“Huddle Formation” from the album Thunder, Lightning, Strike by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

It’s Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. Maybe you’ve seen them in a museum or in a book or on Google’s front page: massive, dangling, wire sculptures, floating above the ground in elegant, symmetrical shapes. Some look like hourglasses, others like lamp shades or flowers. They’re otherworldly, but also beautiful. They seem almost alive. Those sculptures are among the best-known works by Ruth Asawa, one of my favorite artists. Ruth was born in Norwalk, California, in 1926. Her parents had immigrated from Japan and the family worked on a farm until US soldiers moved them to internment camps, during World War II. After graduating from high school in a camp, Ruth became an artist and eventually landed in San Francisco.

Besides the beautiful wire sculptures, Ruth also made some of the most beloved and iconic public art in all of the San Francisco Bay area. Sculptures like the mermaid fountain in Ghirardelli Square or the Japanese American Internment Memorial, in San Jose. She also dedicated a huge chunk of her life to public arts education. She helped found the San Francisco School of the Arts, which—spoiler alert—is where I went to high school. It’s now called The Ruth Asawa School of the Arts.

Ruth used to just hang out there and garden. She was always wearing her signature outfit, which was paint and clay soiled jeans and a paint and clay soiled sweatshirt. I remember there was a rumor going around the school that [chuckles] that old lady who always had a spade in her hand was a famous artist. And I wasn’t ever quite sure whether to believe it. Well, it turns out it was completely true. Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa, by Marilyn Chase, is a new biography of the artist. It examines extensive archives of her work and interviews many of the folks who knew Ruth: her family, her friends, and her teachers. It’s a book that illustrates a fascinating and complex look at Ruth Asawa’s life.

I’m really excited to have Marilyn Chase on to talk about it. Let’s get into it.

Marilyn Chase, welcome to Bullseye. Thanks for this wonderful book.

Thank you, my pleasure.

So, I wanna talk about Ruth Asawa’s life in a minute. But I thought I would start by asking you about her work. Do you have a favorite piece of hers that you could describe for folks who haven’t seen her work before?
Oh, my goodness. Actually, I have to say I love them all for different reasons. But I wouldn’t—I would be remiss if I didn’t say that the more I learn about what is called—among her looped wire sculptures, this genre that she created—there’s something that is called a continuous form within a form, and these are the beautiful sort of shimmering, mesh, looped wire hangings that seem to curve in and out and in and out, that—these very sinuous forms that go in and then out again and the outside becomes the inside and the inside becomes the outside. Almost like a snake shedding its skin, like a mōbius strip. Those are endlessly fascinating, and I think that she regarded those form within form looped wire hangings as her signature invention. And those—I love the more I look at them. On the other hand, who does not love the mermaid fountain in Ghirardelli Square or the Hyatt Union Square fountain. Or, indeed, the Japanese American Internment Memorial in San Jose.

So, all the facets of Asawa have favorite spots in my heart. Let’s talk about those looped wire pieces. They’re probably her most famous form. They are often, like, suspended from the ceiling and look like something between a series of gourds connected to each other and a series of wire baskets. How did she actually make them?

So, that’s a great question, and there are lots of kind of layers to it. She always gave credit to the fact that she learned the basic technique while on a student service trip to Mexico, where she was joining a Quaker group that was doing public health and she was going to teach village children art. While she was there, she observed some craftsman who were looping wire to make simple baskets—open topped baskets for taking eggs and produce to the marketplace. And as a thank you to her, they taught her their technique, that was simply looping wire together. And she began by winding wire around a dowel in kind of a continuous, almost a ringlet form.

