Faces, Gentle Masks: A Legacy of Ruth Asawa

by Ken Kaji



Wall of Faces – Ruth Asawa made these clay masks from molds of her friends' faces. She displayed them in her San Francisco home. From a photo by Shirley Nakao. 1989.

Ruth Asawa is an icon. Though she passed away earlier this year, her place in the histories of modernist art, Japanese America, and San Francisco are firmly secured. Her sculptures, which often evoked nature, were exhibited and acclaimed internationally in the 1950s, and according to San Francisco Chronicle art critic Kenneth Baker, they underwent a revival in the past few decades, "because so many artists now seek ways to spark thoughts of nature without illustration." She left her artistic mark on San Francisco Japantown and the Japanese American Internment Memorial in San Jose with distinctive sculptures. And, for San Francisco, she created some of the city's most iconic fountains, including Andrea, the mermaid fountain in San Francisco's Ghiradelli Square. However, one of her greatest works does not get the same level of attention. The Face of Walls, strangely enough, is an important artistic work that seems to have gone unnoticed by her admiring public. For over 40 years, Ruth made life masks of her family and friends. She used plaster of Paris to make the molds directly on their faces. The masks were made of clay pressed into the molds. That is the technical description of the artful masks made by Ruth Asawa. This is another, more personal, commentary on her masks.

I first met Ruth and her husband Al Lanier through my architect friend, Kinji Imada. Kinji had gotten to know Ruth and Al when he as a young architect, working as a driver for their neighbor on San Francisco's Telegraph Hill, renowned photographer Imogen Cunningham. (They had since moved a couple miles south to a home in Noe Valley.) When Kinji and I dropped in on them some time ago, they were kind enough to show us their home and studio. The Wall of Faces was on display, placed against an exterior wall, in an outdoor space.

A film documentary by Lawrence Cuneo made on the Wall of Faces shows them as life-like portraits of their owners, the typology of the expressive faces are living poetic imagery that captures the unique spirit behind each face. What makes this documentary so delightful is that the masks in their state of display have attached to their physiognomy, filaments of torn fragile cob webs and perhaps some softening signs of patina, through weathering, that adds to a sense of "peeking in" into their hidden dimensions. There were over 50 masks in all, and viewing them, one sees a dazzling assemblage of age, sex and ethnicity, that speak loudly of the beauty of diversity. Viewing her masks, one is

left with an innate expression of her sense of the dignity of humanity.

The masks by Asawa represent her unique sensibilities as a Japanese American artist. Her remarkable career covered over 50 years of creativity as a sculptor working with steel and bronze metal sculpture, public art castings; and as an art teacher in public education. Her uniqueness, like her friend, Isamu Noguchi, lies in her ability to transcend the artificial cultural boundaries of Western and Eastern art and find a natural co-mingling of the sensibilities of both cultures in feeling as well as subject matter—something not copied or imitated, but intrinsic and personally unique in capturing of special form and the use and interpretation of materials. ✺

Ruth's Life: 1923-2013

Ruth was born in 1926 in Norwalk near Fresno, California. Her father was a truck farmer growing fruits and vegetables. She was one of seven children. During World War II her family was incarcerated along with 110,000 other *Nikkei* on West Coast. They initially lived in the "assembly center" at Santa Anita and later were imprisoned at Rohwer WRA camp in Arkansas.

Ruth studied at Milwaukee State Teachers College intending to be an art teacher, but was unable to get hired as a requisite for her degree, possibly due to racial discrimination. During this time, she had a chance to travel and study the basket work of Native American Indians in the South West, and became interested in their crocheting techniques in basketwork. It must have been seminal knowledge she stored away in her memory to later expand on it for her tied wire geometric sculptures.

She then went to study at Black Mountain College from 1946 to 1949 under minimalist abstract painter Josef Albers. They remained friends for many years. She met designer and theorist Buckminster Fuller there as well, who was a close friend with artist and landscape architect Isamu Noguchi.

Ruth met Albert Lanier at Black Mountain in July 1949. They married and came to San Francisco to work and raise a family. They had six children. Her life with Al, an architect, was filled with art and architecture, family creative projects including intensive gardening.



Ruth Asawa photo by Isao Tanaka

Ruth's wire sculptures and civic fountains brought her prominence in the 1950s and 60s. Her work first appeared several times in the annual exhibitions at the Whitney Museum in New York and in the 1955 Sao Paulo Art Biennial and later at the California Oakland Museum and the De Young Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Art.

Underlying Ruth's life as an artist was her commitment to her family and community. Her social mission is exemplified by her active role in developing the San Francisco School of the Arts (SOTA), which was renamed as the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in her honor in 2010. Its mission was to demonstrate significant gains in narrowing the achievement gap for underprivleged children through the nurturing of the arts. ✺