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INTERVIEW SUBJECT: Robert Nakamura

Biography:

Born on July 6, 1937, in Venice, California, Bob Nakamura has been called “the Godfather of Asian American media.” A graduate of Art Center College of Design (B.A., 1966) and the UCLA Department of Motion Picture & Television Production (M.F.A., 1975), Nakamura has garnered more than 25 national awards for his films. His ground-breaking personal documentary *Manzanar* (1972) revisited painful childhood memories of incarceration in an American concentration camp during World War II, and it has been selected for major retrospectives on the documentary form at the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

In 1970, he founded Visual Communications, now the oldest community-based media arts center in the United States, where he continues to serve as a member of the Board of Directors. In 1996, he founded the UCLA Center for EthnoCommunications. In 1997, he and Karen Ishizuka founded the Media Arts Center of the Japanese American National Museum.

Nakamura's is the first recipient of the Steve Tatsukawa Memorial Award for outstanding achievement and leadership in Asian American media, and in 1994 the Asian Pacific American Coalition in Cinema, Theatre & Television of UCLA named the "Robert A. Nakamura Award" in his honor. In 1997, the Smithsonian Institute presented a retrospective of his work, and in 1999 he was named to the endowed chair in Japanese American studies at UCLA.

[Source: adapted from UCLA Asian American Studies Center's website]

Filmography:

Conversations: Before the War/After the War (1986, 16mm, color, sound, 30:00)

Hito-Hata: Raise the Banner (1980, 16mm, color, sound, 1:30)

Manzanar (1971, Super 8, color, sound, 16:00)

Wataridori: Birds of Passage (1976, 16mm, color, sound, 37:00)

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TAPE 1: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:36

ADAM HYMAN

All right, so first it is May 23, 2010 and we're filming with Robert Nakamura. And, oh, let's start with please say and spell your name.

00:00:51

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, Robert Nakamura. N-A-K-A-M-U-R-A.

00:00:57

ADAM HYMAN

Great, all right we're done.

00:01:00

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, okay good. [laugh] That wasn't too bad. [laugh]

00:01:03

ADAM HYMAN

No, tell me if you can at first tell me about where and when you were born and who else were the members of your family? And, what did your parents do and your siblings?

00:01:16

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay. I was born in Venice, California. And, my father was an immigrant from Japan. Actually, an undocumented immigrant, and my mother was a Nisei second generation Japanese American. And, I grew up in Atwater. We were kind of a buffer zone between kind of white working class neighborhood and a Latino neighborhood. I grew up probably more on the Latino side of the school that I went to.

00:02:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

When I was six years old--- it was 1941 the year that Pearl Harbor was bombed. I along with 110,000 other Japanese Americans were rounded up and we were all put into what we call America's concentration camps. We went to Manzanar, California. It's about 15 minutes north of Lone Pine. If you go to skiing to Mammoth you pass Manzanar all the time. So, should I continue there, or?

00:02:53

ADAM HYMAN

No, before you [unintelligible] tell me a little bit more about what are the names of your parents and your siblings?

00:02:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay.

00:02:59

ADAM HYMAN

What did your parents do professionally?

00:03:01

ROBERT NAKAMURA

My father was named George Harukichi Nakamura and my mother's name was Mary Kimiko Nakamura, or her maiden name was —Nitao. And, my dad when he came over was a gardener for a long time but, they saved up their money and they bought a prod--they bought a market in the Los Feliz area. My father was also a Judo instructor.

00:03:48

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, I kind of grew up, at least until I was six years old in that neighborhood.

00:03:54

ADAM HYMAN

What schools did you attend?

00:03:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I attended Chevy Chase Drive Elementary School. Mainly after the war then I went to Washington Irving Junior High School and then Marshall High School, so.

00:04:13

ADAM HYMAN

I went to Fairfax High.

00:04:14

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, okay.

00:04:15

ADAM HYMAN

Another local [unintelligible]

00:04:15

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay [laugh]

00:04:16

ADAM HYMAN

Gone wrong.

00:04:18

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah.

00:04:18

ADAM HYMAN

And, did you have any siblings?

00:04:21

ROBERT NAKAMURA

My brother was actually born in camp. His name is Norman and that's it.

00:04:31

ADAM HYMAN

And, just one more thing. So, do you have any other particular recollections of those years prior to going to Manzanar?

00:04:40

ROBERT NAKAMURA

As I said, we were kind of a buffer zone, so I actually had a lot of friends that were Latino. And, I had a lot of white friends who are working class white friends. And, for all intents and purposes, a very diverse neighborhood. And, in those days we played out in the streets. I just have a lot of good memories prior to the war. It was a nice place to grow up to be quite truthful,

00:05:16

ADAM HYMAN

What other, what else was Frog Town near there?

00:05:18

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Frog Town, Toonerville, yeah that whole area. There were gangs and everything, but not like gangs today. They just hung out as gangs. I wasn't a member, but if you're part of the hood, no one really bothered you, so.

00:05:42

ADAM HYMAN

So, you were still in that area just north of the L.A. River, you know the Atwater, Glendale?

00:05:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, yeah north yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:05:52

ADAM HYMAN

And, in all those early years and then while...that's getting ahead of myself. And, so what do you know of like what happened with your parents' market when you're forced to go...

00:06:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[overlapping] Okay. like a lot of people who had businesses, my father's assets were frozen. They couldn't draw any money out of the bank. And, of course he had to sell his inventory and the market at whatever price he could get. That was the same with everything else, we had to sell the house, and furniture and all of that. And, we could only take what we could carry. Essentially my parents lost everything.

00:06:54

ADAM HYMAN

And, prior to that, prior to Pearl Harbor was any sense or did you remember any incidences of, you know anti-Japanese behavior from the...

00:07:02

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[overlapping] No that's the--- I think partly because of the people who lived in my neighborhood--- both the Latino and the working class white people--- there was very little, if any bias at all that I could recall. We're all just part of the hood and it was a fairly diverse community. I had no problems at all. You know, that I could recall.

00:07:33

ADAM HYMAN

And, what do you recall then of just the move to Manzanar, what it was like?

00:07:38

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well, I recall the--well first right after Pearl Harbor there was a curfew. So, I know we did a lot of playing Monopoly and doing jigsaw puzzles. I remember my dad making these canvas bags because we could only take what we could carry. He made some very large ones and put our names on it. I remember riding in a greyhound bus in a long convoy---stopping at a gas station, so everyone could use the restroom. But, the owner of the gas station wouldn't let us use it. We had to drive on to another place. I really remember that

00:08:36

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

because I needed to go. [laugh] I remember turning into camp. We turned left and at that time, kind of symbolically there was a sandstorm. I remember the sand and going through the--passing by the kiosk and the guards. I remember distinctly having to make our own mattresses. They gave you a mattress cover and you had to stuff straw in it. I thought it was kind of neat, that's why I remember it.

00:09:12

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, the first night we had to stay with another family. I don't know what the barrack size was-- probably 10 by 10, or 10 by 15. It was kind of uncomfortable--- stay in a place with people we didn't know. So, so that's pretty much...well I do remember the lights from the guard towers. Because once again I thought they were kind of neat to see these lights. Remember I was six years old at the time. [laugh] So...

00:09:55

ADAM HYMAN

Children are able to find so often, you know the adventure and the new in whatever...

00:09:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Right.

00:09:59

ADAM HYMAN

Not the tragic circumstances...

00:10:00

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Right, right, right, yeah.

00:10:02

ADAM HYMAN

Do you remember how your parents explained this series of events to you?

00:10:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA

They just said we're going to move to a different place. And, they said, you know that a lot of Japanese are going to have to move. I can't recall if they mentioned the war. All I knew was that we had to leave, but that it wasn't going to be too bad because they'll be a lot of other Japanese American kids around. So, I think that's one of the reasons that as young kids the camp experience itself wasn't too bad. I don't want to say it wasn't bad. But, because my parents really tried to develop a sense of normalcy and order. they did a very good job of that.

00:11:02

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

It wasn't until I came out of camp that I really experienced overt racism. But, in camp we're all Japanese Americans and we didn't deal with the soldiers walking around or anything like that. I think due to my parents attitude it wasn't that fearful or traumatic in camp.

00:11:30

ADAM HYMAN

How else, how did the camp get organized for you? Obviously I don't mean the overall camp organization, but like did you go to school? What other events did you do and so forth?

00:11:43

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I went to school and the teachers were all volunteer Quakers. And, so the education wasn't bad, of course our classrooms were in barracks. And, had very little material until later. But, I went to school and everything was actually orderly [laugh] because we all ate in the mess hall. Someone would ring a bell at 6:00 in the morning and we all line up at the mess hall and have breakfast. And, at noon the same thing and dinner, you know so I always remember the long lines.

00:12:29

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So breakfast, lunch and dinner was very regular. School was regular and I had my duties like having to get--all the barracks were heated by kerosene stoves. So, one of my jobs was to go get the kerosene and bring it back. My parents let me have scorpions [laugh] and insects and, you know so they tried to keep it normal. So, there was a routine.

00:13:08

ADAM HYMAN

Why would you keep scorpions?

00:13:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, well there wasn't [laugh] too much else to do. So, there's grasshoppers and lizards and horned toads and scorpions. We'd go to the mess hall and they'd have these huge mayonnaise, empty mayonnaise jars that they would give to us. And, yeah there was scorpions all over the place, you just had to be a little careful.

00:13:35 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, how long were you there?

00:13:37 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

About three years,

00:13:40 **ADAM HYMAN**

When did the people from just shortly after the end of the war?

00:13:44 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

What pardon?

00:13:46 **ADAM HYMAN**

The camps were— people were released from the camps right after the end of the war?

00:13:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Actually, if you moved to the east coast or Midwest you could leave early. Japanese Americans were not allowed to move to the west coast till I think it was about 1945. So, if you moved— so we moved to Denver, Colorado. So, we got out a little early. And, we lived in Denver for a year then we were able to come back to L.A.

00:14:27 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, when you came back to L.A. what area did you move to?

00:14:30 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Back to the same area because we had friends in the neighborhood. And, we rented a house and eventually bought another house. But, it was always in that area.

00:14:47 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, did you meet friends at the camp who you still know, or did you remain friends with after the war?

00:14:53 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

In camp I made friends, but then we all scattered, when we left camp. So, I never really maintained any contact with my friends from camp. And, once again when we moved back most of my friends were Latino. It's kind of interesting because I went from my elementary school, Chevy Chase was predominantly Latino. And, then I went to Washington Irving Junior High School which was very diverse and I enjoyed that. And, then because I lived on the east side of the street, I went to Marshall High School which was a totally different experience. Because at that time the students were basically white Jewish Americans.

00:15:53 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

They had all professional— their parents were professionals. And, the academic [laugh] standards were much higher. So, it was like a real change for me. I think a change for the better, so...

00:16:11 **ADAM HYMAN**

How long did it take for you to adjust?

00:16:13 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Almost the [laugh] all three years. I had a journalism class I really liked. And, that's when I thought I would become a writer, or a journalist. Mainly because of the influence of my teacher Mr. Edwards. And, so that was my ambition at the time. And, it's interesting because we had counselors then. And, I had said I wanted to be a writer, or a news reporter. And, of course the counselor said well, maybe you should think of a trade..

00:17:07 **ADAM HYMAN**

So, did you sense— were you able at that time to develop right away a sense of whatever needing to resist that they were telling you to do in order to pursue what you wanted to pursue?

00:17:18 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Not really, I really wasn't aware of what the message was. But, I thought that you know I said well, I'm not really interested in doing that. But, I think a lot of it is— I'd have to kind of go back and as I said getting out of camp— Denver was fine when we left camp [at Manzanar], but coming back to L.A. was for me probably more traumatic than being in camp. I was not served in restaurants. I don't know how many times I was [called] “Jap” and all of that.

00:18:13 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, then going with my Cub Scout Den to Bimini Plunge right off of Vermont. We all went and everyone was buying their ticket. And, when they came to me they said we don't allow Orientals in the pool. so my Den, didn't go in and took me back home. But, I know after they took me back home they all went. But, probably it was things like that that really built up I think later kind of my anger and frustration. And, eventually kind of resistance to that whole experience and what was going on during the '60s and '70s.

00:19:12 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So, you have to remember the Nisei generation. Although I'm kind of a young Nisei, an average Nisei is second generation they're in their 80's and 90's now. A lot of the camp experience, what the camp experience did was to kind of reject everything Japanese. So, the Nisei generation because of the war really went into assimilating into society.

00:20:12 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

In fact, there was great article in NEWSWEEK in the early 70s' called WHITER THAN WHITE and that's generally speaking what Japanese Americans were doing because of the war experience. And, I know I did some of that, I got straight A's, I ran for school president. I was the editor of the newspaper and all of that. That was part of this drive to quote 'assimilate' and was kind of unconscious, you know but so getting back to your original question. There was no resistance, in fact I really wanted to assimilate and that's why part of our after the war experience was keeping the camps a big secret, right?

00:21:15 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Number one it was covered up by the government, number two the Nisei generation— after the war didn't really want to talk about it. It was like, you don't talk about a prison record, even if you were innocent. Occasionally I would hear people ask what block did you live in camp? But, basically the Nisei generation didn't talk about camp. And, I followed suit. That was something we never talked about. But, it was always there.

00:21:59 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

My ambition was to be [laugh] whiter than white. I'm sure although I wanted to work on a newspaper and be a journalist.

00:22:08 **ADAM HYMAN**

That's also a very standard, of course immigrant process, right? The children have their parents come here, generally their children go full force for assimilation...

00:22:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Right, right yeah and so.

00:22:21 **ADAM HYMAN**

Back to Manzanar for a bit...

00:22:23 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah.

00:22:24 **ADAM HYMAN**

Did your family end up in its own cabin? Did people have their own...

00:22:29 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

[overlapping] Oh, it's a long they're like typical army barracks except during that period they're made out of wood and then covered with tar paper. And, it's divided into three sections and I think it had 10 by 15 in each family— depending on the number in your family— had one. They called them apartments. I refuse to use that word. And, so there were like four families living in one long barrack.

00:23:06 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, how many people were at Manzanar?

00:23:09 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

10,000, 11,000.

00:23:11 **ADAM HYMAN**

It was a lot of barracks?

00:23:12 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, a lot of barracks and, you know once again it's very it's set up just like a military camp. You had fire breaks and barracks lined up into blocks and one mess hall for each block. You had the toilet facilities right in the center. And, you know there's very little privacy. You could hold hands with the person next to you in the latrines. We had communal showers and all of that. So, it was pretty much like a military set up.

00:23:47 **ADAM HYMAN**

Did the military run the mess hall as well? Who did the cooking?

00:23:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

They did at the beginning, but after awhile the government, the WR— the World War, the War Relocation... well WRA [War Relocation Authority]— t tried to run it as a kind of a city. We had kind of volunteer fire department and even kind of police people that didn't carry guns, obviously. The mess halls were run by the inmates themselves. And, eventually we raised our own vegetables and established hog and cattle ranches. So, it became kind of self-sufficient. but the food at the beginning was awful. It was pretty much army food. And, you ate in these metal trays and these kind of aluminum canteen cups..

00:24:55 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, I really remember that because I thought the canteens were really neat. So... [laugh]

00:25:02 **ADAM HYMAN**

How much Japanese food got incorporated into the meal?

00:25:05 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

There was— except for rice occasionally there was... I can't recall anything. Later, people would take vegetables and pickled them Japanese style. But, essentially we ate a lot of Spam, Vienna sausages and things like that

00:25:32 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, then briefly what was Denver then like?

00:25:36

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Denver was fine. on the west coast there was quite a few Asians, right and wherever there's a high density, high population that's when there's more overt racism. But, in Denver we're so few I think we didn't threaten anyone. So, Denver was quite pleasant, we didn't experience anything, any kind of overt racism at all. Only coming back to L.A., .

00:26:16

ADAM HYMAN

And, when you came back to L.A. what sort of work did your parents...

00:26:20

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well, they had lost the store. So, my father had to start over again. We drove from Denver in an old Chevy coupe. He cut the trunk door off and made a kind of a pickup, yeah his own pickup truck, bought some gardening tools and just started back with what he started out with. My mom took in laundry. They started from scratch. My dad never went into market or produce again. The camp experience really affected my father.

00:27:17

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

He said he just didn't have the energy to start all over again. At the time (during WWII) he was on top of the world. You know he had the store. It was very successful. He had four trucks and all of this. And, being wiped out was just something that took the wind out of him

00:27:48

ADAM HYMAN

All right I'll go back to...

00:27:49

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Sure.

00:27:50

ADAM HYMAN

Marshall then. And then so before I ask this do you remember at what point there where you started coming into like an artistic consciousness?

00:28:00

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, yeah...

00:28:02

ADAM HYMAN

Or, when did that happen I should ask?

00:28:04

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I think it was, well earlier, early on probably in junior high school because of another teacher I became interested in creative writing. I did some poetry. A I wanted to be a short story writer. And, I always took a lot of still photographs. I loved photography at that time. Later in high school, because of Mr. Edwards my journalism teacher, I decided maybe I like being a newspaper reporter, writer.

00:28:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, during high school I began to work at the old L.A. EXAMINER and that's before it became the HERALD EXAMINER. The EXAMINER was on 11th and Broadway and was of the last old time newspapers that you see in the movies in the 1940's, where they had a City Desk and you'd shoot the copy through these vacuum tubes down to the press room. I worked as a copy boy. First, I worked writing high school sports for them on kind of a volunteer basis. And, later, you always had to start as a copy boy. I got a job as a copy boy and just stayed there for a couple of years until I started hanging out with the press photographers more than I did the reporters.

00:29:49 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

I'd go on news assignments with them. So, I became actually a lot more interested in photography. Then a friend and I took an evening course at Art Center College of Design. I really, really liked it. The night course was a portraiture class and one of the instructors thought I did some good work and so he encouraged me to become a full time student.

00:30:44 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**
00:30:55 **ADAM HYMAN**

So, fill in a couple of quick facts here. When did you graduate from high school?

00:30:59 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

1953. [laugh] I have verify things like that .., '53 or '54. [RN: 1954]

00:31:07 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, were you working as a copy boy at the EXAMINER during high school, or was it just after high school?

00:31:12 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

During high school it was a volunteer kind of thing. They had a program for high school students to cover high school sports. So, I would cover our Marshall games and report it in. Sometimes being able to even go to the paper and stay at the sports desk and do all that, you know?

00:31:33 **ADAM HYMAN**

So, how many years are we talking about that you were working just in like the newspaper, photos, and so forth those types of...

00:31:43 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Let's see it was about two years or less. I enjoyed working at the paper. I mean for a young kid straight out of high school it was very exciting and also there was kind of a very liberal atmosphere at the newspaper because reporters and everyone considered themselves— what is it the Fourth Estate or?

00:32:08

ADAM HYMAN

Fifth Estate.

00:32:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah.

00:32:10

ADAM HYMAN

Is it the Fifth Estate? No journalism was the...journalism is the Fourth or the Fifth? [Editor's Note: Journalism is the Fourth Estate.]

00:32:13

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I didn't have to deal with being Japanese American and everything. It was a great atmosphere I really enjoyed that.

00:32:49

ADAM HYMAN

So, when did you then really start going to Art Center?

00:32:58

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[laugh] Let's see... '57 I think... '56, '57. I'm sorry this...[RN: 1955 to 1957]

00:33:08

ADAM HYMAN

It's fine.

00:33:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA

This is when [laugh] when the dates get all— it's yeah.

00:33:13

ADAM HYMAN

So, what was Art Center at that time?

00:33:15

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Art Center was cool. It was a good place. It was small and they prided themselves on having working professionals--- which was true. So, you had less, quote “teachers and professors.” You had more people who are out in the field and they come in and they teach for a semester or two. Art Center was a great place especially if you're going into advertising or commercial photography. I still had that newspaper or writer's bent so I majored in photo journalism and minored in advertising design. My photo journalism instructor was Will Connell who was, during his day, was a very well known magazine photographer.

00:34:21

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So that was where I could combine both the writing and photography. Art Center has pluses and minuses. I think on one hand they gave you really good technical training. But, they kind of pooh poohed the fine arts because they were a commercial art place. So, I had to learn, unlearn a lot of things in terms of art theory and approach after I got out of school. But, what they did give you was a sense of professionalism, of being precise— meeting deadlines, technique, you know, essentially being a professional person.

00:35:18 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Art Center always— you know there was a lot of negative things about their attitude toward content and everything. But, they were very good in terms of training you professionally.

00:35:35 **ADAM HYMAN**

Where was it physically at that time?

00:35:37 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

It was...

00:35:38 **ADAM HYMAN**

What was the physical plant?