From that, she began to create these sort of chains or layers of loops. When she went back to art school with this technique in her head, she was just on fire. Up to that point, she had been a painting concentrator. A painting major, at Black Mountain College. But when she got back, one of her painting professors noticed that Ruth Asawa has changed. All she wants to do now is loop wire and make these sculptures. So, she thought—it was like drawing in space. And she would close the top of the loop and then she would flare it back out again. And you’re absolutely right, Jesse, in thinking that the shapes—even though they’re abstract and in some senses surrealist—they do sort of call up forms from nature, such as a gourd, or a strand of seaweed, or—in their sort of lacy, ethereal, transparency—kind of a dragonfly’s wing.

And that she talked about intentionally. So, they call up these associations as we look at them, but one of the beauties is that everyone gets to experience Asawa on their own.

You know, I knew her a little bit when I was a teenager, because she was around the high school that I went to. Which she helped found. And—School of the Arts, in San Francisco—and my memories of her are—I mean, I was aware that she was a famous artist, but I knew her first and foremost as a gardener.
Because she was, four days a week, at—on our campus, which was a rather sad, former elementary school, and you know, with her hands in the dirt and she—you know, she was in her—I guess, let’s say mid-70s, by that point. But she was there working hard every day and I would—I would look and think, like, “I think this is the lady that founded our school. Like, I feel like people have told me that.”

And to see her do that hard work everyday that was so profoundly unglamorous, in the most unglamorous place of all time—I mean, you know, full of kids doing dances and stuff, but a really sad, dopey building.

Was—Right! This is such a great point. I’m so glad that you brought this up and you gave me a chance to share some of the stories that I heard from folks I interviewed. So, you were at the site, was—I believe it was an interim site, tucked away behind San Francisco State University. And that site is no more, ’cause I made a pilgrimage there to see it and it’s—and it’s gone, but it’s now back up on the hill, sharing another high school site. But at the time—and really, all throughout her career both as an artist, as an advocate for arts in the schools, and all of the other public service that she rendered, she always not only talked the talk, she walked the walk.

She always thought that art—doing art and making gardens went hand in hand. For a very specific reason: she thought it was very empowering for students to not only be able to plan a work of art and make decisions about how they would build this work of art, but also to have the experience of planting a bulb and watching a daffodil sprout. Or planting a seed and watching a vegetable grow and harvesting the vegetable and eating the vegetable. She felt it was very empowering and it gave students a sense of self-worth and of efficacy. She also just happened to love the way a greenery complimented, say, a beautiful bronze sculpture. So, always art and gardens went hand in hand. And there’s some great stories about Ruth, as you say, as a very senior artist and educator, doing gardens on the campus where you went to school.

And there’s a photographer named Terry Schmitt who was out one day transforming the, sort of, sad schoolyard into a blooming garden. Ruth not only gardened. She not only sort of showed up for the photo op. She brought the mulch. She brought the tools. She toted the shovels and the rakes and the brooms. There are photos of her transforming that particular campus and she would get down on her hands and knees and pull the weeds. She—in her old age, she had some balance problems, following an attack of Lupus that she had. And she sort of fought to a standstill, into remission. But she still had a few balance problems and she’d be down weeding
and Terry Schmitt, the photographer said, “Occasionally she would lose her balance and sort of topple over onto the ground.” And everybody knew—knowing Ruth, she was so self-sufficient and fiercely independent, everyone knew not to make a fuss. And after a while, she’d sort of right herself and keep weeding.

You probably would never find an artist more humble or more philanthropic or more dedicated—not just to the ideal of public service, but to the actual sweat work of public service. Which I find absolutely extraordinary.

Let’s talk about her experience in the camps, when she was interned during World War II, along with her family—or separately from her father, but along with most of the rest of her family. She was interned at a racetrack here in Southern California. She met some animators from the Walt Disney company who were her fellow internees and were teaching art. It must have been a big deal to her, as a 16-year-old from Norwalk, you know—which at the time was rural, rural—and to meet real, working artists. Especially real, working artists who were Japanese American.

