

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Author, "Rirkrit Tiravanija's debut solo art show focuses on Thailand's current and firmly established socio-political divide," *Bangkok Post*, August 19, 2010

## Bangkok Post

### Making art useful

#### Rirkrit Tiravanija's debut solo art show focuses on Thailand's current and firmly established socio-political divide

Published: 19/08/2010 at 12:00 AM

Newspaper section: [Outlook](#)

Rirkrit Tiravanija's decision to land his first solo show in Thailand after all these years is undeniably a defining moment in the history of contemporary Thai art.



Artist Rirkrit Tiravanija at the opening of his solo exhibition, 'Who's afraid of red, yellow, and green', at 100 Tonson's Gallery. In the background is charred murals depicting the bloody October 14, 1973 and October 6, 1976 events.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Not that he has never come home many times before, but those were in form of collaborations. Previously, in 1996, he worked with Navin Rawanchaikul, the recipient of this year's Silpathorn Award in visual art, in the latter's famous mobile taxi art project. At least for the last 10 years now has Rirkrit been around more often, given his role as the president of the Land Foundation, an educational-ecological project in Chiang Mai he co-founded in 1998, which combines contemporary art interventions and agricultural traditional values. More recently, apart from his role at Gallery Ver, he also co-curates the Ministry of Culture's Imagine Peace, which is on view until August 22 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC).

Despite the artist's greater local visibility, it takes Rirkrit a subject matter as colossal as Thailand's recent bloodshed and deep-rooted socio-political divide to officially give himself to his native country in the form of a solo debut - a timely and apt actual "homecoming". (His acute sense of being Thai is notwithstanding the fact that he was born in Buenos Aires, raised in Thailand, Ethiopia and Canada; and educated in Chicago and New York where he has remained since 1982; the effortless will to remain Thai, despite his cosmopolitan spirit, made him turn down an offer to be naturalised as a US citizen, choosing to remain there as a long-term resident on a green card.)

"Thai politics impacts my soul. I feel more qualified talking about the ongoing [socio-political] crisis in Thailand than protesting against George W. Bush [for his decision to go to war with Iraq]."

As defining a moment as the fame of the man himself - he was awarded the fifth Hugo Boss Prize by the Guggenheim Museum, in 2004, "in recognition of his profound contribution to contemporary art"; Columbia University's School of the Arts officially praises him as "widely recognised as one of the most influential artists of his generation" - "Who's afraid of red, yellow, and green" at 100 Tonson's Gallery should be considered a landmark in the contemporary Thai art history because it introduces a paradigm shift in how art should be understood.



'Red' curry.

Although Rirkrit refused to say in the interview what he actually wanted to achieve through this show - citing his principle of never actually determining the ever evolving meaning and entity of his art and a concern over the fact that "we live in an age where every single thing is readily digested for us, hence the deprivation of the chance for us to have that experience unique to ourselves and our sensibility" - given the context in which his corpus of works has been appreciated, what should be achievable through his signature methodology of art intervention is to make art useful: to create impacts and changes which, in this particular case, is to heal the fractures of our society by engaging the viewer - who would then be turned into a participant and, eventually, a co-creator of the "artwork" itself - in a learning process of how to live in the same society despite contradicting thoughts and beliefs.

"Although I'm not doing this at the Ratchaprasong intersection [which would have born a greater symbolic significance], the flutters of the butterfly wings affect the world and one must work with hope."

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Upon entering the premise, a big throng of art fans and, in disguise, curious fellow philistines - the number of which was more than any openings could have imagined and managed to lure, flocking to the posh neighbourhood of Soi Tonson in the hope of having a chance to savour the aura of this international high priest of contemporary art - were seen loitering outside, delaying their entrance to the actual show space. They were kept outside because of the alienating smell of the cooking gas, repellent thick vapours of cooked curries, fish sauce and other acrid spices - all culminating in the acute sense of antagonism - something Bangkok gallery-goers are not used to.



'Yellow' curry.