00:35:39 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

It's now a girl's school, the old campus, and it was on Highland— on Third Street near Highland just a block down. There's I think it's a girl's school now on Third and Highland, down...

00:35:57 **ADAM HYMAN**

Echo Park?

00:36:00 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

No, no this is...

00:36:01 **ADAM HYMAN**

Pasadena still?

00:36:02 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

No, no.

00:36:03 **MARK SKONER**

No, no there's a school there. Notice next time you go down...

00:36:06 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

What area? It's one of those grey areas...

00:36:03 **MARK SKONER**

It's like one of those grey areas. It's between Echo Park and something.

00:36:17 **ADAM HYMAN**

When did it move to Pasadena?

00:36:19 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

So, Art Center was, you know much a smaller campus. And, I think we got better education because we took all the other art classes--- because all the classes were small. And, that was their attitude--- we should have a background in, all parts of commercial art and design.

00:37:02

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, I mean I went to junior high at John Burroughs, which is at Sixth and Las Palmas.

00:37:07

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Uh, huh.

00:37:07

ADAM HYMAN

Four blocks from Third and Highland. [interviewer laughs] I can't recall any girls' school... [non-interview dialogue]

00:37:41

ADAM HYMAN (CONTINUED)

And, what else do you recall— so how many years were you at Art Center?

00:37:46

ROBERT NAKAMURA

It was a two year curriculum for a B.F.A., Bachelor of Fine Arts. So, it was two years.

00:37:55

ADAM HYMAN

Oh, so did you do any other whatever, college education anywhere else?

00:38:03

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, later in 1970 I went to UCLA Film School.

00:38:15

ADAM HYMAN

Oh, we'll get to that.

00:38:14

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, yeah.

00:38:17

ADAM HYMAN

So, I'm trying to round out about Art Center. Because I was thinking I would've had you as a graduate of Art Center College of Design of 1966. [Ed: this refers to Nakamura's CV, which refers to him graduating from Art Center in 1966.]

00:38:26

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh. [laugh]

00:38:26

ADAM HYMAN

Is that correct?

00:38:27

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, I guess so. I'm sorry, yeah my date is '66. I guess so. I guess I got out of high school in '54. Maybe I worked at the EXAMINER longer than I thought. I'm sorry. [laugh] So, you're going to have to look up all of the...

00:38:46

ADAM HYMAN

I just want to verify which is, yeah.

00:38:48

ROBERT NAKAMURA

So maybe I was at the EXAMINER a lot longer. And— oh I'm sorry now, that's okay I know. I got tired of Art Center, okay, and I had fulfilled all my credits except for a couple Art History, Photo Science courses and things that I hated. And, so I got a certification of completion. And, then later I went back and by that time I had gone to UCLA for a while. And, I just petitioned to get my formal degree. Now, that's why '66, okay.

00:39:35

ADAM HYMAN

Okay, that's the actual degree date.

00:39:39

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, yeah.

00:39:39

ADAM HYMAN

So, do you remember any... [technical] Okay, so just briefly...

00:39:45

ROBERT NAKAMURA

See, I'm glad you're doing this now I'm remembering [laugh] all this stuff.

00:39:50

ADAM HYMAN

So, do you remember any other significant professors to you at Art Center?

00:39:53

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, yeah like Will Connell was probably the most influential. But, then there was a Charles Potts who eventually became the director of— the dean or director of the Art Center Photography Department years later. He was the lighting instructor and I just learned so much from him in terms of light and the fact that everything we worked with photographically is really based on light and mood. He was very, very influential. And, then there was Wally McGalliard who taught color printing. Who I later worked for as a color printer.

00:40:51

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

But, he gave me a very nice appreciation of what I call the 'real color,' not the real garish stuff that we see today So, those three were very influential.

00:41:04

ADAM HYMAN

And, do you remember— but there's still focusing really like the professional aspects of those three also sort of pooh pooh artistic aspirations?

00:41:13

ROBERT NAKAMURA

No, like McGalliard— he's very open to anything. He was just a fanatic on color regardless of, you know what it was used for. Will Connell was essentially a photo journalist magazine photographer. So, he was very straightforward. It was just a general tone of the school.

00:41:59

ADAM HYMAN

You were probably [primarily] interested at that time was photo-journalism am I right?

00:42:01

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[END OF TAPE 1]

TAPE 2: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:56

ADAM HYMAN

So, tell me about like so then right after you finished like your real instruction at Art Center, you know late '50s what did you move on to?

00:01:04

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I became— essentially I freelanced, did magazine work. And, once again I should back up— as a photo journalist major and even when I was working at the newspaper I was very influenced by the Farm Security Administration's photographers, Gordon Parks, Walker Evans and then also LIFE magazine with W. Eugene Smith and the whole idea of photo essays. So that's why part of the reason--- why I went to Art Center because I thought that was the way to go. It wasn't newspaper work--- which is like one shot. But, they actually do picture stories was I thought was really great.

00:02:02

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, so as a photo journalist major, we did, kind of magazine stuff. But, we did a lot of photo essays and I did one on my father, kind of the day and the life of a gardener. I did one on my cousin who immigrated from Japan. So, I did a lot of those things. I enjoyed doing that kind of work and so I freelanced. And, actually I didn't do too badly. I was able to earn a living.

00:02:46

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

That's what I did right after Art Center. But, as everything else it was hard to earn a living, I mean a real living as a freelancer. I was just thinking of switching over to advertising when I got drafted. And, so I spent a couple of years in Europe and came back looking for a job and someone said this guy Charles Eames was looking for a photographer. And, I didn't realize it was the Charles Eames who kind of revolutionized modern furniture and architectural design.

00:03:42

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, I went there with my portfolio and my suit on--- not really— I just knew that Charles was a furniture designer. I didn't realize he made films and did all this other stuff and it's a funny story. I'm there with my Art Center portfolio and my suit on the studio is in Venice area just right off of Washington. And, it was an old auto repair facility, it was huge and there was a little vacant lot right next to it. I saw this old guy with his shirt off eating a sandwich.

00:04:25 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

I asked him is this the Charles Eames office? And, he said yes, go in there. So I went in there and I said oh, I have an appointment with Charles Eames, you know about this job. And, she said oh, yeah Charles is [laugh] out in the— having lunch outside. The old guy with his shirt off turned out to be Charles. So, out in the lot he looked at my portfolio— he didn't really look at it too much. He looked at my portfolio and he said, why don't you come in tomorrow.

00:05:01 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

You can start and come dressed for work. I had my suit and tie on. And, so I started working there for a couple, three years, you know which that was probably, in terms of my career and approach to the process of photography and film...I don't know. I was probably most influenced working with Ray and Charles. You know because I had never been exposed to a place where form and function, and art and function kind of blended in. don't deal with that.

00:05:51 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Charles melded both function and form. And, so I just learned a lot in that approach. Like he made a big thing about not hiring experts. He said experts know too much, or they think too, or they know too much. So, even when we started doing.. animation work, he started from scratch.. didn't hire anyone. And, so all of his projects was kind of staff, the same staff did everything. In fact, the next day that I started I was shooting [laugh] 16 millimeter and I had never touched a motion picture camera at all.

00:06:40 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

I was shooting the first day. And, the other times I'd be shooting stills and the next time I'd be building, working building a set. And, so the staff there kind of did everything. that was his approach. we all became whatever needed to be done we would learn. And, do it, and so we were much freer in our approach. Because we didn't know anything. that was his philosophy which, I thought was really good. And, he was totally into this approach to aesthetics and the arts. I had always learned from...

00:07:34 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Art Center that you know there were certain compositional rules and color harmony. And, then Charles said you know we don't do that here. We do what we want. Even his dishes and all things were eclectic, you know? He didn't have any matching cups or anything, just everything was— he had this great attitude of, you know— but at the same time, you know his approach was function first and then that function would dictate the form.

00:08:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, so anyway, that's where I think I got my approach to art was at the Eames office and so.

00:08:32 **MARK SKONER**

Do you remember which films you worked on?

00:08:38 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, sure.

00:08:39 **ADAM HYMAN**

Actually I want to do— in a minute we're going to ask you that and we'll go on to this [unintelligible] for a bit, because I actually had somebody else... Let me ask you this. So, who else was at the Eames office in the years? First, can you try to remember what years you were at Eames office? And, then...

00:08:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

[laugh]

00:08:52 **ADAM HYMAN**

Was it early 60's we're talking about?

00:08:54 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, it had to be the early 60's. [RN: Working for Charles Eames: 1961-1963]

00:08:58 **ADAM HYMAN**

Who else was working there at that time?

00:08:59 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

There was a Parke Meek, oh boy I am so bad at names. Parke Meek, it'll come to me tonight sometime. I, you know... [RN: Parke Meek, John Neuhart, Bob Staples, Deborah Susman, Gordan Ashby, Glen Fleck, Archer Goodwin, Dorothy Danziger, Yu Yoshioka, Kaz Higa and Dick Donges]

00:09:19 **ADAM HYMAN**

Well, we'll go onto the films question maybe it'll...

00:09:21 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, okay.

00:09:22 **ADAM HYMAN**

A name will come to you or something.

00:09:23 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

00:10:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

. So, I came in at the beginning of the Seattle World's Fair Science Pavilion. [RN: Worked on multiscreen film called HOUSE OF SCIENCE] There was a lot of animation in that.. And, then at the same time was the Mathematica: A World of Numbers...and Beyond exhibit. That was a major show for IBM.

[RN: Also worked on: MATHEMATICA PEEP SHOWS, THE GOOD YEARS (a film for CBS television), IBM FAIR PRESENTATION #1 AND #2. Furniture design at that time: La Fonda Chair, Tandem Sling Seating, Tandem Shell Seating, and Eames Contract Storage (ECS).]

00:11:03 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

We must have worked on that forever. That was real interesting. And we were always on furniture design and testing out new things. We did a lot of experimental things that never made it to film. Like I did a whole bunch of experiments of— I mean I executed a lot of things that he wanted. He was going to do a whole piece on negative space. And, so we did a lot of work on that, but it never reached... it never made it as a film.

00:11:51 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So, but he had already done HOUSE—AFTER FIVE YEARS OF LIVING and BLACKTOP, DAY OF THE DEAD and TOCCATA FOR TOY TRAINS ...so, a lot of the films that he's now known for was before my time. Most of the things he was doing were not films per se, but using a multi-screen projection. I worked on one for the New York World's Fair. When I left they were just doing NEHRU: HIS LIFE AND HIS INDIA exhibit. And, you know once again there was just a lot of other things going on. But, it was a great place. And, I left primarily because once you become an Eames staff person you're like a monk. I mean that's it... seven days a week, 12 hours a day.

00:13:01 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

I mean you had absolutely no social life whatsoever and that was beginning to take its toll on me. You know I was a young guy. I'd just drive from my apartment to Eames office and back and I'd throw my paychecks into this drawer until it filled up. And, then I'd take them to the bank. I mean that's how— [laugh] I didn't do anything else. [Knocking on door; recorder off]

00:14:10 **ADAM HYMAN**

Who, okay so who's the person you're about to mention?

00:14:12 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, a designer Debra Sussman and I'm blanking, yeah.

00:14:25 **ADAM HYMAN**

That's okay. And, so when you're doing magazine photography prior to that what sort of things did you mean...by what sort of topics or things...

00:14:37

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[overlapping] It was anything that I could make money on. And, that's probably one reason, besides not making enough money it was very unsatisfying because the stories that would sell... I did some things for a lot of small magazines like PARADE and WESTWAYS. I would occasionally get something in MCCALL'S or COLLIER'S. But, they were just stories that I wasn't very interested in. A lot of bread and butter stuff about guys who built Eiffel Towers with toothpicks, you know just yeah, so I decided that real picture stories, or the essays that I really wanted to do were—

00:15:29

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, which kind of reflects into the future... a lot the things that I wanted to do were about Japanese Americans and there definitely wasn't a market for it. So, I gave it up.

00:15:43

ADAM HYMAN

Was there any, did you have you difficulties in any of those areas being Japanese American...?

00:15:52

ROBERT NAKAMURA

You know oddly enough no I didn't. Yeah.

00:15:56

ADAM HYMAN

I'm sorry I asked it poorly, yeah tell me what you were talking about...

00:16:01

ROBERT NAKAMURA

You mean about my magazine work or?

00:16:04

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, and what the topic was because I asked it as a yes, no question which is...

00:16:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[overlapping] Yeah, its topics were... I did a couple of pieces. I got into LIFE magazine, they did a whole special issue on photography. I did a piece on Camera Day at the Coliseum Rose Garden. I got some really nice shots of elderly ladies shooting this and that. You know, so it was that kind of thing. I did a piece on a street theater.. they were USC students who went into various neighborhoods and did kind of street theater. It was just generally not very satisfying.

00:16:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

You know it's that same old story of “ I'll do this to earn a living, but on the weekend I'm going to do the real stuff” and somehow on the weekend you never did.

00:17:14

ADAM HYMAN

So, then prior to going to work with at Eames studio could you give a bit more sense of like, did you have any other sort of artistic exploration that you were able to? What were you learning about what other people were doing?

00:17:30

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Let's see. LIFE magazine and the Magnum, the picture agency and Robert Kappa and all of the others that worked for Magnum. Edward Steichen had done a magnificent exhibit called The Family of Man. I just loved the universality of it and the kind of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural view of the world.

00:18:21

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, yeah I have to if I dig around [laugh] think about these things. But, the Steichen exhibit was something that I really liked. And, the work of...

00:18:32

ADAM HYMAN

Was that installed in L.A. at all, or did you go see it in New York?

00:18:36

ROBERT NAKAMURA

No, I got the book, yeah but I never did— I saw some prints they did a smaller version of it at...I forgot where. But, no I was never able to see the exhibit, the real exhibit.

00:18:55

ADAM HYMAN

Because that exhibit has like this legendary stature.

00:18:57

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, yeah and it was exactly what I wanted to do. You know... cultural universals and related to race and culture and... anyway that was a big influence. The work of [Henri] Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank and Werner Bischof, plus Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and all of the FSA [Farmland Security Administration] photographers. And, so there was always a bent toward the essay which eventually I'm sure translated into film. But, at that time I really saw myself as continuing on as a photo journalist, or a photo essayist.

00:20:03

ADAM HYMAN

I want to go back to Eames in a moment, but tell me briefly a bit more about your army service.

00:20:08

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Being in the service?

00:20:09

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, what years, where exactly were you stationed and what job did you have?

00:20:14

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, God the years— I'm going to have to look up. [RN: 1959-1961] I was drafted and I had basic training at Fort Ord. I had graduated from Art Center. And, they said oh, this is really good, so we're going to give you a job an MOS... a job category as photographer. And, we will send you to Army Signal Corps School in Fort Mammoth, New Jersey. I said I've just spent two years in [laugh] photo school. Why are you sending me to a 16 week photo course?

00:21:17

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, I spent a couple, three months in the Signal Corps Photo School and, oh, is that.... [non-interview dialogue]

00:21:42

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, so I was in this unique position of probably having more education, photo education than my instructor. I slept through photo school there and, graduated top of my class, you know which was not that difficult. That gave me choice of post, and so that's how I ended up Europe teaching photography...essentially as part of an aerial reconnaissance unit.

00:22:28

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, that was before Vietnam. And, so actually I had an enjoyable time because I was able to travel through Europe. Although the Cold War got hot. Occasionally, we'd have to run around with real ammunition in our rifles. Am I giving you too much detail? Oh, okay.

00:23:01

ADAM HYMAN

I still want to know where you were stationed.

00:23:02

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, oh, Kaiserslautern, Germany and we called it the arm pit of Germany... because the town of Kaiserslautern had 500 bars and two churches. You know it was a G.I. town. We were an aerial reconnaissance unit and in those days they would have annual flyovers over Europe and we would remap all of Europe every summer and of course they would shoot oblique angles into Russia and it was top secret and all that kind of stuff. So, it was kind of interesting work.

00:24:00

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

I was able to go from place to place to teach photography. So, I had a very, very good time there.

00:24:10

ADAM HYMAN

Were you there before the Berlin Wall was...

00:24:13

ROBERT NAKAMURA

No, no the wall was up. [RN: Wall went up in August 1961. I was discharged in December '61.]

00:24:15

ADAM HYMAN

The wall was up already?

00:24:15

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah.

00:24:17

ADAM HYMAN

During the 60's.

00:24:18

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, it came...my times.

00:24:24

ADAM HYMAN

Okay, so back to the Eames office. What sort of...how many people were working at the Eames office?

00:24:30

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, the core production staff would be one, two, three...about five people, six and then people would be hired on project basis.

00:24:46

ADAM HYMAN

And, what were you?

00:24:46

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I was the darkroom person, still person and that was before I became really became interested in film. I always saw myself as a still photographer. And, I shoot things and I never really edited, but it was very interesting to see, to shoot film and see it edited. But, basically I worked in dark, I did all the darkroom work. And, a lot of still work. We did everything anyway, but that's my job description.

00:25:31

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

I shot quite a bit of film. And, worked on— I, worked on short pieces for Mathematica. that's where I saw a lot of Charles and Ray's films. especially TOCCATA FOR TOY TRAINS. You know it was just amazing, I just never saw anything like that. the idea of not having narration, just using these toys to create its own universe, its own world.

00:26:24 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Although I had some of this detail professionalism in Art Center. I mean Charles and Ray just carried it to this extreme like just for one shot in TOY TRAINS Charles explained to me.. you know was the train coming toward the camera... then it went through the engine and through the firebox, through the cab— it went through the whole train— and they did it with panes of glass. I mean it took like four weeks just to do that one shot. So, I got a real sense of this kind of meticulous work that required doing really nice work.

00:27:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So, I think I took that from the Eames office...once again the whole idea of the best way to break rules is not to know the rules at all.

00:27:43 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, in that period that both Eames studio and immediately thereafter were you doing any showings to— what film going were you doing?

00:27:52 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Boy.

00:27:54 **ADAM HYMAN**

Is there anything that rings a bell?

00:27:56 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

I was mainly interested in still work and besides going to the normal feature films...I didn't really see a whole lot. I saw some of the early British Documentary Movement., a social change movement— anyway like NIGHT MAIL, and SONG OF Celyon So, I had seen a lot of those, but they were, for me, very related to the photo essays that I was interested in.

00:28:43 **ADAM HYMAN**

That's fine. John Grierson.

00:28:46 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, yeah okay see the names come up, so, yeah Grierson.

00:28:55 **ADAM HYMAN**

So, how many years...forget the how many years. When you left the Eames office what did you do?

00:29:02 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

I left for two reasons you know once again...[non-interview dialogue]

00:29:15 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Burnt out and essentially it's either my career would be— I would devote the [laugh] rest of my life to working at Eames... which I could do worse. Or, leaving and doing what I wanted to do. Because the work at Eames was never dull. You know his philosophy was if he's near the end of a project he would start another one or he would have many projects going on at once...there was never be this kind of postpartum blues. He'd just segue into something else— so that's the kind of pace. So, I decided, you know I can't do this anymore.

00:30:03 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, so I and friend of mine partnered and opened our own advertising or, advertising/commercial photo studio. I thought I might as well if I'm going to do things that I don't want to do... I might as well make a lot of money. He handled most of the business part of it and all of the dealing with agencies and, I did most of the photography. And, we did okay. And, we did a lot of food photography. We did some local automobile stuff.

00:30:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, actually one of our big, big clients was Blue Chip Stamps do you remember Blue Chips? We did catalogs for them. We did a lot of furniture, not very exciting. But, we actually did quite well financially. And...

00:31:10 **ADAM HYMAN**

What was your office called?

00:31:13 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Paxton and Nakamura Photography. [laugh]

00:31:16 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, your partner was?

00:31:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

George Paxton, yeah. An old high school friend of mine. He didn't go to Art Center, or didn't really have a— he didn't have a photographic background, but he had good business background. We decided to open up, that went on for awhile.. well not that long. And, that's when I guess I had this early midlife crisis. I forgot how old I was, but not very old. I asked what am I doing [laugh] with my life? And, going back to a lot of the racism I experienced as a child

00:35:52 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Any time I made a comment people got really hostile to me. And, I figured well, gee maybe I'm older than everybody... I couldn't figure out what it was.— and later people who became my friends said it was because you wore a corduroy jacket and white shoes. [laugh] You know it was the way I was dressed that I received all this hostility. So, I dug out my old fatigue jackets and let my hair grow long. That was my introduction to the Movement.

00:36:42 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, I had designed— someone from the JACL, actually Bob Suzuki who was...

00:36:52 **ADAM HYMAN**

Tell me and spell out the JACL?

