





# Live wire

The artist Ruth Asawa decorated her San Francisco home with her own enigmatic and beautiful abstract sculptures.

Lucy Davies meets her children in the eccentric house she left behind – a treasure trove of art and memories

*Photographs by David LIVINGSTON and Imogen CUNNINGHAM*

Teddy the dog is out when I arrive at Ruth Asawa's former home and studio in San Francisco. This is a good thing, says Asawa's son Paul, because she – the dog – takes serious exception to strangers. 'Only if you're moving,' he adds, opening the gate. On this alarming note, I step over the threshold.

It is a cloudless autumn morning, and glorious. Beyond the perimeter wall, bright-gold light flashes off the houses lining Noe Valley's slope.

Inside, the garden is lovely – unruly in places, pungently scented and resounding with birdsong. Its loquat trees, clambering rose and ferns have a loyal flock of hummingbirds that flit overhead.

Asawa – an American artist – lived and worked in this cedar-shingled Craftsman (the US version of Arts and Crafts) house from 1960 until she died in 2013, at the age of 87. Besides creating a vast body of work – chiefly abstract sculptures, but also paintings and drawings – she and her husband, the noted architect Albert Lanier, who died in 2008, raised six children here. Paul, the youngest, recently turned 60.

To reach the house, you follow a meandering path upwards, across a sort of bridge, to a deck and into the kitchen. 'Have some tea,' says Paul, as we begin, brandishing a box of PG Tips (his wife, Sandra, is English). They moved into the house six years ago, though little has changed since Asawa died and it has a charmingly old-fashioned feel.

Asawa is adored in San Francisco. It would not be an exaggeration to call her the city's patron saint. The School of the Arts is named after her, for one, and Frisco



OPPOSITE *Ruth Asawa and her Wire Sculpture 2, 1950*, by the photographer Imogen Cunningham. ABOVE The artist's home studio, including a giant sculpture of her own head, one of 12 she made of famous San Franciscans in 1982

even celebrates Ruth Asawa day, on 12 February. At the city's de Young museum, a dozen of her looped wire pieces greet visitors to the observation tower. Meanwhile, her public commissions are so prized that when a new Apple store threatened to oust the one in Union Square, it caused uproar. 'We didn't have to say a thing,' Paul tells me.

Travel a few thousand miles east, though, and the artist's renown begins to fade. Prices for her work have shot up at the New York auction houses in recent years (from \$127,500 in 2009 to the \$4 million sale last November), but the Asawa exhibition that recently opened at David Zwirner London (the dealer took her estate into his fold three years ago) is – astonishingly – the first such in Europe. Later this year she receives her first institutional show outside the States, at Modern Art Oxford, and then on to the Stavanger Art Museum in Norway. Asawa is in the ascendant, then. But where on earth has she been?

'In fact, Ruth had quite a bit of success early on, in the '50s,' says Zwirner director Jonathan Laib, who established a relationship with the family during his 17-year tenure at Christie's, bringing the estate with him when he moved to Zwirner. 'She was showing at Peridot Gallery in New York, when they also had Louise Bourgeois and Philip Guston on their books. And she had heavyweight buyers, like the Rockefellers, but she withdrew from all that.'

The reason is three-fold. First, at the time Asawa came to prominence, the macho abstract-expressionist artists held sway (Pollock, Rothko et al) and, like many other talented women of her generation, Asawa was





*'She said she didn't have the patience to nurse the wounds of racism, that what was real were the cuts she had from working with wire'*

consigned to the hobbyist category. Her reviews from that era, though favourable, often end with the caveat that she was a 'domestic' rather than a serious artist.

'She couldn't have been less interested in the schmoozing, either,' says Addie, Paul's sister, who with her son, Henry, has joined us at the house. 'All that shaking hands, going to parties... She didn't want to play the game.'

Second, every time Asawa transported her wire pieces across the country, they would be damaged and she would have to reshape them. There was also the small matter of children – six by 1960 – and moving east was not an option. As a mixed-race couple (Asawa's parents were first-generation Japanese immigrants), Asawa and Lanier knew that San Francisco was one of the few places in the country where their relationship wouldn't be an issue. Public approval of interracial marriage was less than five per cent around the time of their wedding, in 1949. In some states such marriages were banned until 1967.