Exactly right. So, she, her mother, and her siblings landed in this really sordid situation for six months. They were tagged. They were numbered. They had to walk blocks to the bathrooms, blocks to the—you know, the mess hall. They had to do their laundry on hand washboards. It was just—even for a young woman used to the hard labor and toil of living on a farm, this was really beyond squalid. All of the sudden, there was this stroke of magic. Out of Disney Studios, of all things. And the three young, successful Japanese American animators who had worked on full length feature films like Snow White and Pinocchio, were there and available to teach art classes in the grandstand. And they had brought real art paper and charcoal and they taught the students how to draw. And, in particular, to use perspective.

And she, in her memoir write—actually wrote the line, “How lucky could a 16-year-old be?” And she said it without a trace of irony. To her, this was a magic moment. Unfortunately, it didn’t last. Because the three—these three artists were shipped off to other camps, as was she. But one of them in particular—Tom Okamoto—she regarded as kind of her mentor and they corresponded later in life, in adulthood, when she was an established artist. He wrote to her.

She also had a very special relationship with an art teacher in the camp in which she lived, in Arkansas. And that teacher seemed to have recognized that Ruth was, you know, more than just a teenager who was there and happened to be good at drawing. That’s right. She had two teachers who nurtured her special gift in the camp high school. One was Jamie Vogel, her art teacher who recognized her special spark. And her English teacher, Mrs. Beasley, who also kind of tried to take her under her wing. The art teacher even organized trips outside the barbed wire perimeter—sketching trips where she and her classmates could take watercolors and paper and sketch the bayous. This was in a part of Arkansas very close to the Louisiana border. And there were bayous and trees with moss hanging down over the water. So, she captured some of those sort of moody, moss green landscapes in some of her watercolors of the period that still exist in this day.
Were you surprised when you learned about Ruth Asawa’s life and learned the extent to which she was not angry or resentful about her experience, having been interned by the government, unjustly? Yes. It was a shock to read her writings, to not only see what she did with her life—her particular gift of resilience and the power to transcend the abuse that she and her family and her community had received at the hands of the US government—and beyond just surviving it, to sort of transcend and to turn every moment of adversity into an opportunity to create something beautiful was astonishing. And not only that, to emerge from it not only intact, psychologically and healthy, but also do emerge with her sense of public service intact. She would often say, when people would ask her, “How did you come by this equanimity and this lack of bitterness?” And she said, “If it were not for the war, I would not be who I am. And I like who I am.”

More with Marilyn Chase after the break. In her research, Marilyn found receipts that Ruth Asawa kept from work she sold. She was shocked to find out how Ruth priced herself. It’s Bullseye, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

**Music:** Classical orchestral music.

**John Hodgman:** Hey, everyone! It’s I, John Hodgman of the Judge John Hodgman podcast.

**Elliott Kalan:** And I, Elliott Kalan of the Flop House podcast.

**John:** And we’ve made a whole new podcast! A 12-episode special miniseries called I, Podius. In which we recap, discuss, and explore the very famous 1976 BBC miniseries about Ancient Rome called I, Claudius! We’ve got incredible guests such as Gillian Jacobs, Paul F. Tompkins, as well as star of I, Claudius Sir Patrick Stewart! And his son! Non-Sir Daniel Stewart.

**Elliott:** Don’t worry, Dan, you’ll get there someday.

**John:** I, Podius is the name of the show! Every week from MaximumFun.org for only 12 weeks. Get ’em at MaximumFun.org, or wherever you get your podcasts.

[Music fades out.]

**Music:** Bright, cheerful music.

**Sam Sanders:** Hey, y’all. I’m Sam Sanders, host of It’s Been a Minute. On my show, we catch you up on all the things in news and culture.

[Scene changes.]

**Stacy:** The Space Force?! I totally missed this. What is the Space Force?

**Sam:** Stop it. Stacy. You don’t know about the Space Force?

**Stacy:** No!
**Sam:** What!?

**Stacy:** I’ve been in my apartment for four months. [Laughs.]

**Sam:** Oh man.

**Speaker:** Crushing it, Stace.

**Stacy:** Thank you. Feeling good.

[Scene changes.]