00:36:54 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Japanese American Citizens League. There was a USC professor— Bob Suzuki. And, he had these photographs of camp. Remember no one talked about camp. We've never really seen any photographs of camp. But, oh, since this is an oral history I think he got them from Raymond Uno in San Francisco who was quite an activist in the Bay area. It was amazing I had never seen these photos before.. some shots were of Manzanar.

00:37:43 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, they said the JACL is going to launch a campaign against Title II of the McCarran Act which essentially allowed the government to put anyone they wanted into camps again. And, there was a lot of talk about putting Black Panthers into camp. So, the L.A. Chapter of the Japanese American Citizen League and some other people wanted to raise money in order to campaign against— remove the Title II of the McCarran Act. So, Professor Bob Suzuki said we have these photographs, can you frame them, you know, since you went to Art Center, [laugh] can you frame them? Or do something? They just wanted to hang them up.

00:38:38 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, I was so enthralled with the photographs I'm not going to put them en masse and just hang them up. So, I got the idea of doing a sculpture. And, so we put these photographs on these black cubes. And, you can stack them anyway you wanted to and still say something about WWII and the Japanese American experience. We made about five of them that travelled throughout the country. I think that's back to Charles again and his approach. You know I said to myself well, I don't want to put these in frames what can we do instead?

00:39:27 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, somehow that idea of making a sculpture out of it, came to mind. And, I didn't know how to do it, but we experimented. . It was very successful because that's the first time people had really seen images of camp. You know in some cases people said forget it. Why are you bringing this stuff up again? Other people said we whitewashed it. The camp was really worse than the way it was depicted. We even had bomb threats, but it really brought the idea of camp, into everyone's consciousness again.

00:40:26 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So, that was kind of our first VC [Ed: Visual Communications] project. I worked on it with one of the founding members Alan Ohashi who was a photographer and graphics person. But, we did that before we were even in film school. So, that was kind of the beginnings of Visual Communications. But, where the VC really began to become, oh, I'm going to have to take a drink. [non-interview dialogue]

[END OF TAPE 2]

TAPE 3: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:26

ADAM HYMAN

So, tell me, describe for me more about the Japanese American Citizens League?

00:00:34

ROBERT NAKAMURA

The Japanese American Citizens League, and I don't know the date when they started. But, essentially that was the national Japanese American organization and it's been kind of controversial in some ways. But, it's the oldest Japanese American organization. And, they have chapters in various parts of, mostly on the west coast at least in the early days. And, they have a convention every year. And, then they have their own newspaper. But, it's basically a Nisei second generation organization

00:01:37

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

They were kind of controversial during the World War II because they supported Japanese Americans — I'm generalizing there, but there was one faction within JACL who said that we should go to camp to support the war effort. And, so that's all that was something they had to live down after the war. And, it's basically a somewhat conservative organization.. more social than anything else. Until we get into maybe the 70's then more activists begin to come into JACL and tried to organize it as a more of a political entity than and the kind of social thing that it was.

00:02:40

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, when we did the cube exhibit that's where the L.A. JACL... a few members wanted to run a campaign against the Title II of the McCarran and all of that.

00:02:56

ADAM HYMAN

And, where would that exhibit— well tell me the name of the photo thing on tape.

00:03:00

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, it's called, the exhibit was called American's Concentration Camps.

00:03:07

ADAM HYMAN

Is that the camp cube's photo display?

00:03:08

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:03:10

ADAM HYMAN

And, where was that displayed in Los Angeles?

00:03:12

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Everywhere which was really, really neat. It was in oh, let's see Japanese American cultural centers, churches, everywhere. It was— the base you could store all the cubes into the base. So, it became one unit and we could haul that case around and then take all the cubes out and stack them up. We had a little diagram on stacking, or you can stack them up any way you wanted to. So, it went all over. And, we had made a second one for the Bay area and then a third one for Chicago. We made I think five of those exhibits.

00:04:03

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, around L.A. anytime we had an event certain chapters of JACL would use it. Other chapters wouldn't touch it with a 10 foot pole. But, as the Asian American Movement began to really take form in L.A. we used it for everything because the concentration camp experience became kind of an icon for the Movement, at least locally. And, so the exhibit was used quite a bit.

00:04:46

ADAM HYMAN

The actual prints, the photo prints that were in the exhibit were how large?

00:04:51

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Let's see.

00:04:53

ADAM HYMAN

Was it 8 by 10?

00:04:55

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, it was a square so I did an 11 by 14, I think 10 by 10 yeah, if I can...

00:05:01

ADAM HYMAN

And, where is it now?

00:05:04

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I don't know. We only have one kind of tattered version of it at VCs somewhere in— and yeah, there's— I didn't [laugh] think they'd last that long. Because they're essentially plywood and regular photo mounted prints inset in it. And, I and I never thought they would last this long, so.

00:05:29

ADAM HYMAN

Do you think one of the other traveling ones might be in somebody's...

00:05:32

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[overlapping] I, probably could be or yeah, yeah and it would be great to see one in kind of mint condition.

00:05:41

MARK SKONER

Where did those photos come from?

00:05:44

ROBERT NAKAMURA

It was from Bob Suzuki who was a professor SC and a JACL member.

00:05:55

ADAM HYMAN

But, who do you think actually took them originally?

00:05:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, they were probably out of National Archives. But, this Raymond Uno got hold of them. You know once again camp was a big secret right, no one really talked about it. I have no idea how he got hold of them, but I'm pretty sure they were from the National Archives. Because once this all came out there was tons of photos of camp. Most of them were WRA [War Relocation Authority] photos, which made camp quite look pleasant. But, then other sources came out like Toyo Miyatake who I did a film on.

00:06:44

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

He was a local portrait photographer who put a lens and a film holder in his coat and smuggled it into camp. And, had a cabinet maker make the camera and he was the first one who shot, images of Manzanar camp. So, it was a pretty interesting story... a lot of images later came up that we used were from his photographs of Manzanar..

00:07:41

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, later when the government realized what a really stupid thing they did, camp authorities became a lot more lax. So more people had stills and motion picture cameras. Karen [Ishizuka, Robert's wife and producing partner] and I did a film called SOMETHING'S STRONG WITHIN. And, that was totally made from home movies that were shot in camp. Once the cube exhibit came out— and then a lot came out of people's photo albums too.

00:08:34

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

There was quite a bit of documentation which we didn't know about. I'm pretty sure most of the things that we used in the cube exhibit came out from the National Archives. Then I copied things from Life magazine which printed a dreadful article on how to tell the difference between a Japanese and Chinese. And, they had, you know... this is LIFE magazine right? So, I copied a lot of that stuff and also integrated it into the exhibit. So, if you look at the exhibit I stretched a very few images into a lot of images by double printing and putting type across and re-cropping because I didn't have a whole lot of material.

00:09:28 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

.

00:09:39 **ADAM HYMAN**

Were you interacting with anybody from Eames studio still at this point?

00:09:42 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

No, I visited Eames on Pico, is it Pico [Ed: Blvd.] and, you know I met Charles' son, yeah not...

00:09:55 **ADAM HYMAN**

Grandson.

00:09:55 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Grandson, yeah...

00:09:59 **ADAM HYMAN**

They just had an opening a couple days ago.

00:10:00 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh.

00:10:01 **ADAM HYMAN**

For POWERS OF TEN related exhibit.

00:10:04 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, see I worked on that it was a film POWER—

00:10:08 **ADAM HYMAN**

POWERS OF TEN.

00:10:10 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, where...

00:10:09 **ADAM HYMAN**

[unintelligible] film?

00:10:09 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, where we start with a mosquito...yeah, yeah so I did work on— see I'm glad you're [laugh] yeah I worked on TEN— that was just before we were doing kind of experimenting with the idea when I left. But, yeah POWERS OF TEN.

00:10:30 **ADAM HYMAN**

Wow, so do you remember anything else from the making of POWERS OF TEN?

00:10:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I just remember them coming up with the graphics for the cell and the mosquito. I just always remember that part and they're trying to make a decision how far they would go in their timeline there. So, but it yeah, it was just when I was leaving the office then.

00:11:09

ADAM HYMAN

I should see if there's any of their stuff that you worked on in the exhibit. I don't know what sort of stuff I didn't carry that, but I'm sure it's like the graphic elements that are...

00:11:16

ROBERT NAKAMURA

There was just a lot of things that like on the Seattle piece and all of those the six-screen things, you know I shot a lot of cracked earth. And, just a lot of things they'd send me out to shoot, yeah.

00:11:39

ADAM HYMAN

So, would Charles or Ray like actively direct on the shoots?

00:11:43

ROBERT NAKAMURA

No, that was a nice aspect of working at Eames. They [Charles & Ray] trusted you and so they said go out to do such and such and shoot this. And, I'd go out and shoot it. I mean he'd say well, this doesn't make it. You know or this is really good, but he gave very little direction. He never said that, but I think that allowed us to bring our own creativity to it. I know a lot of people who were not staff members said, Charles has all of these talented people working for him. So, you know he wasn't— he's taking more credit for his work than he should.

00:12:42

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

But, that's so untrue... he just gave staff a lot of freedom. They would bring things back and he would put it together. But, a lot of people thought ..I did this all on my own and Charles used it without giving me credit. And, yeah so there was a lot of that. But, we had a lot of freedom to go out and do something. And, he'd either say that's fine, or do it again or do something else. So, he wouldn't be even be angry. He's just say well, that's not it and so...

00:13:24

ADAM HYMAN

So when or— let's start in on UCLA then, or are there more key things that really preceded your time there...?

00:13:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, I guess UCLA tied in with the whole movement, as I said kind of had an early midlife crisis which led to reading that first article in *GIDRA* and , essentially joining the movement. Part of the movement was the development of Ethnic Studies. And, so I think, so the four ethnic studies centers at UCLA started in 1969. One of the things they wanted to do in terms of changing the curriculum was to integrate the UCLA film school.

00:14:27

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Because it was... it was not very diverse. So, they started the program called Ethno Communications and it was with Professor John Young and a graduate student David Garcia, they were on the film side. I mean film school side where they developed and did actually a pilot program. They called it Ethno Communications and that was the idea of bringing in students of color into film school with the idea that given that opportunity, they would eventually make some impact on media in general. So, I think there was 50 of us...I'm not sure what the number. came in all at once.

00:15:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

We were the Asian American component, Native American, African American, and Chicano components. We all came in at the same time and were all recruited through the four Ethnic Study centers. So, I was recruited by Alan Nishio who was then acting director of the Asian American Study Center to come into that program. A group of us came in... it was very exciting. I don't think I'd have been able to go through film school, regular film school, but this was different because we essentially stayed in our components and interacted— we all gave each other insights into issues within our different communities of color.

00:16:27

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And, we began to look at each other's films... it was a very, very exciting period. You know I'm not trying not to romanticize the Movement, but it was... it was very exciting. So, because I was able now to— everything was coming together for me. Learning craft of film. The content was exactly what I wanted... it was perfect for me... for a lot of us. And while we were in film school we thought, you know why—come graduation—why not continue what we're doing?

00:17:11 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And, so Eddie Wong and Duane Kubo, myself and Alan Ohashi, who was not in the program, we kind of became—we formed Visual Communications. And, we called it Visual Communications because the initials were VC, right? So, that's part of the '60s and '70s Vietnam thing. [RN: VC stood for Viet Cong]. We had rented a small office and put a dark room in and in the Crenshaw area just off of Jefferson and Crenshaw. Yeah, Jefferson and Crenshaw blvd.

00:17:58 **ADAM HYMAN**

Do you remember the address?

00:17:59 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

No, [laugh] I don't. And... [non-interview dialogue]

00:18:10 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

. So, I stayed in school, all of us stayed in school as long [laugh] long as we could, because that gave us access to sound mix rooms and Nagra's and all of that. We used Eclair 16 millimeter cameras and huge Nagra recorders. Film school gave us access, so I think it took me three, four years to get out of school.

00:18:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

In the meantime we did a lot of VC films during that time.

00:18:57 **ADAM HYMAN**

Okay, so before we dive into those, let's just a little bit more detail on what was going on at UCLA. So, you were in the first class of...

00:19:07 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

[overlapping] Yeah, uh, huh yeah.

00:19:09 **ADAM HYMAN**

And, who were other students throughout those classes...

00:19:13 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

God, I knew you would, I knew you were going to ask that.

00:19:18 **ADAM HYMAN**

Do you remember— who did you work, do you remember any...

00:19:21

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Let's see, so I remember the Asian American contingent Steve Tatsukawa who later became one of the directors of VC. There was a Jeff Furamura who never went into film, and then there was out of the Chicano contingent... there was Sylvia Morales, Luis Ruiz. Mactezuma Esparsza, who went on to do a lot of producing. And, that's when my memory begins to slip... and in the African American contingent there was Larry Clark who I think he became the dean or chair of some department. I forgot what school. (

00:20:17

ADAM HYMAN

Santa Cruz.

00:20:17

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Huh?

00:20:18

ADAM HYMAN

Santa Cruz.

00:20:19

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, Santa Cruz okay. [laugh] Anyway those are all the people I can remember as really I'm getting so bad at it. [RN: Rufus Howard, African American group]

00:20:29

ADAM HYMAN

Because there's a lot of people, obviously in the African American contingent well, I don't know who started that same year and who came years after who, you know who became notable whether Charles Burnett or Haile Gerima...

00:20:39

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah.

00:20:40

ADAM HYMAN

I'm not sure it was in the first class.

00:20:43

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, see I think Haile [Gerima] and Charles [Burnett] were just be— they were in school already I'm, you know I'm not sure, so they were not part of our Ethno contingent.

00:21:04

ADAM HYMAN

What about David Garcia? What do you remember about David?

00:21:07

ROBERT NAKAMURA

David was, I'm pretty sure he was a grad student and he was our TA, he ran pretty much the technical part of it and acted as foreman and chief wrangler of the program. John Young he eventually became chair of the department recruited me into joining the faculty John Young was a documentary filmmaker..and always championed of idea of a more diverse student body and so...

00:21:54

ADAM HYMAN

Who else was teaching at that time?

00:21:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[laugh] I know I draw a blank on that. [RN: Richard Hawkins, John Boeham]

00:22:03

ADAM HYMAN

What did you find most important that you learned?

00:22:06

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well, to be quite truthful it was the Ethno Communications itself. I think we learned—except for some technical things we learned from each other in terms of content we wanted to do. So, boy you put me on the spot. I cannot, I know it'll all come back to me trying to remember my professors. Maybe it'll come back to me later. But, let's see or just give me a moment. Well, most of our classes were run by John and David and we took editing, certain other technical classes from other professors.

00:22:58

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

In our first year we all had to do a Super 8 film. They call it the Project One. In fact Manzanar was my project one. And, Eddie Wong did WONG SING SONG, which I can't spell . That was a project one. So, the early VC films were essentially the super 8 that we did for project one. And, then WATARIDORI: BIRDS OF PASSAGE [1974] actually was my thesis film.

00:23:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, as I said we bootlegged a lot of films out of film school.

00:23:57

ADAM HYMAN

Who owns those films now? You or UCLA?

00:24:02

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well, that was one of our rules that any film or stills or anything we did would belong to VC. So, like...

00:24:19

ADAM HYMAN

Why?

00:24:20

ROBERT NAKAMURA

That was part of the temper of the times. We were all into collectivity, you know we didn't... we were not a your traditional production company... we were more of a production collective. And, if you see in the early films, except for our Super 8 films, you'll see that we listed no credits. No one directed. The only credits given would be people outside of VC. There was a whole movement in Argentina at that time of collective—or Cuba— of collective filmmaking. Individuals would take on the role of director and all of that. But, at the end of the day, all the titles came off and everyone discussed the film and the shoot. So, it was the idea was breaking the traditional Hollywood film hierarchy.

00:25:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

00:26:16

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

No one would be director of a film... we did our early films by committee. [laugh] That was just part of the philosophy... of what was happening during the '60s and '70s.

00:26:36

ADAM HYMAN

Because you know USC owns the films. There's always that ongoing ethical...

00:26:41

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, yeah right, right, right. [laugh] yeah, yeah no in at UCLA like...

00:26:49

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, UCLA thesis and everything belonged to the filmmaker, I mean to the student. But, you know they didn't put any money in to the film, like at SC right, SC [USC] puts in, essentially produces the film. Am I correct? I mean that's in the old days anyway, yeah?

00:27:09

ADAM HYMAN

That's how their justification.

00:27:11

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah. [non-interview dialogue]

00:27:26

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, you need to get permission in order to use your film? I mean if you had...

00:27:31

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, at USC if your film...

00:27:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Like a PBS screening?

00:27:35

ADAM HYMAN

...plays somewhere else the school takes the money.

00:27:36 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, okay.

00:27:38 **ADAM HYMAN**

The students don't get anything.

00:27:39 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Okay, see yeah. [non-interview dialogue; recorder off]

00:27:52 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

I don't remember— he did his film before...

00:27:57 **ADAM HYMAN**

Oh, say the name of the person.

00:27:58 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, David Garcia was essentially the second person who was really teaching us in Ethno Communications.. along with John Young. I know David was a documentary filmmaker and he had shown us pieces of REQUIEM 29. Yeah, and I don't recall a whole lot of about it. But, I know it affected the Chicano contingent.. But, I don't remember the film that well. Well, I'm really glad he's on the list and not... I'd feel bad if he's no longer around. Because David did a lot in terms of developing Ethno Communications.

00:28:56 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

He was a very nice but no nonsense kind of a guy. He was a perfect for leading all these wild people who came through the Ethno Communications Program.

00:29:13 **ADAM HYMAN**

I'd presumed that John Young is dead.

00:29:16 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

No, John is— I still Christmas cards from him. So, later I can give you his address and phone number. Yeah, yeah, that was one of the things I kept putting off. It was do an oral history on John. So, that'd be terrific if you did something.

00:29:45 **ADAM HYMAN**

Well, let me ask one other...So, you're at UCLA though and you're in your 30's at that point. Didn't that make you, you know several years older than most of the others?

00:29:54 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, that's why...

00:29:57 **ADAM HYMAN**

How did that position you in school?

00:29:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA

It was okay, but that was why I was met with a certain amount of hostility in the early days of the movement was not only my corduroy shirt, I mean jacket and white shoes. I was a lot older and the motto was “don't trust anyone over 30”, during that time so, eventually you know, I was okay That's why I probably became— took a leadership role at VC partly [laugh] because I was older than everyone. But, also I had the background and a lot of people say, where I contributed a lot was the approach, the professional approach that brought discipline to what we were doing.

00:30:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Then there were other people like Steve Tatsukawa and I mean a lot of other people who came in right when we started and so I don't want to leave anyone out. But, officially VC, Visual Communications pretty much puts the four of us as founding members. But, there might be other people.. I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings that were, you know early, early VC people.

00:31:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Like Pat Lao Miller and Candace Murata and, you know there were other people came in fairly early... I just want that [laugh] on the interview in case I forget someone.

00:32:06

ADAM HYMAN

Right. Answer towards her now...

00:32:09

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay.

00:32:10

PAULINE STAKELON

So, going back to at UCLA, I'd be interested in hearing about the relationship between you and that Ethno Communications and the UCLA students who were in the film school just, you know playing in the film school what was the relationship...

00:32:28

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, not part of Ethno [Communications], no, yeah...

00:32:30

PAULINE STAKELON

Yeah, because you were all taking classes that were at the same...

00:32:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, right it was fine, the relationship was fine. Filmmakers or film people are kind of pretty much outsiders anyway. So, we kind of fit in although it was kind of a cultural shock to regular students to have all these 40 people ...some of the guys were pretty wild people coming in all at once. But, generally we were accepted well. Maybe there might have been a few professors who didn't like the idea of having these students of color kind of forced upon them.

00:33:14

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

For the Ethno Communications Program they bent a lot of rules to get people into grad school so I think there was a little bit of resentment about that. But, that was the idea to get more community-oriented people into the Ethno Communications Program. So, there might have been a little resentment about that..

00:34:17

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, in terms of our relationship it was very good, you know.

00:34:21

PAULINE STAKELON

How long did that program last...?

00:34:22

ROBERT NAKAMURA

It lasted three years, yeah about three years and then funding— and I'm sure John got tired, you know it was a very exhausting to fight for the program and run it. David Garcia I know went off and became— he went to Warner Brothers and became— it was an executive position in charge of production. I think mostly... probably productions that dealt with, ethnicity and third world, you know things like that and so then, as far as I could see it kind of fell apart, yeah.

00:35:17

PAULINE STAKELON

And, so it was during this time that you made MANZANAR?

00:35:23

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I made MANZANAR as I said at the beginning, the first year you'd make a Super 8 film. just— prior to coming starting film school which was 1970. But, in 1969 I was part of that activism in the community which was trying to...raise community awareness about the WWII concentration camps. There was a pilgrimage to Manzanar, the site of my camp. And, I was on that first pilgrimage. I had never been back to Manzanar since I was a child.

