

Time is on his side

Thai artist and director Rirkrit Tiravanija's intense study of one ordinary man's life is making waves at the Venice International Film Festival

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By Kong Rithdee

Last Saturday at the 68th Venice International Film Festival, Rirkrit Tiravanija premiered his 149-minute movie, his first film made for the cinema, and it turned out to be one of the year's best Thai films. Lung Neaw Visits His Neighbours is an enigma to many, a bore to others, but its structuralist formalism has a steadfast power that holds your gaze.

The film is a portrait of an old uncle from a northern village, and throughout the film we see him walk, talk, eat, farm, cook, smoke, drink, think _ the film's simplicity, its seeming disinterest in context, belies the complex layers of time, existence, the aesthetics of watching, and maybe even politics. "I don't categorise this film," says Rirkrit, a well-known visual artist. "It could be whatever it is, fact or fiction. It shows a man who goes through his life and his relationship with society and things around him. And it relates to my interest in the notion of time." Rirkrit's story as a prominent visual artist is well-documented, plenty of them in this newspaper since his return from New York four years ago (he still shuttles between the East Coast, Chiang Mai, and European cities). In Venice, Lung Neaw Visits His Neighbours was screened in the Orizzonti section, a sidebar to the programme reserved for cinemas that flirt within the borders of experimental and visual art. While Rirkrit's installation pieces _ notably the culinary anti-art, the live museum cooking have become institutionalised and lost parts of their post-everything novelty, his foray into cinema seems to open up new possibilities in exploring the idea of time, emotion, distance, and the relationship between art and reality. After this, we'll be eagerly awaiting his next film.

"Nothing in Lung Neaw was staged," Rirkrit explains. "Not even when a group of buffaloes wander into the shot, bells jingling. We simply asked Lung Neaw what he would do each day, and we followed him with a camera. We went where he went. "But still," the artist adds, "it's all fiction to me." One of the first lines spoken in this clean, clear yet multi-layered documentary (for a lack of a better term) is when Lung Neaw, a farmer in a Chiang Mai town, mentions to his friend that "your watch is going too fast". Then the radio plays the 8am national anthem, an official marking of time. And thus the whole film, as we watch the uncle going about his business, mundane and curious, reveals itself to be a patient study of time _ how it flows, how it's interminable, and how life occupies that stream of invisible liquid, sculpted and lulled by it. This particular life, Uncle Neaw's, is also a document of a rural being and its relationship with the surrounding environment, especially the farm and the forest.

Shot on Super 16mm and screened in Venice on DCP digital, the film has a painterly quality, sometimes Courbet, sometimes Rembrandt. What constitutes to the casual power of the film is the right distance Rirkrit's camera has chosen: We observe Uncle Neaw but he never comes across as an object _ an insect in a glass cage _ and the texture of the whole film is neither too cold nor too warm, neither too intimate nor too detached. Largely devoid of comments _ except the chapter heads that Rirkrit recycled from his earlier exhibit _ the film is guileless yet secretly guileful. Its strategy is merged into the visual. In this study of the pasaje of time, and in requesting the audience to allow themselves the luxury of time, Rirkrit is doing a neo-Warhol stint, albeit with a bigger heart and without the cynicism.

Earlier this year, Rirkrit had an exhibition in Bangkok titled "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Green?", a clear stab at our colour-coded politics. That exhibition, in which Rirkrit cooked red and yellow curries in a room with drawings of iconic scenes from the 1970s political uprising, had its fans and critics. In Uncle Neaw, the politics is not seen anywhere, but could be felt if you mentally fulfill the big picture that surrounds Uncle Neaw's existence. Rirkrit confirms that it's possible to read into that subtext of the film. "All the confusion we've been having in Thai politics sometimes makes us forget about the real point, and watching Uncle Neaw going through his life is perhaps part of that point," he says. "What's in film can be said to be about the otherness _ the otherness that's not mentioned in the policy of any political party. It's a picture of something that's not in the centre _ Bangkok or the parliament. Maybe that's also what the film is about."

Lung Neaw is competing with 23 other feature-length films in the Orizzonti section of the Venice Festival. The result will be announced on Saturday. There's a high possibility the film will be screened at a film festival in Bangkok this November. "In any case, as an artist I'll be able to move around," he says. "Uncle Neaw hasn't seen the film. So what I'll do soon is to set up a screen on the street in the village where we shot the film and ask everybody to come and see it. "It's good to show the film in Venice, but that other screening is important, too."