

JESSE NISHIHATA

A PIONEER NIKKEI FILMMAKER

Jesse Nishihata was a pioneer Japanese Canadian filmmaker whose prolific career opened doors for Japanese and Asian Canadian artists and Canadian documentary filmmakers in general, as he continually brought pressing issues into the public consciousness.

Born Hideo Nishihata (西畑英夫) to Japanese immigrant parents in 1929 in Vancouver, Jesse spent his early childhood on Powell Street, the former Japantown, where his father owned a sheet metal shop. In 1942, Jesse and his family were among the 22,000 Japanese Canadians uprooted and expelled from the West coast. They were sent to Tashme internment camp, where he eventually took the name Jesse. After the war, in 1946, the Canadian government offered Japanese Canadians two choices: “go east or go home”, that is, move to Japan or disperse to provinces east of the Rocky Mountains. Jesse talked his family out of going to Japan and they first moved to a sugar beet farm in Diamond City, Alberta, and later to Montreal.

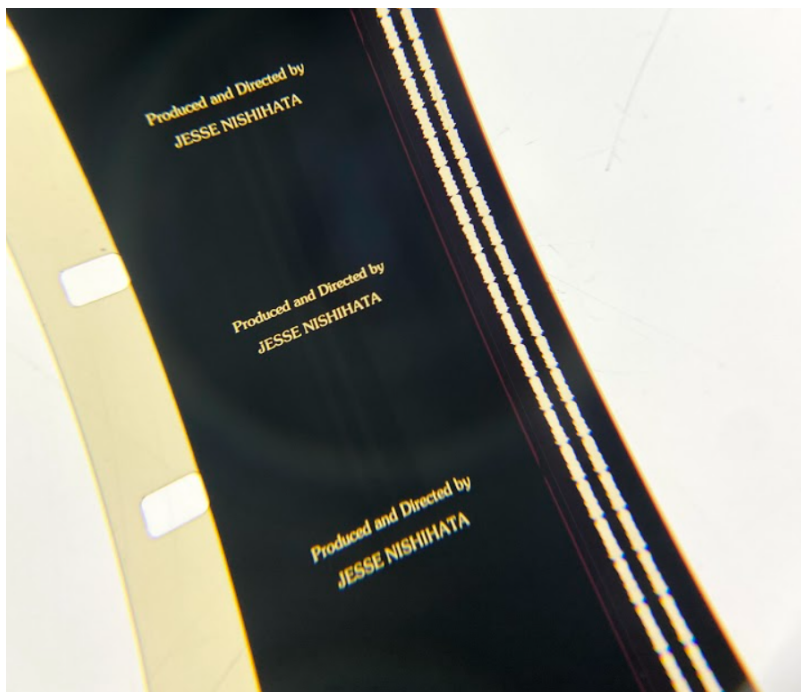
From 1966 to 1978, Jesse Nishihata worked as a contract producer with the CBC-TV Public Affairs Department. During this time, he produced and directed several programs and documentaries, including *Watari Dori: Bird of Passage* (1973) which explores Japanese Canadian experiences during WWII using Nishihata's own family history. Nishihata's seminal documentary *The Inquiry Film: A Report on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline* (1977), was also made during this period. The film is a precedent-shattering examination of Indigenous rights and economic development in Canada's North. *The Inquiry Film* earned Jesse the 1977 Canadian Film Award for Best Documentary over 60 Minutes.

From 1979 to 1995, Jesse worked as an instructor in film and media studies at the Image Arts Department at Ryerson University. It was during this period that Nishihata established himself as an independent filmmaker and served on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC). Some of his notable films from this period include *Black Earth* (1988) and *Justice in Our Time: How Redress Was Won* (1989) which documents the Japanese Canadian fight for Redress.

This online exhibition focuses on Jesse's work as an independent filmmaker. The documentary films from this period of his career explore several topics, including Indigenous rights, people with disabilities, and the fight for Redress of Japanese Canadians, etc. With his humanizing and empathetic lens, Jesse Nishihata's work shone a light on issues that remain very much relevant today.

In the foreword to the book *Powell Street Diary*, written by Jesse Nishihata and published posthumously, Junji Nishihata, son of Jesse, wrote that:

[...] Our most important struggles are not always the ones that sweep up the greatest numbers of people, or that pit nations against each other, or themselves. The most important struggles are the very small ones inside each of us, the ones that cannot be seen or felt by others, but which are nonetheless felt very, very deeply.



With this film program, I invite you to watch and listen to these struggles as shared by the people affected and masterfully told by Jesse Nishihata.