00:36:22

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

As I said earlier, we didn't talk about camp, it was very, very repressed. And, then when I saw the monument at the cemetery and the concrete foundations and big slabs where the bathrooms were etc....you know it really affected me. It brought all of those memories back plus the people that we went with were all part of the movement. and as I said before Manzanar became kind of an icon for the early movement.

00:37:05

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, when I started film school it was a no brainer. I wanted to do something about camp, I just wanted to do something about camp. And, as I began thinking about it I decided to make it autobiographical. The idea was to see the camp through the eyes of a young boy. And, so that was the kind of routes to making MANZANAR. Manzanar was my first completed film. And, you know I'm blanking out again, but who made NIGHT AND FOG?

00:37:55

ADAM HYMAN

Alain Resnais.

00:37:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA

That was a film that I had seen actually quite a few years before coming to film school. NIGHT AND FOG was really influential. I ripped off a lot of ideas. I photographed that area... that whole area is very beautiful it's high desert And the Sierra Nevadas are in the background. I used his idea of shooting this really beautiful scenery and then slowly leading into what this was used for. As a child I had good memories of camp, you know as I said before a lot of it because of my parents. Of course in retrospect, of course Manzanar was a traumatic experience.

00:39:01

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

But, if I really look back I remember swimming in Bear's Creek and doing all those boyhood things. So, I tried to play the contrast of my recollections of camp. Which was some of the beauty of the area as opposed to my adult view . And, that's why I used some of the stills from of the camp. That was kind of the strategy in it. I'm sorry I shot it on Super 8 where you can see editing tape and splices.. And, I wish I could have done it at least on 16 and get a regular print.

00:39:50

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

You can see the splice marks in it and everything. Some call it experimental, but that wasn't it... I had to do it that way. But, the idea was to see camp as a child and as an adult.

00:40:09

PAULINE STAKELON

When did you take that pilgrimage?

00:40:12

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I started film school in '70 and this was '69. So, it was before film school.

00:40:25

PAULINE STAKELON

[unintelligible]

00:40:29

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I knew some of the individuals... there was Warren Furutani who is our current assembly person, state assembly person now. And, another person was Victor Shibata, and there was Mo Nishida... I'm sure there were other people I totally forgot. I know they were part of the organizing body. No one really knew what was going to happen. But, when we all arrived we knew it was a significant event of some kind, as I said before. Manzanar became an icon.

00:41:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Asian Americans have experienced racism...some of it was overt, but a lot of it was pretty subtle, you know? But, the camp was— concentration camps were really, you know that was something very tangible and we used that as an example of what we went through.

end of tape

TAPE 4: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:50

ADAM HYMAN

Where did you film Manzanar for your film?

00:00:52

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well it was at UCLA, but I filmed MANZANAR at the site of the original concentration camp, and I used the remains as a kind of the principle elements of it, other than the stills, there was no person in the film per se. And through the camera, I wanted to capture the beauty and fond memories that I had of camp as a young child, and through the stills to depict the harsh conditions and indignity of the camp experience. The only place that you see people are in the stills and in camp, I wanted to show, in retrospect, my feelings of that experience. I did a lot of things, like using sound. There were irrigation remains there, and I'd use water sounds, and that kind of thing, , so you can recall the old and see what's there now. And one of the great things I found was lot of the concrete where people had wrote their names and dates on there. And so that was really— everyone shoots them now, [laugh] but I was one of the first.

00:02:28

PAULINE STAKELON

Were you talking to your parents about their experience at the time?

00:02:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, that's a general phenomena that's really interesting. As I said before camp was really repressed, right. And then when the Sansei, the third generation began to question, because they knew roughly something happened during World War II, and when they found out the Sansei.. the movement began to look into it and realize what it was and began to really develop the World War II experience as kind of a very tangible expression of wartime hysteria and racism. Then the Nisei, their parents, began to open up this was amazing— so it kind of required the coaxing or almost demand of the third generation, the Sansei generation. And all of a sudden all these repressed,.. you couldn't shut people up after a while, they just kind of came out with their stories. And a good example was the movement for redress and reparations There was congressional committees holding hearings in the Bay Area, in LA. And one of the Movement activities was to make sure we get people to come out and testify. We were afraid the Nisei would not come out to testify, so we did a lot of organizing.

00:04:22 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

When the hearings came, well the room---the whole hall was just packed and people would come up to testify. They had to cut people off because— all this was pent up for all these years. And so the Nisei generation began to really talk about it, became part of the movement for redress and reparations.

00:05:04 **PAULINE STAKELON**

When was that time, the year that it was [overlapping].

00:05:06 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

[overlapping] Oh god, I'm sorry you asked that. That had to be in '72, '73. Don't quote me on that I, yeah I have to look that up. I'm really...

00:05:22 **PAULINE STAKELON**

[overlapping] So it was around the time that you were making the film.

00:05:25 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Making what film?

00:05:27 **PAULINE STAKELON**

MANZANAR.

00:05:27 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh no, that was, oh yeah, that was after, so I mean in '71. So yeah maybe the hearings were '74, '75. I once again I'm collapsing time, so.

00:05:43 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So what were you finding then in your reaction to the film or people's reaction to the film?

00:05:48 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

The film was received very well because number one, it, it's supposed to be the first film done about camps. In terms of the Sansei, the younger generation, it went over well because the more they could see and learn about the camp experience-- they began to bring it out, absorb it into their whole movement, organizing. So the film went— as part of the older generation seeing it, I think maybe it might have played a part in having them open up. But it's hard when you make a film— we used to take it to different places, but you know, I really— anyway, a lot of people saw it. And so I assume it, was well received.

00:06:58 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So it was kind of made, the block of films that were made by the VC founders during that time, the other 8mm film.

00:07:06 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah. Yeah.

00:07:07 **PAULINE STAKELON**

CRUISIN' J-TOWN.

00:07:09 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

CRUISIN' J-TOWN was a little— that was later. We, I think, I mean it wasn't a project one. And I don't even think, what year was that?

00:07:23 **PAULINE STAKELON**

It was '72.

00:07:24 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

'72. Yeah Duane Kubo did that, he was essentially the director. We were still trying to stay in school [laugh] in order to make our films, I thought we were out of school by then, but you know I'm not sure. But anyway Duane made it, and I thought it was later. But you know once again my dates are all fuzzy.

00:07:58 **ADAM HYMAN**

I took the dates from your filmography.

00:07:59 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

[laugh] Well that was well researched, so I guess that's you know-- that's correct yeah. So we might have been all in school, but we were actually using school as a place, as a production access place.

00:08:20 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Do you remember what work you did on that film?

00:08:22 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

I put myself down as producer on a lot of them when we decided we need to, because I was director of VC, and I was responsible for raising money and a lot of the administrative work. And since I was the oldest person, I would front the organizations to— VC to JACL and the older generation. And you know, I feel that I kind of sacrificed some of my filmmaking, you know I ended up administrating and developing the organization. And everyone else got to make films--- in terms of CRUISIN' J-TOWN, I did some of the shooting, and once again remember we worked as a collective.

I was involved in the idea, and of course the idea--- the main theme and thesis is the idea of culture, we're neither Asian nor are we American, and where does— culturally where does Asian America begin. And that's another aspect of a lot of work we did at VC. Most people look at the movement as a political movement, which it was. But it was also— and I think it is not as recognized as it should be. It was also a cultural movement because part of the whole Asian American movement and activism was also about identity.

00:10:09 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Who are we? Who am I? And it takes the arts to develop the culture and recognize—you know give us a tangible idea of who we are so, I think movement newspapers, and artists and VC played a large role in giving ourselves identity. Prior to the 60s and 70s, we were always trying to assimilate—in terms of media—we were always invisible or, or dreadful stereotypes. And so when the movement came and Ethnocommunications came, that gave us the chance to do media about ourselves and for ourselves. That's where many of VC films, and many films I make [came from]. That's where you're talking about alternative media. Our work may not be, quote, 'experimental,' but the whole idea of— our work was not aimed at a large mainstream, quote, 'white' audience. It was aimed directly at our own community and the idea was to see ourselves in media. You know media can validate who we are If you're invisible, you don't belong anywhere.

00:11:51 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So that was part of our approach, and some of it was not conscious thinking at the time. Basically that's what we did because we didn't care to join who—we weren't thinking of going to Hollywood and doing mainstream work and getting our three picture deal, and then do the film we really wanted to do. We decided on short, educational films. A lot of them dealt with identity and CRUISIN' J-TOWN is a great example because it features the jazz fusion band Hiroshima. For us as a part of the Asian American community at that time, they were kind of an icon of this idea of an Asian American culture because they're playing jazz fusion music. But they also used the koto, and taiko, and a lot of things. So it was a perfect film for us to make because that way people can see these young, long-haired, hippie-looking people with Asian faces, trying to create music that was Asian and American. So, so CRUISIN' J-TOWN I thought was one of our more important films that we [made].

00:13:31 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

It gives you a good example of what we were after--- “what is Asian American culture?” In retrospect, although we didn't look at it at the time, VC itself was kind of creating an Asian American culture, either through the content of the films we were making, or documenting other people in their pursuit of what is Asian America.

00:14:06 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Do you remember who the members of Hiroshima were?

00:14:08

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Dan Kuramoto, let's see, no I'm blank— Johnny Mori was the taiko player. Dan was essentially the founding person, and June Kuramoto, was the koto player. And you know that's all I can remember, but they were the, the key founding members and I'm sure I left somebody out. [Editor's Note: Also Peter Hata (guitar), Dave Iwataki (keyboards), & Danny Yamamoto (drums)] Hiroshima was a very, very important part of the kind of cultural— culture making aspect of Asian American movement.

00:15:02

PAULINE STAKELON

Was this, because they you collaborated with them.

00:15:06

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh yeah.

00:15:06

PAULINE STAKELON

Often.

00:15:07

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Dan essentially did all of our— wrote all of, composed all of our, most of the music for our films. Many members of the band also played of course. We had a very good relationship. He was almost a part of VC, so Dan and June yes, so we worked with them quite a bit.

00:15:42

PAULINE STAKELON

So going back to the 8mm films...

00:15:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Uh huh.

00:15:46

PULINE STAKEMAN

Just to identify which ones they were— was it CHINATOWN 2-STEP and PIECES OF A DREAM then?

00:15:52

ROBERT NAKAMURA

No it was WONG SINSAANG....

00:15:55

PAULINE STAKELON

Okay.

00:15:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA

And MANZANAR...And I think those were the two because the other ones we never— oh I'm sorry. And he was not a VC member, I mean he didn't— he was part of the Ethno group, Jeff Furamora, who did a film, Super 8 film called I DON'T THINK I SAID SO MUCH. It was about a day in the life of a gardener. But that wasn't a VC film, so maybe just Eddie's film and my film were the only you know that had the VC label on it,. There were other films that were made that had— from our Asian American component that, you know.

00:16:58

PAULINE STAKELON

And then after that first up what, was it your thesis that was the next film?

00:17:03

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yes my thesis, WATARIDORI: BIRDS OF PASSAGE, and once again I could've graduated earlier, but stayed to do that film. And you know I'm forgetting our chronology, but was CHINATOWN 2-STEP after?

00:17:33

PAULINE STAKELON

I thought it was 1972.

00:17:35

ROBERT NAKAMURA

That was Eddie Wong's film, that was 16mm, and that was kind of a look into middle class Chinese Americans as seen through the Chinatown drum and bugle chorus. So it was a look at the Chinese American middle class. And PIECES OF A [DREAM]— so I don't remember the chronology, so like PIECES OF A DREAM. That was Eddie's film also which traces the Asian experience in the Sacramento Delta area. So the Chinese were brought in first to build the levies in the delta, and then the Japanese came to work on the farms and harvesting crops. And then later the Filipinos were brought in as laborers. So it's about those three waves of immigrants.

00:18:45

PAULINE STAKELON

And you were the cinematographer?

00:18:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I did a lot of the shooting on that,. And it was fun for me because the Delta area is a really interesting place to shoot, and I did a lot of the—. And once again we kind of overlapped, so but I think the bulk of the shooting I did. So yeah. [non-interview dialogue]

00:19:32

PAULINE STAKELON

So I guess looking back at this kind of group, the films, I mean it seems like after you produced these, they were exhibited a lot together.

00:19:44

ROBERT NAKAMURA

That's kind of— the early on I was really— What's kind of interesting is that, it was not enough just to make the films. We didn't have the internet at the time, so a lot of the screenings we did ourselves as kind of guerilla distribution. We would screen our films in churches and community centers and schools, and we'd bring— carry our own 16mm projector and screen. So we did a lot, and then we had some fairly large community screenings. That was part of our mission---making the film, but the other part was getting to people to see them. And eventually—which is really clumsy—people began to rent our films and we had to send these huge reels at exorbitant postage costs out. But the early days, it was kind of exciting because the first buzz you ever get is to have this totally appreciative audience. I think we could've done anything, and Asian American audiences would love it right? The first time I screened MANZANAR, we screened MANZANAR and WONG SINSAANG AT one event--- people went crazy because this— we were starved to see ourselves on the screen.

00:21:30

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

We even projected films outside, you know on the back of a pickup truck. against walls, and we did a lot of— that was part of our shtick too--- kind of guerilla filmmaking, and so we did a lot of that. And a lot of screenings in schools, and JACL chapters, so essentially there was no such thing as real distribution because it was so difficult.

00:22:06

PAULINE STAKELON

Uh huh, and so looking back what do you think the impact of that was for these really early first Asian American film.

00:22:16

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I think we influenced a lot of--- you know I'm just. But there are a lot of Asian American filmmakers today, and there were very few Asian American filmmakers when we started. [RN: Incorrect. There was Lonnie Ding and Curtis Choy in the Bay Area.] So I think some of our work probably influenced people and Asian Americans. Sansei— not Sansei, just Asian Americans to going into film. I think we contributed to, the culture building, culture creating part of it, and it was not only our filmmaking but the content like I said, Hiroshima represented in music what a lot of us were trying to do. And then in I TOLD YOU SO, we, it's a film about Lawson Inada, who's a, who's the poet laureate of Washington [Editor's note: Lawson Inada was the fifth poet laureate of Oregon]. But his early work was about camp and being Asian American. And so I think that film— I like the way the film was made, that was made by Alan Kondo. But it was making Lawson's poetry and his personality and his approach accessible to a large Asian American audience. And Lawson was part of the whole literature movement, Asian American literature movement along with Frank Chin.

00:24:12 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Shawn Wong and... There was a whole group of Asian American writers that were getting together and talking about issues facing Asian Americans. [non-interview dialogue; recorder off]

00:24:45 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So looking back I see VC's work, number one--- as part of that whole pursuit of identity, although in addition to some of the content of the work being political also—especially in the later VC work—what they did, SOMETHING'S ROTTEN IN LITTLE TOKYO and actually I wasn't part of VC, I had left VC during that time. But they became much more kind of political after the early '70s. But I think helping to develop Asian American identity, and as an example of Asian Americans being able to make films. For me, there were no role models at all when I was growing up, there were Japanese filmmakers, but no Asian American filmmakers or photographers for that matter. So I think the organization VC and the films we put up could've played a— became kind of a role model for younger filmmakers to be.

00:26:28 **PAULINE STAKELON**

And what about in terms of establishing venues for your films to screen, or building an audience?

00:26:35 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

The came later, as I said, when we first started---we looked at ourselves as a production company, a production collective, we didn't see ourselves as a distribution entity. First we thought a lot of our work would reach the classroom, so we did a lot of education material at the same time---we did teaching manuals and things. So getting that material in the schools in addition to the whole general Asian American community itself---that was our goal. Later as a kind of new generation of VC people—the old guys left, they had families and myself--- I was burnt out—but the new kind of generation I'd say began with Steve Tatsukawa taking over as director, then Linda Mabalot, Nancy Araki, it became more and more of what they call themselves now as a media arts center. So they became more active in terms of advocacy, supporting young filmmakers. And eventually the film, LA Asian American Film Festival. And so it became— it was a different entity from when the early VC. Yes.

00:28:29 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Let's go back to the beginning. And we'll talk about the individual founding members. Want to talk about Duane Kubo. I just— were there any more people connected to VC?

00:28:48

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well Duane Kubo was a founding member---he did CRUISIN' J-TOWN, and I think Duane was a very good filmmaker, especially in terms of kind of getting a handle on the idea of identity and who we are. And he was also an excellent cameraperson, and he was part of the leadership of VC, early VC. Now he's the Dean of Fine Arts at Cupertino Community College up north. And so I don't know what to say except that Duane was you know one of the founding members. He's very organized, dedicated to community--- very political---it's hard to paint a picture of him.

00:30:03

PAULINE STAKELON

Do you know his background, where he was coming from?

00:30:06

ROBERT NAKAMURA

He came from San Jose, he was a top high school baseball player and went to state finals. And came down to--- he was a UCLA student before he came in as Ethnocommunications Film School student, I forgot what his major was. Many of the early movement people in LA were UCLA students. Duane was also the co-director of HITO HATA, along with myself, and as I said, Duane's very organized, he has a very good eye. And even then, we worked as kind of a collective, but that's where the collective method fell apart because production was so huge we had to have individual assignments, and we couldn't do it like we did our short film. So Duane handled a lot of the camerawork, and so he--- kind of acted as DP, you--- I did a lot of working with the actors. And so we kind of split it up as at that time, I just started as a professor at UCLA.

00:31:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

My son was born in 1980, which was when we started. In fact we used him when he was like ten days old in the "going to camp" sequence, this is my son Tad. It was very, very busy time for me at that time. So I'm trying to think of other things.

00:32:25

ADAM HYMAN

Did you get along well?

00:32:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah VC, you know that was that was part of our— so I think we all got along well because that was part of our organization was community-based, we called our self community-based. And we made— making film was kind of secondary to serving or developing community. So all of us were activists first and filmmakers second we were looking less at film as self-expression, or demonstrations of our creative ability and more as serving community. During the movement, one of the big phrases was, ‘serve the people, serve community.’ VC was part of that. So I think we were kind— I mean we had our differences, but nothing ever really horrendous. Part of it because we looked at ourselves as a collective. We’d have meetings, and talk things over-- -, and we had long meetings. Talking things out, and so I think we got along very well, even under very intense— during HITO HATO, we, it wasn't even a shoestring, it was totally volunteer, low budget.

00:34:14

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Our actors who were members of SAG would, we would pay them and some would donate money back-- it was a huge community event. And so we got along fine. You know especially under the tense conditions, we were I mean, if you look back, you know we were shooting film, and we were using a lot of under, under the table things from UCLA. But even then the film stock, making dailies— even though we transferred our stuff, our sound to 16mm mag at school. But it was still expensive,---we don’t even want to talk about paying ourselves, but just the production costs. So we were always writing for grants, and we got lucky after a while, we had some Endowment for the Humanities money and different places. But it was chronic looking for money, and I guess one of the big kind of—everyone knows this—is that half of the staff would go on unemployment. And when their unemployment ran out, they'd go back on salary at VC.

00:35:37

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And the other half would go on unemployment, so that was the kind of guerilla filmmaking that we did. I think to answer that question again of getting along, part of it is I think we were somewhat bonded by the idea of serving community--- I mean there were a lot of disagreements and rifts, but not within VC, it was other entities saying our work was not relevant, or [laugh] was too slick or was too crude. I mean we had a lot of that, but within the VC ranks— I mean some people may disagree but I thought it was— we had, we're still all friends. You know so that's a good clue.

00:36:39

ADAM HYMAN

Alan?

00:36:40

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh Alan Ohashi was a graphic designer and he was involved with our America's Concentration Camps cube design-- he did a lot of the typesetting and all of that. He was interested in— he was more of a still photographer before we formed VC and he was a part of the activism taking place in West LA, so he brought in a different-- more of a middle class view of— I mean he grew up in West LA which tended to be, as far as Asian Americans, more middle class, professional kind of culture. So he was part of that movement from there. And he joined VC, he was an excellent camera person because of his graphics background--- he did all of our graphics---a lot of our educational material was printed and so he did practically all of our— some really nice work, a lot of our design. His principle— I mean he worked like everyone else on all of our productions, but he did KITES AND OTHER TALES. Which was a design for children, and it was the history of kite making which essentially started out in China.

00:38:34

ROBERT NAKAMURA

And it revolved around Tom Joe, who was a kite maker and taught kite making to children. But it was the idea of getting Asian— showing the influence of Asian culture on the west. And that was strictly designed for children, like TO BE ME, Tony Kwan--there's a couple, three films besides KITES that were designed specifically for kids. Oh, I forgot, Duane did CITY CITY, which was for it's time fairly experimental, but that was developed for young, I guess third and fourth graders. And he used a lot of— which is ridiculous now [laugh] because you can do all of these effects on computers. So, so easy, but we had to use the optical printer to do kind of solarizations and just you know a lot of the effects that we can just do like that, on either Photoshop, or...