**Sam:** News without the despair. Listen now to the *It’s Been a Minute* podcast, from NPR.

00:17:24 **Jesse** Host

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest is Marilyn Chase. She’s a journalist and the author of *Everything She Touched*. The book is a biography of the artist Ruth Asawa. Ruth was a sculptor who worked mostly in San Francisco. She’s probably best known for her hanging wire sculptures, which you can find in the Guggenheim, the Whitney, and in a full room installation in the de Young Museum, in Golden Gate Park, in San Francisco. Let’s get back to my conversation with Marilyn.

Ruth Asawa went to a very unique arts college, but she got there through circumstances that are different than what people might imagine. She was headed to a teaching college in Wisconsin to learn to be, you know, a schoolteacher. How did she end up going from there to Black Mountain College and, you know, avant-garde, artist led, arts college?

00:18:24 **Marilyn** Guest

It’s such a great story. And it’s, you know—as journalists and as researchers and as writers and as authors, we always look for a through line and a story. And this is another example of the kind of consistency and integrity of her character. So, what happened was, she’s finally allowed to graduate and leave… the camp, in Arkansas. And she gets on a train and she’s headed for Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She has to stay in the Midwest, because no Japanese American is allowed, yet, to return to the west coast, which is considered a militarily sensitive zone ‘cause the war is still going on.

She’s allowed to go to college. And she had looked longingly at art conservatories in Chicago, but they were far beyond her means. It turned out that the Milwaukee State Teacher’s College—now part of the University of Wisconsin—could be attended for a three-year program for the sum of $25 a term. And she thought that was achievable. So, with a Quaker scholarship and her indefatigable work ethic—she was a nanny, she was a housekeeper, she was a domestic, she worked in a leather tannery. All the hardest labor while she was going to school. She put in two years hard work to become a teacher of art. Because it was the most practical, achievable form of higher education at the time. Or so it seemed.

She finishes year two. She’s about ready to start her student teacher experience. Her practicum. And the administrators call her...
in and say, “We’re very sorry, however we can’t place you as a student teacher, because it isn’t safe for you.” That was their way of translating the fact that no public school in Wisconsin would have a Japanese American young woman as a student teacher. So, she was basically required to leave without her degree, without her credential. All this time she’d invested, hard work, hard earned money, and she had nothing to show for it except two years of interesting arts and crafts and pedagogy.

So, meantime she’d made some good friends in Milwaukee and they said, “Come with us. We’re going to this great school called Black Mountain College. It’s in North Carolina. You have to come.” All of the leading lights of modern art are there. Josef Albers, the colorist and painter who had left the Bauhaus, fleeing the Nazis, was there. Buckminster Fuller would soon be there. Merce Cunningham, in modern dance, was there. John Cage, an avant-garde musical composition was there. And several of her classmates in Milwaukee were on their way to Black Mountain. So, she finally thought, “You know, I’ve exhausted every practical option. I have nothing left to lose. I’ll go to Black Mountain.” Once again, she found a scholarship from a church in Hawai’i that would give her $200, which she thought was just enough to finance maybe a summer session.

So, she goes to Black Mountain, in North Carolina. She tries to sign up for a weaving class with Anni Albers, the wife of Josef Albers. And Anni Albers says to her, “I’m sorry, I can’t possibly teach you how to weave in just six weeks. You’ll have to find another class.” So, she looks for the next best thing, which turns out to be taking color and design from Josef Albers himself. And that began what turned into three years of just really ecstatic study and exploration and that’s what started her down the road to a career as a working artist. Which was what she had dreamed of, all along.

By the end of the ’50s and beginning of the ’60s, Ruth Asawa started to make a name for herself nationally. And it was particularly with the hanging, woven wire forms that are still probably her most famous works. Do you think that her career was hampered by the fact that her work is so beautiful?