Typical of an experience introductory to the visit to a Rirkrit's show is an alienating effect. A defiance of our deep-rooted unquestioned assumption of what art and art space are supposed to be: A well-kept clean space of leisure where the eyes are feasted upon the creative visual, the audience-turned-participant-turned-creator of the work in question is seen developing a sense of antagonism. It is, indeed, this very habit of presuming and assuming what we think is self-evident, not the smell of the cooking gas we had earlier deemed incongruous, that plagued the air; this antagonism was self-inflicted and symptomatic of our untrained mind, which opts to prejudge. This is, perhaps, where it all begins: The red and the yellow.

Now that the time came to get in and be bathed and graced with that aura we all had come for, you would see Rirkrit standing in the middle of this "temple" - influential European art critics such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Barbara van der Linden and Hans Ulrich Obrist would have dubbed it an experimental "laboratory" in a bid to reconceptualise contemporary art space as some experimentation in perpetual flux, resistant to closure and away from the conventional model of display of completed objects - whose charred "murals" recounted the violent "October (1973 to 1976) events" in the Thai political and social history.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

This is the first time Rirkrit has ever combined his best-known in situ cook-ups and signature demonstration drawings - the amalgamation of which he dubbed "culminative" which, however, was much criticised at the opening as a condescending recycling of the artist's past glories.

"Before any engagement of change, we need to be reminded of where we've come from. As a matter of fact, the demonstration drawings are there on the walls to remind us that we are not actually going anywhere."

Carefully installing himself in the centre of this "religious" hall, Rirkrit conducted the event in the position of the God of a nebular realm strategically surrounded by blue boiling pots whose round shape and the almost exact symmetrical distance from one another recalled a cosmological order in which planets orbit around this Supreme Being. With the assistance of His "archangels", the Artist-turned-God, while tending the cooking pots, handed out food to the viewer who was then turned into a participant in this inevitable power relation of the provider and the provided. Rirkrit, whose manifesto of making art literally useful, and in this case, consumable, had flown in, descending on the Thai fractured soil, and assumed the role of the Saviour.

"Who's afraid of red, yellow and green" is a conceptual improvisation of New York Abstract Expressionist artist Barnett Newman's politically-loaded series "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue" created in the late '60s. A key painting in this series features a solid block of red which is sliced vertically with two thin slivers of yellow and one bold blue line to the centre to connote the colour-coded power struggle and ideological clash between Communism and Democracy; the eastern and the western bloc during the Cold War.

Though not an abstract expressionist himself, Rirkrit, as an art interventionist, inherits Newman's colour game to further engage with the tension and fear of colour-coded differences. But in using in situ cooking to push for positive changes: to instil in the audience a greater social tolerance, whereupon they are turned into the co-creator of the artwork, hence the importance of the human presence and participation in the show, he replaced blue with green.

This is most probably because (Rirkrit is an interviewee who poses further questions instead of giving you ready-made answers) green would make up a complete series of the tri-coloured curries commonly found in Thai kitchens, the most fundamental social unit underlying any diverse groups in this deeply-fractured society. These tri-coloured curries common to Thai households are gaeng daeng (red curry with pork and apples); gaeng leung (yellow curry); and gaeng khiew wan gai (green curry with chicken).

Now that we alienated crowd had to eat, the fear of the colour-coded differences in our fragmented society which we carried along with us and which was symbolised through the three-coloured gaeng went intermingling well down the throat before being digested and become of use to the body, making the ultimate call of "Who's afraid of red, yellow and green" a highlight of the functional dimension of the body primordial to all human beings.

In full control of the interview, Rirkrit left his last remark: "Beauty is no longer in the eye of the beholder, but in the experience itself". And in line with this philosophy underlying the "relational aesthetics" this show is indicative of, 100 Tonson Gallery welcomes, until August 29, any person no longer afraid of differences to come and be served with these tri-coloured curries - the spices our ancestors had appropriated to the point of making it so harmoniously Thai.