00:40:04

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Anyway so there was a lot of effects, the idea was to present a multicultural view of LA--- that LA was a multicultural city, that was the main point of the film. Duane did a lot of optical work, so it was,—I won't say experimental— but he used a lot of effects there, so anyway, I forgot about Duane. Let's see, Alan Ohashi, he's now an architect in the Bay area, very successful. Still I don't know what his community activities are, but I know he was doing— designing something for a Japanese American Historical Society museum up there and that was the last I— we're all bad at keeping in contact because everyone's busy all the time. That's not a good excuse but we don't— even in the day of the internet, we still are not in close contact.

[TAPE FOUR ENDS]

TAPE 5: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:38

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay Eddie Wong was a founding member and part of Ethno Communications program. Eddie was one of the younger people that—founding member and he did WONG SING WONG SINSAANG as his Project One on Super 8. He did CHINATOWN 2-STEP, which was a film looking into the middle class, Chinese American middle class through the eyes of Chinatown Drum and Bugle Corps. He did PIECES OF A DREAM, which depicted early Chinese, Japanese and Filipino experience in the Sacramento Delta area. Eddie was a very good writer, so he also did a lot of our grant writing. Eddie was a very bright young— I mean he was very young but very bright. When we'd go on shoots, on location, we'd pick him up, and his mother would come up to me because I was the oldest, and say, will you take care of Eddie. So Eddie was younger but way ahead of his years, so he did most of the grant writing. After he left VC he became an organizer when Jesse Jackson was running the presidency. Later he became the Director of CAAM, which is Center for Asian American Media. But at that time was called NAATA, National Association of Asian American Telecommunications Association. So he directed NAATA. NAATA is a---or now CAM—is really the entity that funnels grant money from PBS .

00:03:10

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

You know there's a certain amount that's set aside for Asian Americans And so CAAM is the one we write for grants. They also distribute all of the, most of the Asian American films that were made. He was directing, he was director of that. Currently he's the director of the Angel Island Museum. Angel Island was a place that Asians would first come to, it was like Ellis Island, so they have a large museum and educational complex there, so he's the director of that. And I'm trying to think of anything else. Is there, is that enough or I can't...

00:04:14

PAULINE STAKELON

Was there anyone else involved? I mean you four, the four [unintelligible] .

00:04:18

ROBERT NAKAMURA

There are other key people that--- there was Steve Tatsukawa, who was part of the UCLA Ethno program but didn't join VC until later because Steve became an account executive at BBDO. Later he was program director at KCET, later he left everything and joined VC. I mean he was always an activist, and always part--- involved in things but he was never part of VC until later. See that's where I'm going to get hit upon ---he was very active with us but he was doing these other jobs, so he wasn't part of VC. So, but maybe I should say he was part of VC from the get go. Later he became the--- took over as director and was very influential, bringing in large, larger sums of money for VC. Steve was a big player, and I know I'm going to wake up in the middle of the night and say, oh I forgot! [non-interview dialogue]

00:05:57

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And there was Pat Lau Miller, who just came out of the blue and heard what we were doing, and wanted to help out, and she came early. So she's almost a founding member, but not officially. And then--- oh see I forgot, Alan Kondo--- once again he didn't go through the Ethno program, he's a Canadian, a second generation Canadian--- Japanese Canadian. He was the only one that had real editing experience. He just walked in with a backpack on and sandals and he said, I really like the work you're doing, can I help out in any way, so Alan became one of the key people at VC. He did I TOLD YOU SO, and did most of the editing for HITO HATA, he was our key editor because he had a professional background. We were always students--- you know, had only student experience, so a lot of the post production work, Alan either taught us or did himself. And Alan went onto--- he's now my financial advisor, so he's very successful. Runs a consultant business, a financial advising business.

00:07:51

ADAM HYMAN

I have this question, which was the, what sort of relationship did VC have with other filmmaking groups and non-profits and a lot of things in the early '70s? [non-interview dialogue]

00:08:08

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah we interacted with ACV in New York, which was Asian American CineVision, they held the first Asian American film festivals, the first film festivals were done by ACV, and the filmmakers from ACV were Christine Choy, and Renee Tajima[-Peña], they did the---WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN? it was nominated for Oscar.

00:08:47

ADAM HYMAN

WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN?

00:08:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN?, we had a very good relationship with them, and they were also very active with Third World Newsreel--- there was a lot of things going on in New York and we had a good relationship with them. And we— I think you know the idea of doing a, having a film festival really came from their example, so we had that relationship. We had somewhat—at least I think Eddie Wong... and we had a good relationship with JAM [Media Collective], a graphic arts organization in the Bay Area in Japan town, anyway I'll... We were closely tied in with a lot of the community organizations in— because they were all resources for the content of our films.

00:10:40

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

As I said before we were involved with Hiroshima. There was a kind of community arts place called The Storefront. Yeah we were—by the nature of what we were doing—we were pretty much involved with all the local and some of the Bay Area organizations. So that's.

00:11:12

ADAM HYMAN

The extension— the other question I want to follow up with is then, were you involved in any way or did you work independently from say non-Asian American related groups?

00:11:27

ROBERT NAKAMURA

That's a good... In Ethno we— because of the four components— and to be quite truthful, not really, and there's a kind of irony in that, because part of what the movements were about was a multiethnic, multicultural society. I think Duane and Eddie were more involved with other communities, but myself I was pretty much within an Asian American, Japanese American context. But you know, that was in theory, that was one of our ideas of third world, and a multiethnic movement, and all of that. I recall, there wasn't much except for individuals, or VC individuals.

00:12:40

PAULINE STAKELON

How did you define I guess, define— what was kind of the diversity of the Asian Americans then maybe within your group.

00:12:52

ROBERT NAKAMURA

You mean ethnically? Well see the early movement was predominately Chinese American or Japanese American. So VC— let's see, pretty much Japanese or Chinese American, but overall we were always looking for—that's what we did. We got money to do CITY CITY, which depicted LA's multiethnicity... We realized that we had to go beyond Chinese and Japanese experience, so later when Linda Mubalot, who is Filipina, came on, we did QUIET—I don't know if we ever finished QUIET THUNDER, but it was this piece written by— oh it was a biography of Carlos Bulosan. And did another film— I'm forgetting the titles—about the Filipino farm labor movement. We did VITAFE, and OOMAI FATASI... anyway they were about the Samoan experience in America--- we wanted more diversity within VC. So that other parts of Asian American experience can be— so we recruited people from, to do— I forgot the name of the first film. Anyway, we did two films on Samoan American experience, but we consciously were trying to—we weren't quite that successful at what we were trying to. Do more of a pan-Asian...

00:14:52

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Do more pan-Asian films. But I don't think we ever got there. But we did bring in—eventually because of Linda Mubalot—more Filipino American pieces.

00:15:19

ADAM HYMAN

I was going to ask, so then how did you have any money to make any films in those first year or two?

00:15:24

ROBERT NAKAMURA

We got lucky, remember this was the late 60s, early 70s. We had student strikes, a lot of social unrest, so there was a lot more money out there for films dealing with minority issues, or people of color to make films. So grant writing, and getting money—and they weren't large sums, but compared to now—was a lot easier, so there was the US Office of Education. I don't know if that's correct, but they were set up to bring kind of a diversity to the education system, since we were doing a lot of things that were aimed towards students, schools. We had a lot of money from them to do some of our projects. We had some money from Glide Memorial Church---was a very politically active church in the Bay area. We received office space, and staff support through JACL. And there was the National Endowment for the Arts, which was a lot easier than it is today, but it still was a struggle because no one was really getting paid. We were just getting production money.

00:17:19 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And what was left over we'd kind of get minimal salaries and then, like I said, we'd go on unemployment, and all of that, so it was a stretch for me because I was married and I had a kid. That was my first marriage, this is my second. So it was a little bit of a stretch for me also at the time.

00:17:41 **PAULINE STAKELON**

You were solely supporting yourself through your work at VC.

00:17:44 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

No, part of it was school, once again, UCLA money for—at that time—for minority students was very easy, so I received a lot of fellowships, and whatnot through the graduate program there. I also did a lot of part-time teaching, mostly photography. I taught at Immaculate Heart College, I taught at Cal State Long Beach, a lot of different... So it was through that, through teaching part time, and staying in school for a long time and our grants, I was able to kind of— and my wife was working, so that was kind of how we got by. [RN: I was a veteran so I received GI Bill money.]

00:18:45 **PAULINE STAKELON**

And can you describe the educational component of the work that you were doing during those early days? I know I came across some you know graphic material you know for [unintelligible], so was it tied to the films, was it part of you know your strategy for fund raising?

00:19:04 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

That's a really great question because you know on the official records, we did MANZANAR, WONG SINSAANG and all of that. But those were tied in with going to school but our overall mission was to really—in additional to the philosophy of serving community—we thought educating young people was our best bet to overcome a lot of stereotypes and whatnot. And also build certain sense of self-worth and confidence into young Asian Americans, or students of, young people of color. So one of our early pieces that we did, we did a couple learning kits, which I can't remember now. But they were actually, I look at them now, and they were quite good. We did a whole box set of profiles of different individuals and different Asian American communities. And I can't remember the title of the whole box set. We also did activities. Ethnic understanding, yeah that's EUS series. Anyway we called it the EUS series. [Ethnic Understanding series]

00:20:38 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Then we did a—actually quite nice, looking at it now—activity kit for probably third to fourth, fifth grade. [RN: East-West Activity Kit] And they fold out and had everything in there. There were games and Asian things—Asian American themed games, and graphic stuff, which Alan really did—Alan Ohashi, did a great job on that. So we had done that, and then we did a whole bilingual series in Spanish and English. Kind of depicting life of being a Latino in Los Angeles, so we did a lot of non-film pieces that were aimed at the schools, so that was one of our big focuses.

00:21:52 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Do you remember when, what year is any of these things were?

00:21:57 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

[laugh] No...Well I know the EUS kit was pretty early so it must have been '72, or around there. The bilingual series came later, that was probably '74. I'm really bad on the dates..

00:22:48 **PAULINE STAKELON**

And so in those early days, how did you view yourself in relation to like the Hollywood establishment?

00:22:55 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, oh that's a good question because I think part of people interested in media, in the whole Asian American and probably the African American, Chicano movements, I think there were two paths--- one idea was to learn filmmaking, somehow get into the industry and make changes that way. A lot of—in our ethno program—a lot of African Americans kind of had that in mind as opposed to Asian Americans, we looked at more of developing community media for a couple of very practical reasons--- there was no audience for Asian American films, you know. There was no box-office at all, but in terms of African Americans, it was a possibility. I think the Latinos and Chicano filmmakers were kind of more— they essentially, at least the Ethno people from my generation, they went and they developed the Chicano Consortium at KCET. So they did a lot of work in public television. In the Asian American movement, media movement, there were those who felt breaking into mainstream media and making changes was the way to go. And there were other people, like VC, who wanted, who thought community-based media was what was practical number one, and the most needed.

00:24:59 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

You know, but we took one flyer there and did HITO HATO. But most of our idea was to impact through short educational films. [laugh] What was the question again?

00:25:15

PAULINE STAKELON

How you felt about where you stood in relationship to the Hollywood establishment.

00:25:20

ROBERT NAKAMURA

We thought both approaches were valid, I think it was pragmatic on our part. We just couldn't see ourselves either starting out in the mailroom and working our way up. Or— because at that time film schools were not that, you know, it wasn't until Lucas and Coppola and Spielberg, those guys and all of a sudden film school was really great. I looked myself at community-based media because it wasn't only pragmatic, it was what I always wanted to do in my photo-essays. And I think for a lot of us— I think myself and Eddie Wong—it was more creating our own culture. Giving ourselves identity, it was kind of self-serving, a lot of the films that I did, I really wanted to document and have other people see it, like MANZANAR was very personal--
-WATARIDORI: BIRDS OF PASSAGE was very personal because I used my father as part— his life as part of that film. So a lot of it was not having history, and creating our history, or visioning or revisioning who we were. I think a lot of us had that... but personally that was my main motivation.

00:27:21

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

I was not as political as the others, like Eddie was very political and so was Duane, but I was less political and more interested in identity issues, and who are we, where are we going, that kind of thing

00:27:43

PAULINE STAKELON

That's interesting, yeah because a lot of the language in the early literature kind of you know talks about the gross stereotypes that Asian Americans [unintelligible].

00:27:54

ROBERT NAKAMURA

[overlapping] Yeah that, I'm sorry, I should've, yeah that was a given. I should've mentioned that that was a given, but there was— those were two different approaches to combating stereotypes, one is to make it into mainstream and reach this broad audience in order to change the stereotype images. And the other view, which was my personal view and generally VC's-- we felt the society will remain racist no matter what we do. You can't get rid of it, so the alternative is to make films for ourselves so that it counteracts the internalizing of these images. A lot of the damage that the stereotypes make is not necessarily on the majority society, but for the people themselves, because we tend to internalize a lot of it. So by doing more realistic and positive films about ourselves, we're able to counteract stereotypes, but that's a good question. So that's a little different. One is reaching a broad audience, giving us a human multidimensional image. And the other is aiming our films at the victims to help combat internalizing what they see in the mainstream.

00:29:40

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So that's a very good question, I think that's where you know different approaches— and that was I think part of our different approach.

00:29:53

PAULINE STAKELON

So let's talk about WATARIDORI and maybe how that plays into those philosophies then.

00:30:00

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well that was, as I said earlier, when my first photo-essays I did at Art Center was a day in the life of my father who was a gardener. I always wanted to do something about him, and that ties in with the early movement media as the— one thing we didn't have, we didn't have history. We're kind of out, if you don't have history, you don't exist. So part of ---a lot of work that people did—including MANZANAR and WONG SINSAANG, which was about Eddie's father—a lot of it was creating, or not creating but re-documenting our own history. So WATARIDORI was essentially that because I wanted to do a piece— I was going to do a piece on my, the whole piece on my father, but I felt that that didn't really represent the whole Japanese immigrant story. Not that one film could it , so I decided to use three people and that my father, who came--- who grew up in a fishing village and ate rice once a year, and lived on sweet potatoes for the rest of the year, and how he came over. And then Mrs. Sumi,

00:31:38 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

was a widow, gave us a story of Japanese women immigrants, and then Mr. Miura who was a good example of an adventurer or an entrepreneur. He just wanted, to come and see the world and he settled here. So the big questions and what— that's why I call it WATARIDORI, which means 'birds of passage,'—the big question was--- these people came over and they were planning not to stay here, but to make some money and go back, but they eventually stayed here and raised a family--- that was the question in the film--why they eventually stayed here as opposed to going back to Japan. Because my father was planning to come here and earn \$1000 and go back and buy a fishing boat. Right, that was his idea. But as he began to earn a living and meeting my mother, and planting roots, they eventually ended up staying. WATARIDORI really started out with wanting to do a film on my father's experience--- because I always wondered how he could work, nine hours a day and for six days a week at a very labor-intensive job,.

00:33:23 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

But I mean from my point of view, how can he do that? Then later when I interviewed him and really talked to him in depth, I realized where he came from and the economic situation he was in. So I wanted to capture all of that, so that's where WATARIDORI came from. I interviewed a lot of Issei, first generation immigrants, who were still around at that time. And tried to give an overview of their history, that's an important part of--- a lot of the movement was building culture, new Asian American culture, but also looking back into our past, to kind of reclaim or redo— not redo our history but to at least make it accessible. That's part of VC and our current Ethno program--- to document and preserve and present the Asian experience in America. And so documenting—that's why I love your project—it's just straight documenting our experience, and then preserving it, archiving it, and then presenting it. So those are three principles and like I have my students now-- I tell them that the piece that their going to create is important, but more important or as important are the interviews.

00:35:19 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So I make--- we make transcriptions part of the program--- transcribe and make many DVD dupes and essentially archive and really get the idea. All these interviews you do with this one piece, are as valuable as the piece that you create.

00:35:45 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Do you happen to know where the cuts and outs from that project or any of those interviews anywhere?

00:35:51 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

From WATARIDORI? You know did they tell you the tragedy at VC?

00:36:03

PAULINE STAKELON

What was—? I can't remember...

00:38:34

ADAM HYMAN

Let's just keep talking about WATARIDORI. We'll do HITO HATA later.

00:38:40

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah so WATARIDORI, we did it as my thesis film, and that was received fairly well because it wasn't very controversial, it was history, it was kind of nostalgic, and so it did very well in terms of community viewing. I think we put it in— I think for, in terms of festivals, we didn't send it out that much, there weren't that many Asian American film festivals and what not. And we couldn't afford sending prints out and everything. But I'm very happy with the film

00:39:52

PAULINE STAKELON

What did your father and mother interviewees, how did they feel about the film?

00:39:58

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh well my father was delighted, my parents they like anything. They loved anything, any film that I made. I think he really felt good about having his story kind of preserved. And I want to— I've interviewed my mom, not a whole lot but my son has interviewed her a lot more You know how the shoemaker's son has no shoes, you don't interview the people closest to you--- so that's a big mistake, but you know everyone makes that..

00:40:48

ADAM HYMAN

Is there anything else? Did non-Asians go and see WATARIDORI?

00:40:54

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah that one actually, it's, it was a crossover because it was historical, it's part of the immigrant, you know immigrants, part of the American story. So schools used it a lot and it was a little longish, I should've made it a little short. It would've been used in schools more often. It was the only mouse trap in town at the time as far as a film about Japanese Americans,. Actually that film kind of crossed over because there was nothing controversial about it, although I did have a camp sequence in there, but it wasn't too much. And so yeah a lot of non-Asian American school kids saw it, and it was so hard because you know projectors, and 16mm prints get scratched, and, it wasn't like sending out a DVD, so the distribution was a real issue unless it was on television or had broadcast.

[TAPE FIVE ENDS]

TAPE 6: ROBERT NAKAMURA

[START OF SECOND INTERVIEW]

00:01:12

ADAM HYMAN

But first, could you please say and spell your name?

00:01:15

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, Robert Nakamura, N-A-K-A-M-U-R-A.

00:01:36

PAULINE STAKELON

So we will start by talking about the filmmaking workshops and what kind of training was VC providing for filmmakers and, you know...

00:01:50

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Well, we didn't do that, until much later. So actually, I wasn't part of VC at that time. Remember VC was a production company when I was there. And then later, when the founding members left-- they had families and everything, and then it became more of a media arts center. So they did advocacy and fundraising for filmmakers. And then later, they started working, developing workshops. And so they would use community filmmakers, Asian-American filmmakers, editors, and they would do weekend workshops, but that was after my time.

00:02:45

PAULINE STAKELON

Do you know about when that started?

00:02:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Probably in the late '80s, yeah.

00:02:51

PAULINE STAKELON

Okay. Okay. So we can return to HITO HATA. If you could just start by talking about when you, you know, conceived this idea. Was it, you know, did VC kind of set out to create— when I read about it, often it is the first, you know, feature length Asian-American film.

00:03:18

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

We had done a lot of short documentary films, and we thought we would try a narrative piece that hopefully would reach a broader audience. We received funding from the Department of Education---which no longer exists. And that was through the Emergency School Aides Act, which was granting funds primarily to develop educational material [RN: about minority communities]. And I guess there were two things that we wanted to do in the film--- One was to develop a historical background because there was very little media then about Asian-Americans. The other was to deal with contemporary issues.

00:04:23 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So, in HITO HATA, we tried to combine it--- one element was historical about Japanese immigrant workers on the railroad and some of their experiences. And then there was an issue going on in Little Tokyo— urban renewal, gentrification. And so a lot of old retired—we called Issei—were in many of the hotels in Little Tokyo, and they were being evicted, so that was the contemporary issue. So the story kind of evolves about, around our main character, which I forgot the name now...

00:05:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Our main character...Oda, okay. And, anyway, our main character was one of the old retirees in a hotel was about to— the hotel was about to evict him. Through flashbacks we go back to the time when he was working on the railroad. So that was the concept to show contemporary issues and go back to the past and relate the past to the present.

00:06:14 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So and once again, remember, we tried---VC tried to work as a collective, so we all sat around and threw out ideas. And then we came up with this idea of the of Issei who's... [technical]

00:07:00 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Okay. Well, you are listed as, you're credited as the writer and co-director. So I knew you said you worked as a collective, but were there kind of specific roles that the other VC members had that you could delineate?