What a great question. Um. And I think that, at least initially, the answer is yes! It was both helped and hindered. There’s an absolutely striking review when she was a very, very young artist. She was not yet 30. I think it was Time Magazine’s new year’s edition, 1954. There was a dual review of all things. She really made an initial splash. Her work was beautiful. On one level, people appreciated it for its decorative qualities. For its, sort of, craftiness. And in this review, double review comparing the art of Isamu Noguchi—the venerable, much more senior Japanese American sculptor based in New York—and Ruth Asawa, who at 28 was basically half his age, talking—the—I remember the review was called “Eastern Yeast”, talking about how American artists were running out of ideas and all the fresh energy was coming from these Asian American artists.

But in it, at the same time as reviewers were drawn to the beauty of the work, they also would use these kind of—slightly demeaning, slightly reductive terms. They would say that it’s sort of pretty, it’s delicate, it’s feminine, it’s crafty. Also, in the beginning—in fact,
what introduced her to the New York gallery world, in the late ‘50s, was that her work was displayed in a decorator showcase, in Manhattan. And the gallerists who ran the Peridot Gallery, on Madison Avenue, saw them and said, “We’d like to show your work. We’d like to start a relationship with you.” That opened many doors for her. And she began to be—her work began to be acquired by important collectors like the Nelson Rockefellers and the architect Philip Johnson. The beauty of the work, I think, and the ease of appreciating just the gorgeousness of the sculptures… in effect, made it a little bit too easy to classify her in a facile way as decorative.

So, her work would pop up—believe it or not—in Vogue Magazine spreads. An article—a feature article on the latest couture suits and coats. Or in architectural magazines, it would be shown. And to this day is still—you know, in Architectural Digest. A famous entertainer had a spread in Architectural Digest in which there was an Asawa hanging in her living room. So, it’s easy to appreciate with, on that level, but it also made it easier for people to kind of pigeonhole her as more of a craftswoman than a fine artist. And even though she came out of the Bauhaus tradition, studying at Black Mountain with Josef Albers where these artificial barriers between craft and art are kind of brought down, in the American art critical community it was a little too easy for people to review her in gendered, racialized language.

So, it was a double-edged sword, the beauty. She ended up making a name for herself in San Francisco, not so much through the kinds of works that, you know, these days sell for a million dollars in an art auction, but rather through public artwork. And her public artwork was generally representational. She did a lot of fountains and had a reputation as being San Francisco’s fountain lady.

[Marilyn affirms.]

And it was often made of the simplest clay that exists [chuckling] in the world, which is—like, you know—flour, salt, and water clay, that was then cast into, you know, metals for installation. But, like, she was sculpting representational work with the kind of clay that preschoolers use.

Exactly. She calls it baker’s clay or, alternatively, she called it playdough, although it’s not the trademarked, you know sort of brightly colored, sweet smelling Play-Doh that you buy in a toy store. She created a recipe for baker’s clay, which is repeated in my book [chuckles]. It’s nontoxic. Everybody has the ingredients. It’s four cups of flour and so much sugar and so much water. And then it becomes this very malleable sort of safe, cheap material that she created initially to amuse her children and then began to be used in the Alvarado Arts Project, for elementary schools and city-wide, because it was inexpensive and available. Also, she did use it as a way to make originals for some of her more famous public commissions.

For example, the Hyatt Union Square fountain, which is this large sort of cylinder of whimsical, San Francisco cityscapes. And even
The most serious and grave and the most—you know, overtly political of her representational works, which would be the Japanese American Internment Memorial, in San Jose, was created from an original made in baker’s clay—with her son Paul and her studio partner, Nancy Thompson. And then later cast, at the Bronze Foundry, in Berkley, from that original. So, yeah, in San Francisco, she became known as the city’s beloved fountain lady, beginning with her very first public commission—the mermaid fountain, called—formally titled Andrea, in Ghirardelli Square. Which, in 1968 when it was created, caused a huuuuge public controversy. Just an explosion of editorials and angry letters and protests by the lead architect in the Ghirardelli Square project. But she won the popular vote, the—in the court of popular opinion. Because the public loved it.