'Theirs is an incredible love story,' says Aiko, the eldest daughter (Asawa had two daughters and four sons), who lives nearby. All the siblings do, in fact. What with various grandchildren, there are eight Asawa-Laniers at the house for my visit. We move en masse, like a shoal of fish.

Back in the kitchen, I'm given Asawa's favourite chair to sit on, with a view into the living room, which is, without question, the house's star attribute: with a huge fireplace and soaring rafters; lit by a grand bay window through which the sun falls in chiselled bars. Its ceiling is so tall because when the house was built in 1908, it had to accommodate the pipe organ played by the owner's wife.



FROM TOP *Ruth Asawa, Sculptor, and her Children, 1957*, by Imogen Cunningham. *Left to right Addie, Aiko and Paul today in the family home, now inhabited by Paul and his wife*

In Asawa's day, these same rafters were strung with scores of her wire sculptures – some finished, others still in progress. Most have gone to the de Young now, though the nails they hung from remain. She would sit beneath them as she wove. 'You don't think ahead of time; this is what I want,' she said. 'You make the line, a two-dimensional line, then you go into space, and you have a three-dimensional piece.' Her children would clamber and crawl over her as she worked. 'She never minded,' says Aiko.

Asawa, who was born in 1926, grew up on a truck farm (a large-scale market garden) in Norwalk, south of Los Angeles, where she and her family tended fruit and vegetables. The fourth of seven children, she was 16 when in 1942, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, her father was arrested by the FBI and sent to a detention camp in New Mexico. The rest of the family were taken to the Santa Anita racetrack in Arcadia, California, where they lived for five months in two horse stalls. The Asawas were among an eventual 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry who were imprisoned on the orders of President Roosevelt during the Second World War. In 1994, when Asawa was 68, she said, 'I hold no hostilities for what happened; I blame no one. Sometimes good comes through adversity. I would not be who I am today had it not been for the internment, and I like who I am.'

Among her fellow internees at Santa Anita were three animators from Walt Disney Studios, who taught art in the stands to distract the children. 'We drew for hours, sometimes into the night,' Asawa later recalled. From Santa Anita, she and her family were sent to another camp, in Rohwer, Arkansas, where a Quaker organisation noted her talent and gave her a scholarship to attend college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To take the place, she had to leave her family behind. She didn't see her parents again until 1948.

'She didn't talk much about it,' Aiko says, 'but that was the stoic Japanese way.'

'She said this one great thing,' Addie responds: 'that she didn't have the patience to nurse the wounds of racism, that what was real were the cuts she had from working with wire.'

In later life Asawa slept with Bag Balm on at night, a cream used by farmers to prevent cows' udders becoming chapped. 'She'd also wrap her hands in duct tape when she was working,' Aiko says, 'but they were always cracked and they would bleed.' She shows me a cast of Asawa's hands, the skin hatched with hundreds of scars.

Asawa hit on her loop process in 1947, while on a visit to Mexico, where she saw baskets being made. She was so good at it that she could work with three strands of wire at once. 'Sometimes she would drop a loop,' says Aiko, handing me some sketchbooks, 'probably because she was tired or distracted. Those are like little fingerprints for us.'

The sketchbooks are something else, Asawa's exquisite drawings intermingling with the children's. They were also allowed to crayon a rainbow of fantastical animals and faces all over the wall by the bathroom. Drawing was a non-negotiable habit. She believed that, even if they didn't become artists, the decisions it required of them would make them better at whatever else they did.

'I would ask questions,' says Paul, 'like, "How do I do this?" and she would say, "Try it. Figure it out."'

'Yes,' agrees Addie. 'For me, it was always, "Have an opinion." Because I don't think anyone had ever asked her opinion until Black Mountain, and it just released her'

Black Mountain was a short-lived progressive arts college in rural North Carolina, founded and staffed by German Bauhaus émigrés, among them the architect Walter Gropius and the artist Josef Albers, who became Asawa's lifelong friend. Other teachers included the





Lanier exchanged during the year she was still at Black Mountain and he was out in the world trying to get a foothold so that they could marry.