00:07:15 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

First of all, the idea and actually the script, was a collective effort. And so we--- John Esaki and myself would write a scene and then we'd sit down and kind of discuss and change things around, so that was the group process. Getting back to the story, it was very important for us because there was a movement to stop gentrification of Little Tokyo. We tried to make that the main issue--- the situation of the railroad workers was not that dissimilar.

00:08:47 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So the idea was from the group-- the collective. The script was written as a collective. And before, all of our films were done as a collective. But as we started--- this was a much larger project so we had to break down into groups, and so that's what we did. The first thing, first, I wouldn't say it's a problem, but challenge we had was to get our actors together. And we had very little money as you might guess. So we were able to get Mako, who was a very experienced actor. And he was in [THE] SAND PEBBLES and was—he was nominated for an Academy Award for supporting actor.

00:09:48 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

We approached Mako and he said he'd really love to do it.(I delited this section. I believe Mako worked for points and did not receive money and donate it back.) And once Mako came aboard, other actors h we approached decided they'd come on board. And so we had Yuki Shimoda, who was a very fine actor. He passed away [in 1981]. Then we had, let's see, who else? Yuki, Mako, and we had as our lead woman actor was an actress called Sachiko and she came from East-West Players.

00:11:14 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

And so, she came from there. And then we had one more character that we needed, and it was very difficult. And while we were looking around, one of our members suggested Pat Morita, and we thought we wouldn't be able to get him. But we approached him anyway and, yeah, he said he'd love to do a serious acting part rather than his comedy roles. So, we had our cast together, and I'm trying to remember what roles they played. But, anyway, Mako was Oda, who lived in a small hotel in Little Tokyo. He was a character who everyone knew in Little Tokyo. He's kind of a feisty old man and no one really knew about his past.

00:12:23 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So we painted him as kind of a very lonely person which a lot of the older Issei were, you know, they were bachelors because when they came over, there were really no Japanese women who immigrated at the same time. So they essentially were bachelors and lived their lives out in places like Little Tokyo--- in small hotels. And another element of the film was the family that ran the hotel. So we get a kind of a balanced— the two daughters of the owner of the hotel gave us a chance to portray younger points of view and growing up in Little Tokyo and generally being Japanese American and being women--- young ladies. So that was another element. Anyway, that was the main thread, and I'm trying to think of more detail on it...

00:13:58 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So we had some money, but we had to raise more funds. So we shot one sequence--- all the sequences in the past--- we shot all those scenes and edited it together to make a trailer so we could raise more money. And that was a railroad sequence and we shot in Laws, California, which is a few miles south of Bishop. And there was this railroad museum called the Laws Railroad Museum. One thing about working on a low-budget film with minority--- Asian-American themes-- everyone helped us out, so the museum let us use their trains and all of that at no cost, and so the sequences that we shot were the railroad sequences that, at that time, the, let's see...

00:15:19 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

One of the effects of the diet that the railroad workers had was night blindness. That was, well, it was essentially no fruits and vegetables, so that in our story Mako, Oda goes out and steals vegetables and comes back to help his colleagues and that's one person who was going blind. And so that was the main plot of his struggle and their struggle..

00:16:21 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Anyway, we shot that sequence, and we used it as a trailer to raise more money-- which we did. And so, we went into production for the rest of it.

00:16:35 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Where did you get that funding from?

00:16:37 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Donations, different small funding. [RN: This was funding beyond our US Office of Education grant.] And also we used the trailer to raise awareness within the Asian American--- in this case, Japanese-American communities because we're going to need a lot of cooperation. So it was the other reason we showed it around and everyone, I think, everyone realized what we're doing and so we were helped out everywhere. One good example is Little Tokyo, runs along 1st Street between Central and San Pedro And prior to our film, the Little Tokyo merchants never allowed any Hollywood, or any production to block off the street, they had a lot of offers because Little Tokyo is kind of colorful, but they allowed HITO HATA to--- we blocked the streets off.

00:17:48 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

We dressed First Street as 1936. And we setup something like a Nisei Week Parade, and we had a sequence where Mako, as a young man, meets his friend, which I forgot the name. Anyway, Oda meets...I should've reviewed the film...

00:18:14 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Anyway, there's a sequence where he meets...

00:18:25 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Anyway, he meets someone who, they become lifelong friends. So it was, a good example of— oh, yeah, and we had like three, four, 300 people show up in 1930s garb. We had to dress them a little bit more, but they came out and became the crowd. Another good example of community help as we were doing this sequence--- right in that area, there's a Buddhist church, Buddhist temple, and that was the area where L.A. Japanese-Americans were rounded up and put into buses to take them to a— we call it American concentration camp, near Lone Pine called Manzanar. So we wanted to create that whole scene.

00:19:35 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So we had buses and people dressed in military outfits. But we had our— once again, around 200 people showed up this time in 1940s clothing. And so, it's a good example of the kind of cooperation. We even had a sorority from [U]SC come out and served donuts and coffee and so there was a nice ambience— the local community really got behind the film. So we had total cooperation as far as using storefronts and shooting in restaurants and all of that.

00:20:23 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So, I think one of— the significance of that for us as VC and, Japanese-Americans, Asian-Americans, in general, was--- I think they really caught onto the idea of using film to portray our own story and essentially by ourselves as Asian-Americans so that...

00:20:57 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Yeah, there's a lot of side— and I think that's one of the faults of the film is we tried to cover too many pieces of experience. So another through line was one of Oda's friends— oh, yeah, I guess one of the, part of the plot was they— they were offering like \$500 to the old retirees to move out of Little Tokyo, as opposed to evicting them, which they eventually did. So one of the subplots was Mako's, one of his friends decided to take the \$500 and he ends up in skid row, so that was one of our sequences where Oda and Mako's apartment in the skid row hotel and talked about the old days. We put that in there--- that's what happened to a lot of the retirees. They ended up in skid row hotels.

00:22:31 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Can you describe what Little Tokyo was like at the time?

00:22:35 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

At the time we were...

00:22:37 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Well, this was at the time when the gentrification and evictions were, late '70s.

00:22:42 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, yeah. That was— historically, there were similar incidents--- like starting with Bunker Hill area had a lot of old Victorian housing which retired people lived in. And, of course, there was a promise, if they moved out, that there'd be low-cost housing, etc., etc.. Take a look at Bunker Hill today, that never happened. And then there was Chavez Ravine where a lot of Latino families were moved out and Dodger Stadium moved in. In every case, there was a promise of people being moved to, and offered low-cost housing which never--- it never happened.

00:23:45 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And Little Tokyo by virtue of the community organizing--there was a group called LTPRO [Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization], actually brought the situation to light, and there was a lot of resistance and eventually Little Tokyo was not changed. In fact, the whole one side of 1st Street was a designated as a historical site. So, it's pretty much the way it was. And, although now, it's finally happening and that's not a city government thing, it's just a matter of economics. And now there's condominiums and apartments being built. So, there is a slow gentrification of the Little Tokyo area--- Little Tokyo was very important to us all.

00:25:01 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Number one, that's one physical site where we can get good Japanese food. Then number two, it's seen a lot of historical aspects of Japanese American history-- from the early days of Japanese American truck farmers--it was quite a large truck farming industry, predominantly Japanese Americans. And there was a big produce area on 3rd Street, that was primarily run by Japanese Americans and there was also a big flower market.

00:25:46 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So, Little Tokyo was the focus on weekends of farmers and working people--they would come to eat. There was one of the first Buddhist temples, which is still there. It's part of the Japanese American National Museum. So it was quite an area where a lot of history took place. And as I said before, people were rounded up and moved from Little Tokyo to Manzanar. And so, we all felt that any kind of change--- they were taking what was left of our history. And so, there was, I think, fairly successful campaign against gentrification, although today it's happening on its own, so...

00:26:48 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Do you feel that the film also played a part in that movement?

00:26:52 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

You know, I don't-- I can't really say. I'd like to think it did. I think, probably the film's major impact on our community was the idea that media could be used to preserve and present our past and current issues. And later on, because we were about, I think 400,000, no, I forgot the, we were really in debt. I'm going to have to look up. And so, we had to raise money. And that was the beginning of forming what became the Friends of Visual Communications.

We went around showing the film all over the country and raised enough money to pay off our debts. That's when VC became known to a larger Asian-American audience, and because we showed HITO HATA all around.

00:28:18 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Was the debt from the film or...?

00:28:19 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, for, [laugh] from the film. It was, yeah, we went all out for it. And even if things were given to us free---we shot it in 16 millimeter, because we couldn't afford 35. And we had the, oh, yeah, another subplot. Once, we tried— it's not even a subplot but part of the purpose of part of the film was to kind of paint a picture-- Little Tokyo was kind of a character in the film, because we go back to the '30s when it was becoming a community,

00:29:37 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

There was a lot of changes going on and where, in the story, people rallied together and stopped the urban renewal and destruction of Little Tokyo. So, Little Tokyo an expensive part of our budget, because we had to recreate the '30s, and then later the '40s and all of that, so it was very expensive going back into the past.

00:30:21 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So that was— what were some of the other challenges that you faced?

00:30:25 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Challenges, mostly money, production funds, because--- although it was very intense, I think all of us enjoyed the production. I mean, not the long hours, but the fact that we had community backing. So, I think there was a buzz because we had all the actors essentially working for free and we were able to close down Little Tokyo to shoot. And then we head down Keiro Nursing Home where Mako has—our lead Oda—has a stroke and he's in this nursing home. And so they opened up the whole nursing home for us and we were able to shoot. So every place we went--- we had this great cooperation. and all of us at VC were kind of buzzed about that, so that kept us going.

00:31:51 **PAULINE STAKELON**

How long did it take you to complete the film?

00:31:54 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, from script to shooting the railroad sequences to finish it up, I think probably, year and a half, although our production, actual production time was probably 30 days or so. I think I'm going to have to look a lot of that up. So...

00:32:24 **PAULINE STAKELON**

And so maybe you can talk about how it was received. You screened it a lot in L.A. and then you took it on the road.

00:32:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA

We premiered it at the Music Center, which, once again they let us have it at no cost. and so it was a big, big premiere. It was great. We had all the Asian-American celebrities and political people come. And so it was a big affair. I even wore tux, that's how—I hate to even wear a suit. It was a very successful premiere. We never got the national PBS National Broadcast, but we had local KCET and other local stations around the country run it.

00:33:27

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Our most notable screening was in Japan. NHK did a national broadcast and they had—after the screening—they broadcast a panel discussion, the film was discussed and very popular in Japan. Probably, more so than here, but it was quite nice. Nice is not the word, it was well received and the panelist were all educators and they were talking about the Japanese American experience. So it was— otherwise, we showed it from place to place, and local PBS stations screened it and— oh, that's right, and we had a couple of fundraisings, screenings at a local theater somehow-- one was the Kokusai Theatre.

00:34:54

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

The screening was donation only and then later, someone, I guess someone reported us, so then SAG wanted \$20,000 from us because HITO HATA played in the theater even if we were asking for donations. So we tried to bring pressure on them not do it, but they stuck by it, so we had to pay. I think it was \$20,000 which we thought was totally, totally unfair. And so that's a little side story. And let's see...

00:35:40

PAULINE STAKELON

So I imagine the community that had participated in Little Tokyo, probably very excited to see the film and...

00:35:48

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah. Yeah, they were. We were all starved to see ourselves in the media-- to kind of validate that we exist. And so I think that was what— I think they liked our short documentaries, but I think to see their history in narrative form--- the film was well received and especially, obviously, in the Japanese American community. But in, you know, in terms of other Asian-Americans-- - we have a lot of young people who said after seeing HITO HATA, they decided, they'd like to go into filmmaking.

00:36:52

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

I think that's another side benefit that HITO HATA did—I hate to use the word inspired—but essentially inspired a lot of young people to go into film, a lot of Asian Americans to go into filmmaking. That was something else that HITO HATA did. So, oh, and the full title is HITO HATA: RAISE THE BANNER--- that comes from early Isseis who immigrated to the US. They were planning not to stay here, but to make some money and go back. And they use the phrase “hito hata ageru”, and that means to come over here and raise their own flag. You know, that's essentially to come here, make their money, raise their flag and then go back, so that's where we got the title. Hito means, “hito hata” means one flag.

end of tape

TAPE 7: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:37 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Yeah. There's another part of HITO HATA, and you talk about cooperation, is the jazz fusion band, Hiroshima—Dan and June Kuramoto. Dan was kind of the founding member, and they did the whole music score. Once again, it wasn't totally free because they had to pay other musicians and mix time and all of that. But they did the whole score which I think was a really great part of the film that kind of captured the audience.

00:01:22 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

In the opening sequence, once again, Little Tokyo, the more and more I think about it, it was kind of main character. Because we open up at and we have Nisei Week and that's in addition to the parade. We have a big carnival, and so we open up and we meet Oda in the carnival throwing ping-pong balls to win fish. So he's introduced that way.

00:02:00 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

But then with the bright lights of the carnival, he leaves and you see him go back up to his kind of solitary and dingy hotel. He had won a goldfish playing the ping-pong ball game, and so he brings the goldfish back. We tried to paint the picture of him in a lot of other senior Issei living out their lives. But so Little Tokyo, we played that part, and then later in the flashback, they have the Nisei Week parade.

00:02:45 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So from the restaurants, the hotels, to eviction to urban renewal. So actually, Little Tokyo was probably one of the major characters in the film, yeah, because all of us used that as kind of an icon of someplace to go, someplace you can feel comfortable because there's the food, and you look like everyone else in the street.

00:03:21 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Not today, because we have a lot of tourists now, but during the early days, that was kind of a refuge, a place to come. So, I'm trying to think of more. We had Pat Morita in the film. We had him do a slight Hawaiian accent because we had a lot early Isseis worked in the plantations in Hawaii, and so we hinted at that, we didn't go into it.

00:04:02 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

But his character was the disillusioned Issei, although there was kind of a protest and organizing going on in Little Tokyo. He had given up, and he says, that's not going to work. I think that's one of the more dramatic scenes. He's on the roof, he raises pigeons, and he's letting all of his pigeons go, like symbolizing being evicted.

00:04:41 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So that was a really good scene where he says, I'm going to go all out. I'm going to do this, and we have only one take and then he really pulled that scene off. So that was I think one of the better scenes in there, and Pat was really happy with it, because he's known as a comedian or funny guy. So I think he really enjoyed playing that character. I'm trying to think of other aspects of it...

00:05:25 **PAULINE STAKELON**

How was it for you to direct actors?

00:05:31 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Difficult. Because both Duane and I—Duane Kubo and I—we...

00:05:37 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Could you spell Duane Kubo's name?

00:05:40 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

D-U-A-N-E Kubo K-U-B-O. So other than film school, most of our work was done in the documentary form. Although, as I said, we had so much cooperation with various actors, and Mako, who was probably the most experienced, really helped us in terms of directing the actors and handling the situation. So Mako gave us a lot of on-the-spot training.

00:06:27 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And a lot of the actors through East West Players were pretty experienced. So I think between their help and well, a lot of help from the actors themselves, we got through. I think one of the big faults of the film is that we needed to edit it down. We could have, but we just ran out of time and money, because it needed a lot more editing, as there was a lot of fat and long scenes in there. But we just ran out.

00:07:05 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So I think with really tighter editing and maybe elimination of a couple scenes, it'd be a much stronger film but, you know, you can't— we were fortunate to just get it done at the time.

00:07:21 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Where and how did you do the editing?

00:07:24

ROBERT NAKAMURA

We had a loft right on Third Street. It was very nice. We had the whole third floor. So we had about— oh, wait... We had two locations in Little Tokyo, and I'm trying to think of where we did most of the editing... You know, I can't, I don't know what location it was. We had a place of First Street above a kind of a confectionary.

00:08:28

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

They would make what we call manju, which were Japanese sweets. And they let us use the second floor. So we had two editing bays in there. I guess they're not really editing bays. Then later we moved into a loft on Third Street and we had the whole third floor. I know we had three editing spaces there plus a screening area. I really forgot which— we might have worked in both of them, but I'm going to have to look that up.

00:09:12

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Alan Kondo was really in charge of post-production, because he was one of the few people who actually had editing experience—so-called “professional editing” So he edited most of the film. I mean, everyone— there was a lot of us kind of helping out in terms of pasting things together, but Alan essentially did most of the editing, supervised post-production.

00:10:00

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

We did a lot of things at UCLA because we had friends still there, and we would use some of the mix rooms there late at night. So we did a lot of work at UCLA, undercover work late at night. I know sometimes we would work in shifts, you know, I'd sleep eight hours and then work six, and then the next person would take over. So it was fairly intense, as probably all post-production is.

00:10:45

ROBERT NAKAMURA

You shoot in video so you wouldn't know [laugh] how difficult it was doing film on a shoestring budget.

00:11:02

PAULINE STAKELON

So what was the impact of VC itself after completing this feature-length film?

00:11:07

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, that's actually a very good question, because I think HITO HATA kind of burned us all out, at least the founding members. A combination of really being burned out, being in debt, and we were all getting older, and we all had families. So that was, I think, the pivotal point where the old VC kind of stopped, and the new VC began. So a lot of us, Eddie Wong and Duane Kubo, and Alan Ohashi, a lot of us kind of phased out.

00:11:59 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So a new generation took over and that was first Nancy Araki became the director of VC. They moved to a much smaller location at the Japanese-American Community [&] Cultural Center, and later moved into a larger place on San Pedro. So it, you know, just by virtue I think of the new VC people, and the old guard leaving, it became less of a production company. But there was an evolution there and eventually it became more a media art center with very little production.

00:13:15 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

But there was a transition there. I'm trying to remember the sequencing. But I know we were always trying to reach out to different Asian-American Pacific Islander communities trying to recruit filmmakers or young people who wanted to make film, so it would reflect a little more of the community besides Chinese-American and Japanese-American.

00:13:55 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So we did a film called OMAI FA'ATASI, and it was about this Samoan community primarily out of the Carson area. So we had a lot of Samoan young people working on the production. We were hoping then we could get some of the young people interested in filmmaking. The film was about young people and we had a lot of vocabulary that's not used in— anyway, the young people were speaking in their kind of own street language, and there was a lot of, you know, “motherfucker” and all that in there.

00:15:00 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So the Samoan community—which the elders are very, very religious—they really spoke to us about doing a one-sided view of the Samoan community. So we did a second film called VAITAFE which kind of gave an immigrant story, a young person immigrating into the Samoan community here in Carson. So we kind of did two different films. And let's see... As I said, Linda Mabalot who was Philippina.

00:15:44 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Can you spell her last name, please?

00:15:47 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

You know, M-A... you know, I don't— I'd have to write it down. It's Mabalot, and I'd have to look that up. But Linda, when she became director, one of the things she wanted to do of course is do a little more of Philippino-American history. So they did a couple pieces. They tried to do a narrative longer, but they ended up as a short narrative called QUIET THUNDER, and it was kind of based on the younger days of Carlos Bulosan, who wrote...[RN: America Is In The Heart] anyway, Bulosan was a very well known Philippino-American writer.

00:16:49 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Anyway, they ended up with a short narrative piece, and then they did a documentary on the Agbayani Village, which was a...I don't know what you would call that area, essentially supporting— it was like a retirement home for Philippino farm workers. And it's still there, and they run a lot of senior programs.

00:17:29 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Once again, it's the old bachelors who worked, and because there was no access to Philippina women to marry and everything, many ended up being bachelors. So anyway, there was this kind of move to bring in other filmmakers and do other stories about other communities. So, there was a transition there, but eventually VC decided to become more of an advocate to really support Asian-American filmmaking. They helped young filmmakers raise money, or they became an umbrella organization and worked as fiscal agents, sponsors.

00:18:39 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So it became a totally different organization. I think Linda Mabalot, Nancy Araki, Steve Tatsukawa, and I forgot who the other people were, but they formed NAATA, the National Association of Asian-American Telecommunication [Assosiation]. And NAATA became CAAM, Center for Asian-American Media. So VC was actually quite influential all over, because NAATA—which became CAAM—became the funding agent for PBS—Corporation for Public Broadcasting money. They became the funnel for it.

00:19:36 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So these were national organizations?

00:19:39 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

It's in the Bay area. It's actually quite a large operation now, but their job was to funnel money to Asian-American projects, and the money was primarily from Corporation for Public Broadcasting. And they're still doing it today. In fact, as I said, my son is doing a film, and it essentially came through CAAM, so they're still very active. But I just wanted to point out that VC kind of went beyond what we know as VC today.

00:20:20 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Because some of the members created that organization.

00:20:28 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So how did your own filmmaking progress then after HITO HATA, and your relationship with VC, and when did you start to work more?

00:20:38

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Let's see. Well, I have to backtrack, and I think I might have said it in the other interview, was that for better or worse, my filmmaking didn't advance as much as I would have liked to because maybe being older and being one of the organizers of VC, I ended up doing a lot more administrative work as director. So part, you know, raising money and fronting off VC to different community organizations.