You published some of the, like, receipts from this big public art works that Ruth Asawa made in the San Francisco Bay Area. And very famous in the Bay Area and internationally, works. And you show that she was barely making any money on them. And, in fact, through her career, she never became any more than—you know—generously a middle-class artist. You know, she was a working artist, but she never made a bunch of money on her work.

I had this experience, because I had this fondness for her—’cause, you know, she’s the only famous artist I’ve ever known—where when I joined the middle class, in my 30s, I thought, “You know, maybe I should take some of my money and try and buy one of Ruth’s pieces.” And I went into the auction records and about four years before I had, you know, started making more than $25,000 a year, her works had basically gone [chuckling] from selling for—you know--$10-$20,000 a piece to selling for $500,000 apiece and $1,000,000 apiece.

[Chuckles.] I did sort of report on and print some of those receipts because I—it was a revelation to me, although having artists in my family, I knew that—I wasn’t under any sort of illusions about artists having an easy time. Artists do struggle and she spent less than no time burnishing her image and worrying about her market values. She was in it to create. In fact, her daughters told me, “Mom always lost her shirts.” On these big public commissions, even though the contract price may seem fairly rich, the artist has to pay for raw materials. The artist has to pay for labor. There are years of work behind each piece. They have to pay to have the installers come in. They have to pay to have basins built and concrete companies or marble companies make the bases. It’s a very expensive proposition.

And Ruth herself said, “The artist always pays for the privilege of doing the work.” And bronze is terribly expensive. She loooved working in bronze for the beauty of the patina, the color, for the durability. But these pieces aren’t cheap to produce. They’re very costly to produce. So, it was not a great moneymaking venture. I was amazed to find that in the old days, when she was just starting out as a sculptor, you could actually rent an Asawa for $20 a month. You could have an Asawa sculpture in your home for $20 a month. And even at that, as an artist, she had to write notes dunning the renter to please pay up. “Would you mind sending me your tender $20?” I mean, incredible stuff.
And her son, Xavier—her adopted son—told me that, "Mom always shopped at the dented can store." I guess she, you know, she didn’t like to waste her money. She went to the surplus grocery, the discount grocery. And they ate well. They grew a lot of vegetables. They always ate wonderful meals. She was a fabulous cook, known for her bountiful tables. But she didn’t waste a penny. She—I think she had one professional haircut her whole life, she said. It cost her $5. She was going to a wedding. She went to Maiden Lane and she resented paying that five bucks her whole life, which is pretty funny.

So, she went from being someone whose work could be had relatively inexpensively or even rented through the rental gallery, to being someone whose work is now sort of in the stratosphere. Which is both validating and also ironic, because never was there an artist who cared less about material values and high market prices. [Chuckles.]

Well, Marilyn Chase, I sure appreciate you taking all of this time to talk about Ruth Asawa and her amazing life and work with me.

It's my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Marilyn Chase. Her book, Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa, is available pretty much wherever you buy books. Ruth’s art and Ruth herself are the subject of a new series of stamps. You can buy them right now at the US Postal Service. They were just launched online, by the artist’s gallerist and George Takei, a fellow Japanese American internee. I bought a bunch of them, because I love Ruth and I love the postal service.

That's the end of another episode of Bullseye. Bullseye is produced out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where today, it was 90 degrees and a little rainy. Which I guess means that we live in Florida now! I don’t know.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O’Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

You can keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for Bullseye with Jesse Thorn. And I think that’s about it. Just remember—all great radio hosts have a signature sign-off.

Speaker: Bullseye with Jesse Thorn is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]