‘They’re so romantic,’ says Aiko. ‘She was very aware of the difficulties he would face on her account. His parents were not happy about it – they came from a small town in Georgia where Albert was one of the superstar kids, class valedictorian. When he told his mother he wanted to be an artist, she said, “That’s a sissy career,” which is how he ended up in architecture.’

In fact, Lanier’s parents were fond of Asawa. ‘But they lived under a very racially segregated structure,’ Aiko explains. ‘They wanted their son to come back and live in the South, and that wasn’t possible if he was married to Ruth.’

Drawing wasn’t the only habit Asawa was determined to instil in her children – hard work came a close second. ‘Sculpture is like farming,’ she once said. ‘If you just keep at it, you can get quite a lot done.’

At the family cabin in Guerneville on Russian River, Sonoma County, where Asawa and the children would spend the summer, she made them pick up apples from eight in the morning until six at night. She would say, ‘You can learn something every day, just by working. Life presents this opportunity for you.’

Guerneville is quite chi-chi these days, but when the Laniers bought their cabin, a former mink farm, it was nothing of the kind: there was no bathroom, only a bathtub outside. One summer, Asawa made the kids help carve a huge pair of wooden doors for the Noe Valley house, inspired by Lorenzo Ghiberti’s 15th-century Baptistery in Florence. ‘Our brother Xavier kept saying, “Why can’t we just have regular doors?”’ Aiko recalls, laughing.

We have moved downstairs, now, to Asawa’s studio, from where it is possible to see into Lanier’s study on the first floor – he designed the space so that he could shout down to her, or so that if he was playing a Bach record (she loved his music), his wife could hear it. Today, its only inhabitants are the huge caricature heads of notable San Franciscans that Asawa made for Macy’s in 1982. There were 12 in all, including Joan Baez, Joe DiMaggio and OJ Simpson (pre-downfall). The kids used to put them on and run around.

It must have been a little chaotic here, growing up, I say. Apparently every surface in the house was given over to whatever Asawa happened to be interested in at the time. They would often find her papers stuffed in the dishwasher (which had never worked, a gift from someone at Black Mountain).

Was it hard for Asawa, after Lanier died in 2008? ‘She never complained as an old person. Sometimes she’d just start laughing, recalling a joke he’d told,’ Addie replies, ‘and it was only when we were taking care of them that I realised what an incredible partnership they had. He had always been the silent support, helping design shows, strapping the work on the back of the truck, feeding us canned chicken when she had to go away. He told her he loved her every night. I don’t think she responded! But I’d hear him – “I love you, dear.”’

The last few years have been a time of discovery for Asawa’s children. ‘All of her work from the ‘40s and ‘50s was packed away when they moved here, and no one ever thought to unpack it,’ Aiko says, ‘and she would squirrel things away. Even two weeks ago, we were running a new gas line downstairs and when the plumber unscrewed a boarded-up wall, out came all these body parts.’

‘Casts,’ she adds, seeing the alarmed look on my face. Then: ‘You know, we keep thinking we’re done, but Ruth lived the life of four people. The volume of it, her energy, we just didn’t get it. It’s pretty startling to realise this is who my mother was, who my mother is.’ ●

futurist Buckminster Fuller (of geodesic-dome fame) and the choreographer Merce Cunningham.

Students were allowed to choose their own course of study, but were expected to work in the kitchen and help construct school buildings and furniture. ‘It is not our ambition to fill museums; we are gathering experience,’ Albers explained. Among Asawa’s classmates was Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly attended not long after.

Black Mountain was where she met Lanier, who told his children that his first sight of Asawa, coming down the path from the apple orchard, left him smitten. Though the rest of Asawa’s papers have gone to Stanford library, the family has kept back the letters she and

The American Craftsman-style house, which dates from 1908, has a magnificent double-height living room that opens into the kitchen