00:21:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Everyone else got to make films, and I didn't. Except for HITO HATA, the only other film I did was my thesis film, WATARIDORI. I mean, we all worked on the other productions, but yeah. My filmmaking experience could have, yeah, you know, I wish I could have done more film work.

00:21:58

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So except for HITO HATA which was kind of very—I don't want to say traumatic, but in terms of first time working with actors in a narrative form. So being kind of burnt out both mentally and financially, I went to San Diego and got a job teaching actually photography, not filmmaking, at San Diego Community College, which I really actually enjoyed.

00:22:40

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Because the photography courses were offered through the vocational training part of community college, so I didn't have to deal with style, you know, it was strictly vocational training. So I taught essentially commercial and advertising photography and I really enjoyed that, because the students were very diverse and a great mixture of students there in terms of both economic status and ethnicity. So I enjoyed it for a couple years, and then I got very tired of San Diego and I kept going back to L.A.

00:23:43

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So I really didn't do any filmmaking for quite a while, for—let's see, a couple— oh, you know, I'm getting my— I'm sorry.

00:23:56

ADAM HYMAN

Well, the next...

00:23:57

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I'm sorry. Before then is when I came back. That's when we did HITO HATA. I'm sorry, yeah. I'm getting my burnt out part— I told you I was going to do this. Okay. Let me resequence that. I personally was burnt out of doing administrative work and not making films, and that's when I went to San Diego, also trying to patch up my marriage and all of that, which I didn't succeed.

00:24:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So I went to San Diego to take a steady job. That's where I met my wife—I don't want to say current wife—but I met Karen Ishizuka there. Both of us wanted to come back to Los Angeles, because San Diego at that time was very laid back, very quiet, and actually very white. So we wanted to move back to Los Angeles.

00:25:27 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And just by chance, we were visiting L.A., and we were eating in the Japanese restaurant on Sawtelle [Blvd.], and the director of the Asian-American Studies Center at UCLA, Lucy Cheng, was eating there and she said, would I be interested in a teaching position at UCLA. It'd be a joint appointment with film, television and Asian American Studies. It would be a tenure track, etc., etc. And of course I jumped at the opportunity.

00:26:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So I started teaching at UCLA. It was during that time that I kind of went back to work with VC, and that's when we did HITO HATA. So I'm getting things mixed up. So after HITO HATA, I guess two things: I had to kind of really leave VC is that we that we had our son, Tad. In fact we used him, when he was a week old, we used him in the evacuation from Little Tokyo sequence.

00:27:02 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So I had family and then a full-time job. So that's why it was very stressful, because I was teaching, and I had a family and I was doing HITO HATA at the same time. So I'm sorry. I told you I'd mix [laugh] ...

00:27:20 **PAULINE STAKELON**

That's okay.

00:27:21 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

...mix things up. But anyway, yeah. So from there, after we did HITO HATA, and once again, I might be getting my sequencing mixed up. But my wife, Karen Ishizuka, wrote a play called...anyway, she wrote a play which I directed. The purpose of it was to—and I'm gonna ramble a little bit—but during that time, there was a big movement for redress and reparations for the Japanese Americans who went to camp.

00:28:13 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So there was a big movement and the government had formed a committee, an congressional investigating committee, and they were holding hearings at large areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles. So we were really concerned at that time that the Nisei generation, and some of the Issei who were most impacted by the camp experience, that they would not testify before the committee because—and that's another story that Niseis had a tendency not to talk about camp—because they looked at it as kind of a prison record even if they were really totally innocent of anything.

00:29:13 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So Karen wrote a play called THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER, and I directed that. So that was kind of easing back into media. After that, I think I did CONVERSATIONS: BEFORE THE WAR/AFTER THE WAR.

00:29:43 **PAULINE STAKELON**

You did FOOL'S DANCE too.

00:29:45 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, okay, FOOL'S DANCE. Oh, yeah. Fool's Dance, yeah.

00:29:49 **PAULINE STAKELON**

1983.

00:29:50 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Okay. Yeah. FOOL'S DANCE, we received a grant from CPB [Corporation for Public Broadcasting]. It was a series called MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH. So Karen had written a play essentially— I mean, a script about a very eccentric Buddhist senior who comes to a convalescent home and essentially disrupts everything. The character Saichi was played by Mako. And in Buddhist literature—or history—they've had people called Myokonin who were just naturally enlightened.

00:30:54 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So historically there was a character called Saichi, and he was a woodworker, and he would take shavings from wood and write these kind of poems. So he was considered a Myokonin, which means naturally enlightened. So we put the character of Saichi into a contemporary convalescent home. We were able fortunately enough to get Esther Rolle to play the lead female part.

00:31:38 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And it's about this seemingly crazy guy Saichi coming and essentially talking about the Buddhist view of life and death. So that was that film, which I thought came off very well and got a lot of the ideas of the Buddhist way, is not fearing death and not missing the person who died, that that's a natural cycle of life and death. So it got funded by CPB.

00:32:29

PAULINE STAKELON

And it aired on PBS?

00:32:32

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah. Yeah. It aired on PBS.

00:32:35

PAULINE STAKELON

You did that without VC?

00:32:37

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah. That was because if you don't publish, you'll perish, right? So my publishing—which was great—I made film or theater pieces That was without VC, although I worked with quite a few VC people in post-production and Dan Kuramoto did the music. Once again, that was working especially with Esther, but I had a little more directing experience, so it wasn't as traumatic as doing HITO HATA.

00:33:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So that was FOOL'S DANCE. And I think I did CONVERSATIONS: BEFORE THE WAR/AFTER THE WAR, and that was kind of—at least for me—a little more experimental, because I had done a lot of interviews of camp and World War II experience, and I was thinking of doing a documentary.

00:34:12

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

But number one, trying to edit a lot of the interviews was getting very difficult, and I would end up with an hour piece that I didn't think was going to work, because I couldn't really find a through line, you know, even for the documentary. So what I did is, I used non-actors, non-professional actors, but working not with a total script, but with a rough outline, and they did a lot of reading of the interviews that we had done.

00:34:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So I had them take on the character of some of the people that we had interviewed, or a kind of composite. And I used my mother, and she was in camp, so she used part of her experience and then I coached her in other areas, so I'd get stories about actually myself.

00:35:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

I coached her in terms of the time we were walking along the barbed wire and I asked her if she can make a strawberry shortcake because that was my favorite, and she explaining that she couldn't do that. So we used that. And then we had another, once again, non-actress, Grace Ino do essentially the Nisei, the younger Nisei part. And once again, she read quite a few transcripts, kind of digested it, and we talked it over.

00:36:17 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So they were done kind of extemporaneously. Then we had Warren Furutani. In that case he was taking the part of his father. His father had talked to him a lot about the camp experience, and so he read other transcripts. But, he was essentially playing his father, and actually Warren is one of our assembly persons now. But anyway, so for me it was experimental in that we used the experiences of the non-actors themselves reading transcripts of interviews, and a little bit of coaching.

00:37:13 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So we did that piece.

00:37:20 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Where was that screened?

00:37:24 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Gee...that made local television, but a lot of it was community screenings and it was used in the classroom to talk about camp. Then the next...

00:37:51 **PAULINE STAKELON**

The next one...

00:37:53 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

...the next one...

00:37:54 **PAULINE STAKELON**

THROUGH OUR OWN EYES?

00:37:55 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Oh, okay, yeah. So during that time, I had been working with various organizations in the community, and there was talk about establishing a Japanese-American museum essentially. So I was kind of part of that beginning, the museum became the Japanese-American National Museum, which started out in that same Buddhist temple right in Little Tokyo where people were shipped off to Manzanar.

00:38:46 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

I essentially started the Media Arts Center. So it was less a media part of the museum. In fact, it wasn't an AV department or anything. We established it as a media center, and that's what we had done a lot of production. So the first one was **THROUGH OUR OWN EYES**, and that was a three-screen project.

00:39:28 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And just backing up, Karen and myself, as part of the beginning of the museum, we were trying to establish an archive, starting way back. Remember I said we wanted to do things on Asian-Americans, but there was no material. So that was kind of a continuation of that, except we had a little more money through the museum. So we were traveling around, gathering not artifacts, but gathering still photographs, historical photographs.

00:40:09 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

When we were in Seattle, this one woman said her grandfather had film footage, would be interested in? We never thought about that. So yeah, we said yes, we'd really like to see them, and they went back into the 1930s. Her grandfather had shot Japanese-Americans in the logging industry, or just in family life. It was just fantastic.

00:40:42 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So then we began to look for more footage and for some reason Japanese-Americans loved film and photography, and that's, you know, the stereotype... [technical]

END OF TAPE 7

TAPE 8: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:43

PAULINE STAKELON

Okay. So the first question was, when did you start teaching at UCLA?

00:00:48

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay. It was '79, '80 (1979) when I started teaching there. And I guess one of the highlights of it was I was working a brand-new job as Assistant Professor, we were shooting HITO HATA and I had a son, so that was a very hectic time in my life. But teaching at UCLA was very good at the beginning because my old mentor, John Young, who started the Ethno Communications program at UCLA, was then chair. So he kind of— I knew him very well and he took me under his wing in going through the academic— climbing the ladder and doing work.

00:01:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And so John helped me a lot. And it was great because my publishing was making film. If you can't make a living making film, then teaching it is second best because I had summertime to work on pieces and winter breaks and breaks— I mean, Christmas breaks and breaks between quarters.

00:02:57

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So UCLA was... [technical]

00:03:21

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Starting out at UCLA. So my old mentor who was the faculty in charge of Ethno Communications program back in the early '70s, was chair of the department and allowed me to make films that I wanted to make.

00:03:56

ADAM HYMAN

What did happen to the Ethno Communications program that you had been in in the early '70s, at this point that you described?

00:04:04

ROBERT NAKAMURA

The Ethno program, lasted for three, about three years. And I think there was an impact in terms of filmmakers of color, but the program ended. And, but a lot of Ethno Communications people went out on their own, like we did as Visual Communications. And let's see. Some of the, there was Larry Clark was Ethno Communications person who went on to make a couple of films, but he ended up as a teacher and a dean at...I forgot where.

00:05:26

ADAM HYMAN

At Santa Cruz. We went through some of those last time...

00:05:07 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Oh okay, alright. But it, essentially, I think, in three years, disappeared, you know? I kind of brought it back as part of the Asian American Studies Center documentary film program. And I decided to call it Ethno Communications just because it was kind of nostalgic and also was, I thought it was fitting, you know?

00:05:43 **PAULINE STAKELON**

When did you bring that title back?

00:05:46 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

It's, I think '96. And it was the Asian American Studies Center— I was thinking of retiring or going on to other places, and the director of Asian American Studies Center, Don Nakanishi, said, you know, why don't you come over to Asian American Studies? And he knew about my work at VC and early Ethno. And he said that they'd like a program like that, but in this case to teach Asian American Studies students or people who are not necessarily interested in going into filmmaking, but wanting to— or that's what I wanted to teach-- was to expose students to the potential of media, the importance of it in terms of the invisibility of people of color.

00:06:57 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

And so that's the main reason for the course, although the courses are— it's a three-quarter course. We're getting a lot of good, really good students in, yeah.

00:07:16 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So it's kind of like a certificate of, like...

00:07:18 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

No, it's not.

00:07:19 **PAULINE STAKELON**

...studies or...

00:07:20 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

It's part of the Asian American Studies Department curriculum. And the idea is documenting community—but it goes beyond communities of color. So, again, there's all kinds of students coming into the courses, and they do amazing work in three quarters because--- I wasn't planning for such elaborate productions. I just wanted, at the beginning, just expose them to things like VC and Ethno Communications and the idea of using media. And, but it became more and more of a hands-on series, and now it's— actually, they do learn quite a bit of shooting and editing and so forth.

00:08:35 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So just to be clear, it's housed in the Asian American Studies...

00:08:41

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah.

00:08:41

PAULINE STAKELON

...department, but it's teaching— but do you work with the film department at all?

00:08:46

ROBERT NAKAMURA

No, no, no.

00:08:48

PAULINE STAKELON

But, and students from anywhere can take it?

00:08:50

ROBERT NAKAMURA

So we have films about gay and lesbian communities, films about, oh, let's see, gay, lesbian, elderly. There's a lot of, foster parents stories. So there's a whole variety. So community is very broadly defined. And I totally enjoy it because of the content of the students' work--- as opposed to teaching in a film school. There's nothing— I'm not complaining, but in film school, you have students, especially graduate students, who come in and in many cases---they don't want to make film.

00:09:58

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

They want to be filmmakers. And so [laugh] there's a certain, well, there's just a totally different approach to filmmaking in a film school. And to me, teaching the Ethno Communications gives me the best of two worlds. And I think I'd be retired by now if it wasn't for teaching those courses. It's very— you can see the students becoming aware of media and the importance of documenting their own communities. So it's also about documenting and preserving and then presenting. But the presenting is not— is just as important as preserving. They do, obviously, interviews, and we have them transcribe it and we keep it. We are trying to archive everything because it's just like what you are doing except we're getting people's stories from all over.

00:11:26

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Wherever the students go, we have them transcribe. That's part of their requirements--- transcriptions, releases and all of that. So in addition to putting together a film, we teach about documenting and preserving their communities-- the importance of that.

00:11:55

PAULINE STAKELON

Do you keep a copy of their films or...?

00:11:57

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah. You know, they're in the Asian American Studies Center library and we keep a copy. We just had an Ethno Communications retrospective at the Hammer Museum--- that was actually quite nice. It was in the Billy Wilder Theater, which was the best projection and sound that I've ever heard. And so it was good because we had former students come in. And it became kind of a reunion so...

00:12:47

PAULINE STAKELON

Have any of those students gone on to...?

00:12:49

ROBERT NAKAMURA

A few of them gone on into--- yeah, some of them are editors now and we have quite a few kind of Ethno Communications programs in other communities. There's a Filipino media arts organization that works with young people from Belmont High, and we have another group that work with young filmmakers in Chinatown. So there are, you know, there are students who are going out and doing their own work in, media work in communities. And I think the real benefit of that is that they come out with really an idea of what media can do and the importance of it in terms of the history of their own particular community, and preserving that and continuing dealing with issues, current issues. And so I think that awareness of it is one of the benefits.

00:14:18

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Not everyone runs out to be a filmmaker because we didn't start with that idea. So what we tried to tell students on their first day or I tell them that if they're coming in to, for self-expression or art, this is not the place, that we talk about using media to serve community. And that was— back in the '70s that was the idea, to serve the people. And VC had that idea in mind so that's kind of a carryover of the importance of media and using media to serve community.

00:15:12

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So that's kind of carryover from Ethno to VC and to, well, to the Media Arts Center at the Museum [Japanese American National Museum] and to our Ethno Communications. I think if we had to put, at least, our approach to media, it's the idea of serving community as opposed to self-expression art, you know, that kind of— it's a different approach.

00:15:47

PAULINE STAKELON

Mm-hmm. Okay. Do you want to then backtrack to the Media Arts Center?

00:15:52

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah. The Media Arts Center began with the beginning of the Japanese American National Museum. For me, I took about a two-year leave from UCLA and I was asked to do some of the... establish some media program or archival program. And that's when I got the idea of not being attached to the archival department or becoming AV department program for the museum, but establish a media arts program where, number one, we would be a production component of the museum, that we would work with the designers, the curators from the beginning of putting together an exhibit. So one of our first project was **THROUGH OUR OWN EYES** and that was utilizing the early home movies by Japanese Americans.

00:17:15

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And I think we really captured the feel of the 1930s and '40s through those home movies, We really looked at that as a real documentation of our history and it was very exciting finding footage of the early Issei and their still black and white prints. I think it's cultural, you know? You have the stereotype of the Japanese with cameras. Well, some of that is— I don't know what it is. Culturally, the Japanese and Japanese Americans have always been fascinated with photography and film. So that's why we did it in a three-screen format.

00:18:20

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Because we had so many, so much film, wonderful film footage that the best way—without narration and just with music—so you can just see the images of the home movies. So the home movies were portrayed, presented as home movies, not as illustrations for documentaries, with a voice-over or anything like that. So the three-screen worked as we can show three views of whatever was happening like we had an early Obon dancing... [technical; recorder off]

00:19:12

PAULINE STAKELON

So we were talking about **THROUGH OUR OWN EYES** and the three-screen projection.

00:19:17

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And so you're able to do close-ups and wide shots at the same time, and in many cases, we can use text and keep images going. And it was kind of like a loop so, it was designed so you could come in and start anywhere. But it featured a lot of farming and city life. And it gave me a whole different perspective on early Japanese Americans, because I thought they were all farmers and small business people. But the collection that found in Seattle, the woman's grandfather owned the lumber company and was quite wealthy and had a lot of people working for him.

00:20:22 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Seeing Japanese lumberjacks totally breaks a lot of stereotypes because we have some real nice footage of them, you know, moving logs down the river. So I think part of that was breaking stereotypes of—even for us—early Issei experience. You know, and it was good and give everyone a sense of continuity--- we have what we call Obon, that's a day to remember people who passed. And so they have dancing and seeing the same kind of dancing going on, you know, in the '30s that we see today. So it was quite, I think was very successful and it was planned as a loop where people would stop and look at it and leave. But eventually, people would just stop and watch the whole thing so we had to put benches out there--- we didn't anticipate that much interest. And...

00:21:38 **PAULINE STAKELON**

So was that film made to coincide with the opening of the museum?

00:21:43 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, yeah.

00:21:44 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

It was a part of the opening and that's when it was housed in just the Buddhist temple. Later they built the whole pavilion area, you know? So, and that collecting home movies, and Karen's written a couple books on using home movies as history and so we continued and then, I'm kind of jumping probably around but...

00:22:19 **PAULINE STAKELON**

Well, have you established an archive? Was that the footage that you collected for the exhibition?

00:22:25 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, yeah and that was...

00:22:27 **PAULINE STAKELON**

That's going to an archive at the museum?

00:22:28 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. We would make, at that time, Betacam SP masters on everything. The telecine was expensive but what we had everything, telecined then, so we have quite a good home movie archive at the museum. And then one of the offshoot— oh it was an offshoot but starting with the home movies, later as we were doing that, someone said, well, my uncle shot film in camp. You know, we had seen stills that people have shot in the camps, but he said her uncle had 8-millimeter film footage and then we acquired those and then we asked around because we never even thought about people shooting home movies in camp. And so that was— as we asked, we found a lot of film footage.

00:23:38 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

First, people just smuggled cameras in and then had people bring film and they'd mail it off to Eastman Kodak to get processed. It's pretty interesting--- then later, everything loosened up in camp because I think the government realized that, you know, what they did was a big waste of time. So things were loosened and then people could bring in cameras in, order cameras through Sears and Roebuck, so there was a lot of footage still shot in camp. But then, later, it wasn't surreptitiously shot. So, and then we used that footage in another film...I'm blanking out... [technical]

00:24:44 **PAULINE STAKELON**

SOMETHING STRONG WITHIN?

00:24:47 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

Yeah. [laugh] **SOMETHING STRONG WITHIN**, we did totally with home movies and that was once again presenting home movies as home movies, not as B-roll for documentary. And so, we really— yeah, once again just had music written by Dan Kuramoto. We thought we'd use it to do a documentary, kind of **THROUGH OUR OWN EYES** kind of idea, but this time, do a documentary and we started writing, yeah, the voice-over and everything and then realized this is not going to work and because all we're doing is--- we're doing a camp documentary which, you know...

00:25:49 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

...there are plenty of documentaries about the concentration camp experience. So we presented, once again, home movies as home movies. In fact, we edited to keep it, you know— and left frames, blank frames and exposure flashes and lot of things in there. Although it was edited, it doesn't look edited, and so I think it was very successful. And the title comes from a quote from Yuri Kochiyama, who was probably our most revered activist and, so she said...I forgot the whole...I'll remember it.

00:26:59 **ADAM HYMAN**

Can you spell her name, please?

00:27:00 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Kochiyama, K-O-C-H-I-Y-A-M-A. So, yeah, she was, she worked with early civil rights movement, and, yeah, she was quite an activist. She started even in camp, and she's like in her 80s now, still very active. So we used a quote from her which is famous and then I can't remember, but it'll come to me. You know, so...

00:27:47 **PAULINE STAKELON**

And you did that one in 1994. And did that screen also at the Japanese American [National Museum]?

00:27:53

ROBERT NAKAMURA

That was part of the idea of the Media Arts Center -- we would become part of the planning of the exhibits, as opposed to a curator just saying we need a film about this and we need a loop portraying this. So we...