Curator
Yixun Zhang

Films in the Exhibition¹

***The Inquiry Film* (1977)**

Canada / 1:30:00 / sound / colour

Inquiry Films Limited

About the film

The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry (also known as the Berger Inquiry) was a precedent-shattering examination of Indigenous rights and economic development in Canada's North. The contentious issues brought out by the Inquiry are very much alive today as Southern Canada still seeks to exploit the resources of the North. *The Inquiry Film* documents and reveals the process of the Inquiry, and humanizes a complex political and national issue. (CFMDC catalogue)



Exhibition format

Digital file provided by CFMDC.²

¹ All films are directed by Jesse Nishihata unless otherwise specified.

² Film is not colour corrected.

***Open Circle* (1983)**

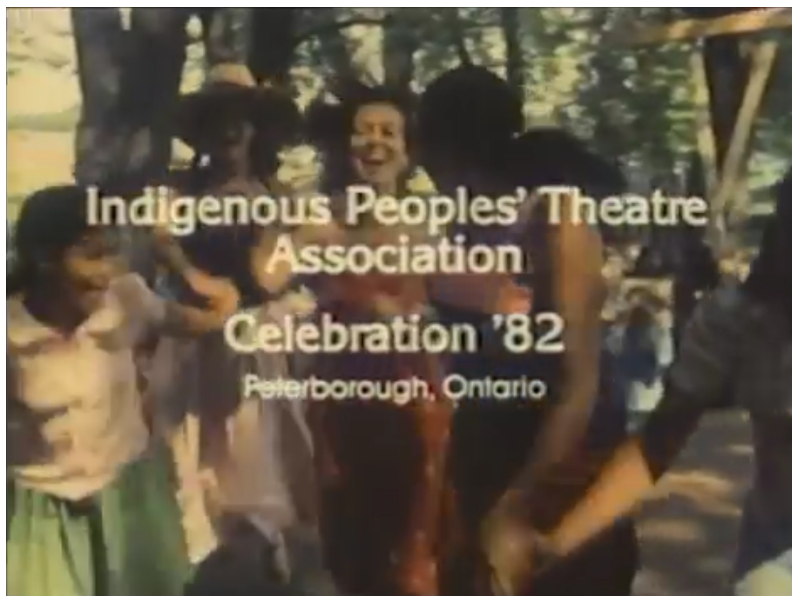
Canada/ 59:00 / sound / colour

Inquiry Films Ltd & Artech Films

About the film

Filmed at Indigenous Peoples' Theatre Association Celebration in 1982, *Open Circle* is a jubilant celebration and showcase of the talent of Indigenous performers around the world. The film documents several groups as they take centre stage at the Celebration.

(by Yixun Zhang)



Exhibition format

U-Matic tape provided by the Jesse Nishihata estate, digitized by Video Média Montréal.

***Tukak* (1984)**

Canada / 28:00 / sound / colour

Inquiry Films Ltd & Arto-Pelli Motion Pictures Inc.



About the film

Also filmed at the '82 Indigenous Peoples' Theatre Association Celebration, *Tukak* is a documentary short that focuses on one of the groups that participated in the Celebration—Tukak Teatret—an Inuit professional theatre company and theatre school concerned with the development of Inuit actors for theatre work in Greenland. (by Yixun Zhang)

Exhibition format

16mm film print, digitized with Lasergraphics ScanStation Personal

***A Nice Step to Take* (1985)**

Canada / 28:00 / sound / colour

Jesse Nishihata Productions

About the film

The radical change from an institutional residence to an apartment complex promoting independence sets the stage for this film about the people at Bellwoods Park House in Toronto. Founded in 1967 by the Adult Cerebral Palsy Institute, Bellwoods is one of the first residences for the disabled in North America. This film puts a face on people too often masked by our perception of disability. (CFMDC Catalogue)



Exhibition format

16mm film print, digitized with Lasergraphics ScanStation Personal

***Black Earth* (1988)**

Canada / 58:00 / sound / colour

Black Earth Films Inc.

Director: Vivian Darroch-Lozowski, Jesse Nishihata

About the film

Filmed on location in India, *Black Earth* is a film essay on the earth's body. The film follows a woman's journey through time and space. The film's images and utterances and sounds poetically resonate a world as woman, a woman suffering the fate of humanity. (CFMDC catalogue)



