

The Faces of Ruth Asawa, Cantor Art Center, 1966 - 2000

AIKO CUNEO: My name is Aiko Cuneo, and I'm Ruth Asawa and Albert Lanier's oldest daughter.

PAUL LANIER: I'm Paul Lanier – I'm Ruth's youngest son.

AIKO CUNEO: A lot of these are people who helped her in her art making. If she needed to learn something and she didn't know how to do it, she'd go find that person. And some of those people are on this wall -

PAUL LANIER: - artists, architects, you name it - all kinds of people. She would say, you have such an interesting face, can I cast your face?

AIKO CUNEO: She learned it from a man who was a teacher at Washington High School. And she just took off from there. She cast hundreds of faces. And she would sometimes do it on the kitchen table or on the living room floor. And she would try and just capture somebody. If she thought they had an interesting face, she would try and get them to do it right then. And most people would say yes.

AIKO SOFIA WEVERKA: Hi, my name is Sofia - I'm one of Ruth's three granddaughters. I first had my face cast when I was about three and a half years old, and I remember it being a really special experience.

LILLI LANIER: My name is Lilli Lanier. I am one of Ruth's grandchildren. I remember Grandma Ruth casting my face. I loved the process. She would cut a hole in a piece of cardboard so that it would fit around my face. Then she had me put Vaseline all over my face, so it wouldn't stick to my hair or my skin. And then, she'd have me lay down on a table, with a pillow under my head, and tell me to close my eyes, and she would slowly pour the plaster on my face and sculpt it carefully around my nose to make sure the only part of my face showing was my nostrils.

AIKO SOFIA WEVERKA: Her confidence really made you feel like, oh, this is just a routine thing that grandparents do!

AIKO CUNEO: Everybody trusted her. Yeah. I think that people were probably pretty honored, too, to have their face cast.

TERRY LANIER: This is Terry Lanier, Ruth's daughter in law. It seemed to take a long time for the plaster to set up, but it actually only took a few minutes. It was a strange sensation to have the cast removed.

PAUL LANIER: She would lift off the plaster mold and then she would look in it and say, "Oh, wow, it came out beautiful". Then she would press the clay in. She was always experimenting with different colors of clay.

LILLI LANIER: It was such a magical process to pull the clay out of the mold and see the face appear.

PAUL LANIER: And she tended to not want to do too much cleaning up on the masks. She kind of liked that they weren't perfect.

PAUL LANIER: She liked to draw people, so I think it was interesting for her to then have a three-dimensional representation of somebody's face.

PAUL LANIER: It was also the capturing of a moment. Because the person's face changes, but it's forever recorded there in the clay mask.

LILLI LANIER: Every line, every curve, every detail is there.

PAUL LANIER: As my mother made these masks, she would put them up on the shingled wall of her house, and she started to run out of room. And then Stanford also chose to paint the background a brown color, like the house. And to incorporate that sort of curvy wave, maybe as a nod to her aesthetic of meanders and the looped-wire, because that's an aesthetic that she was always exploring.

HENRY WEVERKA: She was constantly experimenting and just like she did with her sculptures, it was always like, wow, this is really amazing - now, what's next? Where can I take this? I am Henry Weverka and I am one of Ruth Asawa's ten grandchildren.

AIKO SOFIA WEVERKA: One thing I really admire about my grandmother is her ability to build community. She always had people coming to the house. She had folks there all the time, and I think that the Wall of Masks is kind of almost a physical embodiment of that community - she really cut across a broad swath of San Francisco.

EMILY DEL REAL: My name is Emily Del Real. I was a fifth grader at Alvarado Elementary School in San Francisco. I was just a regular old student who enjoyed working with art and getting my hands dirty, and I think Ruth realized that I enjoyed that. So she would ask me to participate in a lot of different types of art while she was helping out at Alvarado. My mask, it's one of my most prized possessions. It has *life*.

HENRY WEVERKA: And I think that's why this installation is so powerful, because it brings together people from all walks of life, with all different backgrounds, into one just really, really unique piece of artwork. I think it just speaks to how democratic she was with her art making and community involvement.

PAUL LANIER: In the photos that accompany this audio piece, you'll see images of Ruth making masks, and the closeups of some of the masks she made from her plaster molds. If you're at the Cantor Art Center in person, you'll also find a map pointing out some of the people on the wall. As well as family and friends, you'll see artists who taught and studied with Ruth at the renowned Black Mountain College, in the late 40s.

AIKO CUNEO: She said she was the citizen of the universe. You know, these masks kind of say that, also, we're all part of the universe. That's the kind of thing I think she would want us to think.