00:28:23

PAULINE STAKELON

So you would create films for exhibiting?

00:28:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA

But we would be in on the concept purely, concept as opposed to the curators only.

00:28:33

PAULINE STAKELON

What other filmmakers were working with, or as part of Media Arts Center?

00:28:37

ROBERT NAKAMURA

We had John Esaki, who is now the director of the Media Arts Center. We had, I guess one of our most famous alumni is Justin Lin, who did BETTER LUCK TOMORROW. And he's now making FAST & FURIOUS films. But Justin has, well, worked for us. And then as part of the permanent exhibit, we did a 12-screen— eight-screen kind of stand alone piece. And Justin did all of that--- that's a multi-screen piece that gives you a flavor for Japanese Americans in the early days using home movies to contemporary times and...

00:29:49

PAULINE STAKELON

What was the name of that piece?

00:29:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA

You know, I'm blanking on the... (J-Town Rhapsody)

00:29:58

PAULINE STAKELON (CONTINUED)

Is it still screening there?

00:29:59

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yeah, yeah. It still— and that was before computers and, I mean, we can do it real easy now, but this was then with laser discs, some really old, now old technology but its still running and THROUGH OUR OWN EYES is, it's still running, in the permanent exhibit also. So they're getting their money's worth out of the productions...

00:30:35

PAULINE STAKELON

Mm-hmm.

00:30:35

ROBERT NAKAMURA

...you know?

00:30:36

PAULINE STAKELON

And so were there any other aspects of the Media Arts Center that you haven't covered and...

00:30:41

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well...

00:30:42

PAULINE STAKELON

...you established an archive...?

00:30:44

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Yes, established an archive. And I think, you know, a lot of the pieces we did for exhibits— there was one on Japanese Americans and the military, and so we did a film that I've always wanted to do. It's called **LOOKING LIKE THE ENEMY**. And it's experience of Asian Americans through World War II, Vietnam War, Korean War, where they all had the face of the enemy, and there's stories of them mistaken as the enemy, or being wounded and left there, because they look like the enemy. So, I'm very proud of that piece because it brought out a lot stories that have never been told.

00:31:42

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, and through the view of Asian Americans looking at Vietnamese, Asian people being totally mistreated, and their kind of emotion to that. We did a lot of good interviewing and archiving of the experiences of Asian Americans in three different wars.

00:32:19

PAULINE STAKELON

And then, one film that we missed in the chronology was **MOVING MEMORIES** from 1992.

00:32:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Oh, **MOVING MEMORIES**—because we did **THROUGH OUR OWN EYES**—people said, can we get a copy of it? We couldn't do a three-screen copy. So we re-edited it and did it as **Moving MemORIES**..

00:32:54

PAULINE STAKELON

So how was that distributed?

00:32:56

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Through the museum, through the gift store and catalog and, you know, they keep selling, it's still being sold now. And so, and also, **SOMETHING STRONG WITHIN** is still there. And I guess another project where we did film was from— it was a Hawaiian— the experience of Japanese Americans in Hawaii and the exhibit was called **Bento to Plate Lunch** [Editor's note: The exhibit was called **From Bento to Mixed Lunch; Americans of Japanese Ancestry in Multicultural Hawaii**]. Bento means lunch in Japanese, and **Bento to Plate Lunch**— and the whole exhibit was the idea of not only the Japanese American experience in Hawaii but the coming together of the Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean and Portuguese cultures to kind of create the—and, of course, the native Hawaiian culture—to kind of create what we know as Hawaii today.

00:34:06 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And a lot of this is reflected in the food, the plate lunch, because you have foods from different countries all melding into what they call plate lunch. And that kind of started with the people working on sugarcane plantations and at lunch time they'd sit down and share their food. So we did, we did three pieces for that, we did...I'm getting really bad with titles... [technical; recorder off]

00:36:01 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

One of the pieces was called PLANTATION ROOTS. And that's a film about early Japanese and the whole sugar plantation life, which was fairly harsh, and eventually how they establish themselves in Hawaii. The other was FROM BULLETS TO BALLOTS, and that was about the 400— 442 Battalion, which is, it's a pretty famous Japanese American battalion in World War II. And also, the veterans— anyway, they were the most decorated military unit in World War II. It's very famous beyond the Japanese American community because they had the highest casualties in Europe and they had saved a whole unit from Texas, same with this, kind of, quite a bit is about the 442, but one of the changes, the 442 veterans came back....

00:37:29 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

...and because of the GI bill, they're able to go to school, law school. And so in the '50s, there was a whole change over in Hawaii, essentially, Japanese Americans, by virtue of their war experience, essentially became very influential politically. And out of that, I guess one person was the current senator from Hawaii, Dan Inouye. So it was the whole story of from plantation workers to becoming part of the government. So that was FROM BULLETS TO BALLOTS.

[END TAPE 8]

TAPE 9: ROBERT NAKAMURA

00:00:35

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay. The third film we did for the Hawaii exhibit was THE POLITICS OF PLATE LUNCH, and that was a more contemporary view of Japanese Americans in Hawaii, and that's the Sansei, the young people, getting really involved in different aspects of Hawaii, especially the Hawaii sovereignty issue. And so it was essentially about the third generation of Hawaii, the Sansei. And we used THE POLITICS OF PLATE LUNCH showing the kind of melding of Japanese Americans, all the people of color, which Hawaii—mostly people of color getting together around the issue of sovereignty for native Hawaiians. And so that was the third piece of that. Yeah.

00:01:43

ADAM HYMAN

What was the economics of those pieces? Were they just fully funded by the museum?

00:01:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

They were fully funded, by the museum. And, but, you know, we had established the Media Arts Center and we— and it's named after Frank Watase, who...

00:02:01

ADAM HYMAN

Can you spell that?

00:02:03

ROBERT NAKAMURA

W-A-T-A-S-E, And he donated a million dollars. And so we—both the museum funding and that donation—we had a fairly nice set-up within the museum. And so we did— you know, we had the equipment, editing and all of that. So and then a staff. Actually, we had a staff of four, five people at that time. So the things we did for the museum were relatively inexpensive because we had the Media Arts Center going at that time, so...

00:03:06

ADAM HYMAN

Okay. And then, now were the works of the Media Arts Center, did you have relationship with other filmmaking groups or non-profits?

00:03:24

ROBERT NAKAMURA

A little bit. But, no, not really. We became a kind of community media center. I mean, that's how I've always looked at it, although in our case, we did mostly Japanese American themes. But I think we've always—whether it was through VC or the museum—we've always had, or I've always had worked with other community groups because that's where our contact came from. So we are always tied in with various community organizations, JACL, Little Tokyo Service Center, the Japanese American Community Cultural Center. [RN: Visual Communications, UCLA Asian American Studies Center, Chinatown Youth Center.] So we, and NCRR...

00:04:34

ADAM HYMAN

What's that?

00:04:34

ROBERT NAKAMURA

National Coalition for Redress and Reparations. And various local organizations and, to an extent, some filmmakers, Arthur Dong and, I'm trying to think a little local...Renee Tajima[-Pena]. And, yeah. Anyway, [laugh] I'm trying to come up with the— Spencer Nakasako, who did A.K.A. DON BONUS. And...

00:05:24

ADAM HYMAN

A.K.A. what?

00:05:25

ROBERT NAKAMURA

A.K.A. DON BONUS. It was a landmark film. He gave a— anyway, he gave a camera to a young Cambodian high school student, who was a gang member. And he videotaped himself for a year. And the film— and then they cut a film and, went to Berlin and all kinds of festivals. It did really well. So, anyway, Spencer did that film. And I'm trying to think whether— anyway, I think, yeah, some more will come to me. But, so we've always had contact with kind of an Asian American community.

00:06:24

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And then the San Francisco Film Festival started up and CAAM, you know, or formerly NAATA. So there's been quite a network of Asian American filmmakers and organizations.

00:06:41

ADAM HYMAN

What about interaction with, well, say, other elements of the art world?

00:06:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

You know, we really didn't have too much contact with the art world. Number one, we looked at our ourselves as a community service media. And in many cases, because of what we wanted to do, it didn't fall into the realm of art, although people looked at some of our early films as, you know-- I guess my MANZANAR film is part of Oakland Museum collection, a couple of other collections. And it was screened in, I think it was the Filmforum program, the Belly of the Beast [Ed note: Scratching the Belly of the Beast].

00:07:50

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And that's— so they used MANZANAR in that. And so, but other than that there's personally very little contact with the established art community. And I think VC and Ethno... But we didn't have that much contact with the art world per se, you know.

00:08:20

ADAM HYMAN

And in the work that you did at the Media Arts Center as well, I mean what sort of difficulties did you face?

00:08:29

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well, I think part of it—and I think it was just a natural thing, so I don't want to put down the museum—but there was always a conflict over content. We had sometimes our own political view or view of content, and then the curators would have another view. And without disrespecting the museum, I think part of it was-- some people looked at the museum as a place to show mostly the positive aspects of Japanese American history. And then we had a little different opinion that wasn't there as—the museum, or at least the Media Arts Center—was not set up as kind of a big PR thing for Japanese American, the Japanese American story.

00:09:31

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So there was little conflicts there, but otherwise we had full backing by the then director. And, you know, Irene Hirano, the director during that period. So all in all, I think there was a pretty free reign. We just had some issues and, in some cases, like establishing the archive because museum curators always look at artifacts, and that archiving media was not a basic function at the museum. So there was a few issues about that. But all in all, the Media Arts Center was— we had a lot of freedom. I'll put it that way, so...

00:10:34

ADAM HYMAN

Let's go back then and also talk about THE BRIGHTER SIDE OF DARK.

00:10:39

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Okay. Actually, **THE BRIGHTER SIDE OF DARK** we did as a kind of celebration honoring Toyo Miyatake, who was one of our famous within the community, early photographers. Then later we used that **BRIGHTER SIDE OF DARK** and we did it--- we turned it into a much more elaborate documentary called **INFINITE SHADES OF GRAY**. So **BRIGHTER SIDE OF DARK** was kind of the forerunner. We just did that as a community service. But then we realized the story that we had, a very fascinating story, so we did **INFINITE SHADES OF— TOYO MIYATAKE: INFINITE SHADES OF GRAY**. And that film was very interesting to me because, once again, that broke a lot stereotypes that we had about the early immigrants.

00:11:51

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

As I said before, we are always looking at them as farmers, fishermen and small businessmen in Little Tokyo. But we realized through researching the work and life of Toyo, there was actually quite an art colony, Issei art— both art interest and artists, and they had formed a group—and this was in the '20s—a group that would get together and talk about modern art. And so the film was interesting in that the earliest Issei were involved in, at that time, modern art, not traditional Japanese brush painting but, you know, contemporary art.

00:12:55

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And Toyo Miyatake was part of— at the core of a lot of Issei photographers who became quite well-known within the salon photography world at that time. They were published in a lot of magazines and books so for me, that was very exciting. And then we collected a lot of Miyatake's contemporaries photographs which are gorgeous, gorgeous work! And so we wanted to get that in the film. And Miyatake, he was really known more for his camp experience, which he slipped in a film--- a couple film holders and a lens in his pockets and went to Manzanar. And later, he had a woodworker build the camera body and it was like a view camera. And he had one of the guards, he got to know very well smuggling 4x5 film.

00:14:14

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And so some of the earliest films shots of camp were done by Miyatake, and it was fascinating. So he dug, he pulled up the boards in his barracks and developed his own films, the negatives and all of those were— so it was a fascinating story. But we didn't feature that because we discovered this aspect of Issei involvement in the arts and in the photography world. And so, you know, we used the camp section, but we tried to portray this [RN: modern art] aspect of our early immigrants.

00:15:06 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And so it was very— and we're doing this because Miyatake was very difficult, because Toyo had passed away, and so we had to do it all through his son Archie and other people. But showing that art photography of that era, that Japanese Americans were involved in totally blew my stereotype about the early immigrants. And the film was quite successful. It went to Sundance and got a lot of broadcasting and whatnot. So I was very, very happy with that piece. And the other part of that, we used his photographs, once again not as documentary, but we tried the— his photographs of camp, we portrayed that as art as opposed to documentation of camp. And, so I'm very happy with that.

00:16:19 ADAM HYMAN

What sort of stylistic approaches did you choose for the film?

00:16:21 ROBERT NAKAMURA

Well stylistically, we used home movies which Miyatake had and we really paid a lot of attention to the work of the artist. And stylistically, it's pretty straightforward, I think, documentary because the story kind of carried itself. And his son, Archie, had kept the original camera that Toyo had made and some 7,000 negatives that he shot, you know, a lot of it in camp. So it was a nice historical piece but the centerpiece was to establish the early immigrants as being involved in the contemporary art at that time.

00:17:26 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And actually, come to think of it, and Toyo, through his studio, portrait studio in Little Tokyo, began to shoot a lot of celebrity, Hollywood celebrities and so forth. So he became quite known as a photographer of dance, and so there's a lot of really nice pieces of dance that he photographed. And one of the centerpieces is his slow kind of evolution into more abstract things. He has a dancer shot at a very long exposure so, you know, all you have is the motion and you can't really see what it is. They just became movements and light.

00:18:24 ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

And so he was a very accomplished film artist, and this same group that became— who was organizing a modern art movement. They were the first ones to have a Edward Weston show and it was right in Little Tokyo. And then, Toyo had, I guess, had taken lessons from Weston or Weston helped him in his photography. And I guess one of the interesting was when his son Archie was showing us Toyo's photographs. And then in between, [laugh] some of them were original Weston prints, you know? I said, Archie, you should put these away.[laugh]

00:19:23 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

They shouldn't just be sitting here. So there were some— which we used in the film because, well, at the back of it says for, I mean, the back of it says \$4, you know? So [laugh] anyway, so, yeah. So, that was a very enjoyable film to shoot.

00:20:00 **ADAM HYMAN**

The long-term effects, what would— there was all the debates over identity politics of the '70s and '80s. You know, the debates that's not, you know, I don't know, not as heated, I guess, currently. But what would you say, at this point, what are your reflections upon the necessity for and effects of those debates?

00:20:25 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Well, I think that was going on, you know, in the early days and that was...

00:20:34 **ADAM HYMAN**

What was going on?

00:20:35 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

Going on, the idea of the movement being political and the other part of it is identity. So there was always a cla— there were the people within the movement who were very motivated politically, in terms of colonialism and oppression over people of color. It's a straight civil rights political view of what we should all be doing, and there was another part of it, although I don't think it was as articulated as well as the political part of it. But I think— I look back at it as culture makers in that, you know, you have no identity unless you have the arts and culture and history. So there was a lot of us, I think, that were involved in that part of it, VC. Although we had a political bent to some of our films.

00:21:45 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

A lot of it was based on identity and for a lot of us, it was not political. It was answering the question, who am I? I'm not Asian or Japanese nor am I American, you know? Who am I? Where are my roots? Where do I belong? And that was a dilemma for a lot of us in the— before the movement that's— so for me, the movement was less political and more a sense of searching for identity. So that was in music and the arts, filmmaking. They were, you know, that was part of, like, Hiroshima, the band, you know, they're trying to fuse Asian music and their own background. In the case of Hiroshima it was jazz and using some of the Japanese instruments like the koto. And so there is fusion there.

00:22:51 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

With VC it was the idea of doing our own experience. We would do films about Hiroshima, trying to fuse music, Lawson Inada—who was, I think, a really great movement poet who had roots in African-American community and the Chicano community [RN: Japanese American community]. So his poetry reflects all three groups. And so for me, it was political, for VC it was political, but a lot of it was about identity. Oh, yeah, we use roots as a cliché now, but at the time, we were searching for our own roots, and if we have no past, we don't really exist. If we're not reflected in something like film or literature, you're invisible.

00:23:57 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

So I think, so those were two facts and still kind of debated today, you know, kind of rehashing it, and I really don't think there was a conflict myself that, you know, we kind of, you know, both factions kind of fit into each other. Yeah, we are identity films. We can do without some of the political aspects and some of the arts and media brings political ideas to life. They're not abstract, it's not just abstract theory and you should be doing this and this. So I think a lot of our films and other media or kind of culture making was very important to the whole Asian American movement.

00:25:10 **ADAM HYMAN**

And so in the context of that, though, then like what was being written about? Were there critics looking at HITO HATA or works that preceded that, or the ones shortly thereafter? And were they being written about in the past? So what was being written about? [technical] Let's do outside of Japanese American community...

00:25:39 **ROBERT NAKAMURA**

You know, I don't think we were really looked at outside of our own communities. And I think, I have a theory on that. It's kind of mainstream America can see Japanese from Japan but— or Asians from Asia, but Asian Americans are still kind of an anomaly to them, we don't exist. Because the films of interest here are films from Asia, they're not Asian American stories. So I think that's one reason that Asian American— you know, a Kurosawa film comes out, you know, he gets all kinds of press and reviews.

00:26:46 **ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)**

But Asian American films like HITO HATA, we didn't have too many— Kevin Thomas actually wrote a nice piece about HITO HATA. And he's been probably one of our few supporters who reviews, you know, Asian American films. But generally—except for our own vernacular press and within a kind of movement press—we didn't get too much recognition, you know? In the art world, I don't think we were even on the radar screen with the established art, you know, community.

00:27:35

ADAM HYMAN

And within your community press?

00:27:37

ROBERT NAKAMURA

It was, most of our work was, you know, accepted. You know, we got really good reviews. And once again, this is where the political part and cultural part kind of clash because in the early days, we had political people, especially in the Bay Area, saying our films were too slick and therefore not relevant and, you know, that kind of thing. So, you know, we've had— or we're whitewashing the content or, and then we had other critics saying we're portraying a negative view of Asian Americans. So we had it on both sides.

00:28:26

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

Kind of the more, kind of heavy political people look at our work sometime as being fluff and identity-oriented, rather than hard-hitting, you know, VC should be out at Wounded Knee, you know, what are you doing about stories, about poets and musicians, you know, that kind of thing.

00:29:10

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

So, you know, there was that political and kind of cultural, kind of clash. But we'd get it from— you know, it's media so you're going to get critics from both ends. Like, so one would say we didn't paint a hard enough picture, accurate picture and then other groups like the Japanese American Citizens League, they're saying what are you bringing up camp? You know, that's in the past, you know, so forget about it. So, we got it from both ends. But basically, I think our films were well-received, you know? Just to be validated by seeing ourselves on the screen and breaking kind of stereotypes and presenting parts of our own history that, you know, people have not, did not know about, you know? So...

00:30:16

ADAM HYMAN

Great. How have you seen the activities and concerns of Asian American filmmakers change since the 1960s?

00:30:33

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I think one of the big changes are having venues where their work can be seen— you know, maybe not in the mainstream media, although, but at least now— before they were— now, we have at least 10 or 12 fairly large Asian American film festivals, you know? So at least filmmakers can get to see their films, screened before large audience or, film festival audience. saying something I'll regret later...[laugh]

00:34:22

ADAM HYMAN

So what would you then, what would you assess as your primary legacy?

00:34:28

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I think my primary legacy is all of the kind of organizations I worked with, or in many cases, established. And that's still the idea. So it's not a legacy of breaking stereotypes or any—I think the legacy is that I've taught in, kind of advocated as serving community, using media to serve community. That's the one thing that I really feel is something important in my teaching and the organizations I've been with, it's not necessarily different but it's a little different from general reasons for people going into media, you know? It's not like I want to change the world or make great social change, but I want to use media to serve to community. Well, just to generally serve community.

00:35:45

ADAM HYMAN

What does that mean, if it doesn't mean to someday changing the world?

00:35:49

ROBERT NAKAMURA

I guess it could in a small way. But I think changing the perceptions, our own perceptions about ourselves as opposed to changing perceptions of mainstream population, I think there's a different— someone might change the world, I want to change the view, our own views of ourselves. I think that's— well, that could be another part of—I don't want to call it legacy—but something that I advocated as using, making films for ourselves, or seeing history through our own eyes. I think that's what we want to do. A lot of people go into the idea of changing the world with their work, you know, where filmmakers of color who want to break stereotypes and tell their stories to a large, generally white audience.

00:37:08

ROBERT NAKAMURA (CONTINUED)

I take a different view that I'm making my films generally for Asian Americans and if the mainstream community can be relate to the films, that's great. But basically, I look at our— my films are made for Asian, other Asian Americans to kind of share that experience.

00:37:41

ADAM HYMAN

Okay. Do you have any other thoughts?

00:37:47

ROBERT NAKAMURA

Let's see, no, I think those are the two aspects of it. Yeah, and it's kind of a cliché but I think all my films that I've made really help my own thinking about who I am.— that was where we talked about, you know, not knowing who I was and where I belong. Part of the filmmaking process is defining who I am and where I belong.

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