

Excerpt from *Being Ruth Asawa*

"We do not always create 'works of art,' but rather experiments; it is not our ambition to fill museums: we are gathering experience."

— Josef Albers

"When I'm working on a problem, I never think about Beauty, I think only how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong."

— R. Buckminster Fuller

One Sunday in February 1942,
two men in dark suits surprised us
as we worked in the fields.
They took our father by the arm
and marched him to the house.
They watched him eat lunch.
He finished his meal with a slice
of my sister's lemon meringue pie,
and then they drove him away.

I learned later they were FBI
and suspected our father
of being a traitor.
He disappeared from our lives.
Four years passed before
we saw him again.

Soon, with thousands of others,
we were assigned to a detention camp
in Santa Anita. We lost almost everything
we owned. We lived in the stables
of a converted racetrack
surrounded by barbed wire.
Hair from the horses' manes and tails
stuck between cracks in the walls.
In the summer heat, the smell
of horses was overpowering.

The excuse for separating us
from our homes and livelihoods
was that the U.S. was at war with Japan
where our parents were from.
Yet there was no similar removal
of Italian or German Americans.

In the camp, I noticed three men

who liked to sit together high
in the grandstand of the racetrack,
balancing sketchpads on their knees,
drawing pictures with pieces of charcoal.
They didn't seem to mind the dust
that blew up from the track, or the sun,
or if I sat with them. They encouraged me.
That was how I learned I was an artist, too.

They were my teachers—
Tom Okamoto, Chris Ishii, James Tanaka—
Disney artists who'd drawn *Pinocchio*,
Fantasia, *Dumbo*, *Donald Duck*,
and *Mickey Mouse*—now suspected
of being “enemies of the people.”

Yet I saw how when they worked,
worry fled. In the midst of hardship,
their concentration made a peaceful space
where something unexpected
and beautiful might happen.

Excerpt from *Ruth and Imogen*

Imogen:

Growing up, I had a scientific bent.
At the University of Washington,
I majored in chemistry and made lantern slides
for the botany department, assembling
a visual catalog of its specimens
in the days before slide projectors.
A sheet of glass was sensitized
with a gelatin silver emulsion.
The plate was exposed to a negative,
resulting in a positive transparency
valued for its complexity and tonal range.
I appreciated the subtlety of the process
and continued my work in that medium
when I went out on my own.

I wrote Ruth's recommendation
for a Guggenheim fellowship:
*She is an unfailingly creative person
and an indomitable worker.
Although young, she has maturity
and a balance that few achieve.*

*The more she undertakes,
the more she accomplishes.*

I was certain she'd be selected,
but each time she applied,
she was passed over.
It's true I was hardly objective.
After twenty years of fruitless efforts,
I confessed to the committee:
*I may be too involved in her work
to be a cool observer,
as I have photographed much of the sculpture,
making it mine as well as hers.*

Success and failure
are matters of perspective,
and perspectives change.
When I met Ruth, I recognized
an old soul, despite her youth.
She credited my example,
but I think I learned more from her
than she from me. Her energy
and industry astonished me.
It came from her upbringing
as a farmer's daughter.
She seemed to draw strength
from the earth up through her body.
She brought life into everything she touched,
and everything she made had a wholeness
and satisfaction to it. I worried
that her wish to have a large family
and be an artist wouldn't come true,
but she thrived in the ferment of family life,
calming disorder and confusion,
radiant in her sense of concentration.

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