

Tied-wire sculpture, Oakland Museum of CA, 1974

PETER COYOTE: One day in the early 1960s, a friend gave Ruth a desert plant, and challenged her to make a drawing. Here's her daughter Aiko:

AIKO CUNEO: And so she tried to draw it and she got so confused, she decided to make it out of wire. So she bundled some very short 12-inch pieces of wire together and made - it looks like a tree, and it's bundled and then divided, and then bundled and then divided. And once she made that small, very first tree, then she could draw the desert plant.

PETER COYOTE: Working in three dimensions helped her figure out the plant's intricate geometry. It also sparked a new creative path. Ruth became fascinated by this new way of manipulating wire, and began a whole new series of sculptures.

AIKO CUNEO: They started out on a pedestal like this and then she hung them upside down. Then she made them double-sided, so it looked like the tree growing up and the roots coming down. Eventually they went on walls and had patterns and open centers. I mean, she could do so much with it. No two were the same.

PETER COYOTE: At 12 feet in diameter, this is Ruth's largest and most complex tied wire sculpture. She had to use copper pipe to help support the heavy wire bundles. See how it's hung so the center forms a diamond? She rotated the square center when installing it the first time, deciding "it's more active that way".

PETER COYOTE: These tied wire pieces also grew out of Ruth's openness to new and unexpected materials. Her son Paul:

PAUL LANIER: Ruth would go to these dark, dusty warehouses where they sold wire, nothing but wire, And she would see this straight, stiff wire, on the shelves. She probably got some of that wire to play with and then arrived on tying it and bending it, and tying it and bending it - it is just such a fantastic use of that material. She was very interested in, what does a material do better than another material?

PETER COYOTE: When Ruth was at Black Mountain College, students worked with paper and clay. But they also made leaf collages, helped Buckminster Fuller try to build the first geodesic dome using aluminum strips, and experimented with industrial wire.

PAUL LANIER: The students were encouraged to explore what a material could do and to experiment with that material and then if something happened by accident, to recognize that that is something that's worth doing again.

PETER COYOTE: "Let the material express itself", said their teacher, Josef Albers. "Art is never wrong."