Exhibition Format

16mm film print, digitized with Lasergraphics ScanStation Personal

***Justice in Our Time: How Redress Was Won* (1989)**

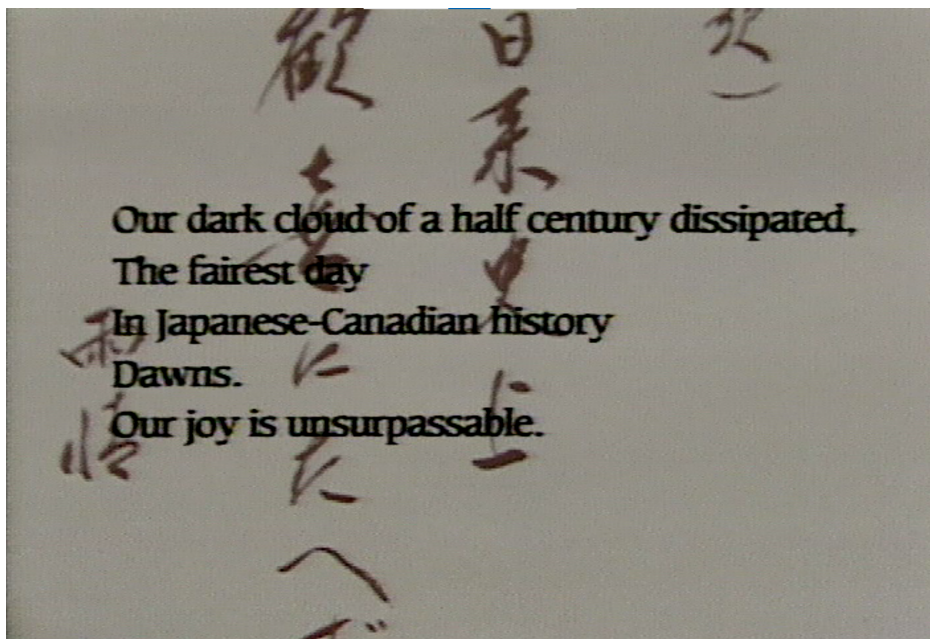
Canada / 30:00 / sound / colour

Jesse Nishihata Productions

About the film

The first film depicting the Japanese Canadian fight for Redress to be aired on Canadian TV, *Justice in Our Time* features interviews with key members of the movement and footage of signing the paper. From the historic injustices, through the Redress movement, to the final events leading up to the settlement—the dramatic story of Redress is told through a rich interweaving of commentaries and historic documents.

(by Yixun Zhang)



Exhibition Format

Digital file provided by the Jesse Nishihata estate

Jesse Nishihata Filmography

2002	<i>Showa Shinzan</i>	Co-writer
1991	<i>Skeena</i> (unfinished)	Producer/Director
1991	<i>Catch the Spirit!</i>	Producer/Director
1991	<i>Faces of Redress: Irene Tsuyuki</i>	
1988	<i>Justice in Our Time: How Redress Was Won</i>	Producer/Director
1988	<i>Black Earth</i>	Co-director
1985	<i>A Nice Step to Take</i>	Producer/Director
1984	<i>Tukak</i>	Co-producer/Director
1983	<i>Open Circle</i>	Co-producer/Director
1982	<i>Sifted Evidence</i>	Producer
1977	<i>The Inquiry Film</i>	Director
1976	<i>Writing Canadian</i>	Producer/Director
1975	<i>Orilla, Our Town</i>	Producer
1974	<i>Copernicus 500</i>	Producer/Director/Co-writer
1973	<i>Watari Dori: A Bird of Passage</i>	Producer/Director
1972	<i>Impressions of Canada</i>	Associate Producer/Director
1972	<i>Velikovsky: Bonds of the Past</i>	Producer/Co-writer
1971	<i>To Be Indian</i>	Producer/Director
1971	<i>China '71</i>	Producer
1970	<i>Life Game</i>	Producer
1967	<i>What They Want to Produce, Not What We Want to Become</i>	Producer/Director
1966	<i>Bird of Passage</i>	Co-writer
1964	<i>Mods and Rockers</i>	Researcher

Curator

Yixun Zhang is a second year student in Ryerson University's MA Film + Photography Preservation and Collections Management (F+PPCM) program. They have a BA (Hons) in Film Studies from University of Sussex. Zhang's research interests include Chinese language cinema, Asian diaspora filmmakers, 2SLGBTQ representation, etc. Zhang is currently in placement residency at Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC). Zhang's previous curatorial projects include *On This Land: Films from CFMDC* (co-curator)

<https://onthislandfppcm2021.wordpress.com/>

The curator would like to thank the following organizations and individuals:

The School of Image Arts, and the Faculty of Communication & Design, Ryerson University

Junji Nishihata

Masashi Crete-Nishihata

Akira Nishihata

Genne Speers, Jesse Brossoit, and Shannon Gagnon at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC)

Christina Stewart at University of Toronto, Media Commons Archive

Linda Kawamoto Reid at Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre

Louis Pelletier

Mark Loeser

The program guide is to accompany the [online exhibition](#) of the same name on June 14 - 24, 2021.

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June, 2021