

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sadie Dingfelder, "Rirkrit Tiravanija is Giving Out Free Curry at The Hirshhorn. We Asked Him to Explain Why," *The Washington Post*, May, 2019

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Rirkrit Tiravanija is giving out free curry at the Hirshhorn. We asked him to explain why.



In the original version of "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Green?," the artist cooked food for visitors on the gallery floor. For the Hirshhorn version, a local Thai restaurant is catering the meal. (Courtesy of 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok)

Does contemporary art make you hungry? Then you're going to love the Hirshhorn's new exhibit, "Rirkrit Tiravanija: Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Green." The installation, which opens Friday, serves up three colors of Thai curry to lunchtime visitors, who can dine while watching area art students sketch images of political protests on the gallery walls. (Visitors can even assist with the drawing if they'd like.)

Tiravanija, a Thai artist who grew up in Thailand, Ethiopia and Canada, is known for including communal elements like dining and group drawings in his installations. Often, he even cooks the food himself, as he did for the original 2010 manifestation of this piece in Bangkok. In the Hirshhorn version, the food will be catered by local restaurant Beau Thai, and visitors can try the curries (while supplies last) Thursdays through Sundays, 11:45 a.m.-1:30 p.m., through July 24. We talked to Tiravanija to learn what he hopes people take from the piece, besides a full belly.

Can you explain the title of the piece?

The title itself is bouncing off from Barnett Newman's painting "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue." But, of course, there's a relationship to Thai politics. In Thailand, the party colors are red and yellow — red being more grassroots farmers and the yellow shirts being more royalist. And then, of course, the green is the military. In Thai cuisine, we also have yellow curry, we have green curry and we have red curry. So those are going to be the three kinds available in the installation. And I was also playing with the idea that there are different colors but we all share them together, we eat them together.

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Rirkrit Tiravanija believes you can conquer fear of the other through food and art. (Courtesy of 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok/Courtesy of 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok)

Do you feel like having the experience of eating a meal together can bridge these political differences?

It's something every person does, to have a meal. It's a platform where we understand how to share. Whether we come with very different expectations, with very different backgrounds, with very different experiences, this is a platform we all can approach, because we understand [sharing food] on a basic level. So it can be a platform where we begin to understand each other.

In Bangkok you actually cooked curry yourself, using portable stoves on the gallery floor?

Yes, we actually had open fires and boiling pots of curry, which is impossible to do in any museum in the U.S. So [the Hirshhorn] has found a restaurant to basically cater the food. It's not the same, but I think it's more important that the atmosphere is right, the feeling is right, and the content is there. For more people to go to experience [the piece] even with a little bit of a compromise is maybe more important than trying to set up propane burners in that space.

In the original version of the piece, the gallery walls were covered with drawings of Thai protests. Will you be adding drawings of U.S. protests for the D.C. version?

We are going to mix the images up a bit. We're going to bring some imagery from the protests on the Mall into the work, the Million Man March, The Women's March.

And the drawings are going to be added to throughout the course of the exhibit?

Yes, the drawings will be drawn on top of each other. So there's that kind of layering. My intention, which [probably won't be] quite reached, is that the imagery is layered to the point where you can't see any more imagery, where it's just black.

Is the overarching idea that art can make big political divisions seem a little less scary?

We are living in fear from many things — fear of difference, fear of otherness. These fears are being used ideologically to shift your allegiances, your politics. So [the piece] is asking, "Why should we be afraid of these things we are being told to be afraid of?"