strands that glint in the light and sway with the barest of breezes. Their shapes are both transparent and solid, shifting with each viewpoint, and it is tempting to affix formal associations—tree, womb, sea creature, mathematical equations mapped in space, wild geometric parabolas like modernist pavilions, flowers, dendrites, dandelion clocks, ghostly bodies. But this is the challenge of the work: to let it continue to grow and change inside the viewer, to resist linear and categorical readings, to push the mind further.

A selection of Cunningham’s portraits hang near the sculptures, including a now well-known photograph of Asawa working in the studio with four of her six children playing alongside, large looped oblongs of nested orbs within orbs dangle overhead and in between—seductive, intimate, dazzling, austere. Asawa spent her adulthood in

San Francisco, integrating her family life with her studio practice, and engaging actively in her arts education in her local community. While these details have often been used to interpret Asawa’s practice as related to the maternal, domestic, and craft-oriented, they have avowedly more to do with an embrace of process and practice as ideology: that *how*, not necessary *what* one makes is tantamount, and structurally revelatory of one’s role as a citizen in society. For Asawa, who learned these critical positions during her studies at Black Mountain College, community, patience, rigour, and the infinite continuing line were ideals to live by.

A Line Can Go Anywhere takes its title from a quotation by Asawa, in which she describes the ability of the line to contain space while maintaining openness. The exhibition closes with a series of spare ink drawings of daisies, lilies, roses, and chrysanthemums. These works echo the sculptures, continuing and transforming their sinuous lines so that the forms read as at once distinct and interchangeable: everything is connected. An idea that soothes and encourages in troubled times—though what you do with it is up to you.

Emily LaBarge

David Zwirner, London, U.K.
January 10–February 22, 2020