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Frieze

What We Can Learn from Ruth Asawa

As Ruth Asawa is honoured with a postage stamp, artist Stephanie Syjuco considers her legacy and her internment by the US government

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BY [STEPHANIE SYJUCO](#) IN [OPINION](#) | 30 OCT 20



The images are curious, even jarring: Dorothea Lange's black and white photos of Japanese American women in a warehouse, sitting, kneeling or standing in front of giant rope nets strung up impossibly high and stretched impossibly wide. The women use their hands to weave strips of fabric in and out of the gridded network. They wear their hair in classic 1940s styles, with scarves tied around their heads and fabric masks shielding their faces from lint and dust. The women are hand-making camouflage netting for the US war effort while in internment camps, set up to keep the rest of the country 'safe' from their 'Otherness'. The nets they make will safeguard the machinery of war – tanks, planes and soldiers – while their conscripted labour will also remain hidden from larger society behind barbed-wire fences on remote sites in Arkansas, Arizona, Utah and other states.

I think of another striking image: a colour photograph of the Japanese American artist Ruth Asawa on the cover of *Everything She Touched: The Life and Work of Ruth Asawa*, a new monograph published in April by Chronicle Books. Peeking out

from behind one of her iconic wire sculptures, her blunt bob and dark turtleneck are partially camouflaged by its filigree pattern. The posthumous celebration of Asawa's intricately crocheted wire forms – evoking porous vessels, living organisms, nets and traps – might entail a reckoning with how the US government interned her as a teenager, first at the Santa Anita Park in California and then at the Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas. At Santa Anita, women were conscripted to weave military camouflage, though Asawa was able to apprentice with Disney animators instead. How might her artistic practice have been informed by what she witnessed in the camps?



Dorothea Lange, Making camouflage nets for the War Department at Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, 1942–5. Courtesy: U.S. National Archives

Camouflage, in the traditional sense, is a way to avoid detection and, ultimately, capture. Blending into your surroundings is a means of survival because you can't be picked out from the crowd. The more exuberant dazzle camouflage, meanwhile, relies on graphically disrupting the viewer's perception of what they think they see by using loud zigzags, stripes and false perspectival shifts. During World War I, the

US and UK navies painted stark black and white designs on their battleships to confuse their enemies. I employed dazzle camouflage in my series 'Cargo Cults' (2016), ethnographic-style photographs that critically examine how the viewer seeks and finds what they want within an image of an ethnicized Asian/Filipinx 'Other'.

A great irony in the Euro-American cultural landscape is that Asians and Asian Americans are constantly held up against a national background of difference despite decades, or even centuries, of assimilation. The constant, xenophobic drumbeat of 'No, where are you *really* from?' is perhaps evidence of a form of cultural dazzle camouflage painted upon us. Meanwhile, an extreme form of invisibility in terms of a lack of cultural representation of Asian Americans means we are also overlooked. What does it mean to be in high contrast against, as well as completely invisible in, your own country?



Dorothea Lange, Making camouflage nets for the War Department at Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, 1942–5. Courtesy: U.S. National Archives

In February, shortly before the pandemic brought to an end my year-long research sabbatical, I was deep in the archives of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. My project as a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow focused on excavating photographs and ephemera of Asians in the US to determine how we are represented in the nation's archives. Among all the tenuous threads, I found mostly gaps, holes, glaring absences. Indeed, we – this multitudinous group known as Asian Americans – are a part of US history but rendered strangely invisible.

There were, however, several boxes of ephemera collected from Japanese American families in the archives. Within a brittle paper booklet that served as a high school yearbook for Rohwer, Asawa's typed name jumped out from the list of graduating seniors. Finding her in an otherwise national archive felt to me like a small victory, the uncovering of an inconvenient American truth: an artist whose craft might have been influenced by her internment now celebrated by the very society that deemed her not equal. (Most recently, Asawa's work has been featured on a new series of US postage stamps.) There she was, uncamouflaged and unadorned, and visible at that moment, within a larger gulf, to me.

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Main Image: Ruth Asawa, 1956. Courtesy: © Estate of Ruth Asawa, David Zwirner and Artists Rights Society, New York; photograph: © Imogen Cunningham Trust

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