

Asawa's Gift to SF, de Young museum, 2005

ADDIE LANIER: What I love about what Ruth says about her looped wire pieces is: they contain the space, but she doesn't steal the air from anybody. It's .. They're present, but you're still able to breathe. Kind of an interesting idea.

SUSAN STAUTER: That's Ruth Asawa's daughter Addie. And I am Susan Stauter. Ruth Asawa was my friend and mentor. Look around. Notice how the forms of each piece interact with each other, and with their shifting shadows. You could call them abstract. But they also echo the natural world – seaweed, seedpods, roots and branches. Their forms go way back to Ruth's childhood, on a dusty southern California farm. Here's her daughter Aiko:

AIKO CUNEO: She would sit on the back of the leveler, which would level the ground, and drag her feet. And they'd go close together, and far apart, and close together. So you would get these undulating lines that actually look like her long hanging looped wire sculptures.

SUSAN STAUTER: In the 1940s, Ruth was taught to think outside the box at the groundbreaking Black Mountain College. At this liberal arts school, the art department was led by the iconic German artists Josef and Anni Albers. Ruth's fellow students included artist Robert Rauschenberg. Guest teachers included the painter Jacob Lawrence, the dancer Merce Cunningham, and the inventor Buckminster Fuller. On a summer trip to Mexico, she began exploring looped wire:

ADDIE LANIER: A craftsman there showed her how to make egg baskets out of a galvanized wire, and then when she got back to Black Mountain College, she was just playing with the wire again in these kind of basket forms. And one of her friends says, what happens if you close it up? And so she closed it up to see what would happen - And that's where the first sculpture comes, where it's not utilitarian, it's not practical, it's suspended.

SUSAN STAUTER: Hanging sculpture was incredibly radical for the time.

AIKO CUNEO: She would play with the wire, she would play with form. There weren't always drawings for all of them, which is kind of exciting because then you don't know what it's going to turn out to look like until you're done.

SUSAN STAUTER: Other pieces are made with her tied wire process. This grew out of Ruth's studies of angular desert plants.

Ruth's grandsons Henry and William:

HENRY WEVERKA: I think what's also very special about the de Young tower for me is that Ruth hand-picked those sculptures as a representation of her larger body of work, and chose to gift them to the de Young.

WILLIAM LANIER: - *it felt that they always belonged there.*

SUSAN STAUTER: And, as an education activist, it was really important to Ruth that they're displayed in the part of the museum that is free to the public and is used for education. Her son Paul:

PAUL LANIER: *Art changed her life -*

AIKO CUNEO: *And I really feel like she wanted children to know the joy of making art, making something from nothing.*

SUSAN STAUTER: Ruth's own family grew up around these pieces. They hung like a magical, upside-down forest or underwater kingdom, in the family home in San Francisco.

PAUL LANIER *Often you would see a pencil stuck in one of these looped wire sculptures or a paper airplane caught up there.*

AIKO CUNEO: *We weren't punished for things like that!*