

## Lights, Tinsel, Presence

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As the holidays recede and we brace for the months ahead, might we take a moment for a backwards glance, so that I can share the highlight of my 2011?



On 7 December, Miyarrka Media, the group I co-founded with Yolngu co-directors, Paul Gurrumuruwuy and Fiona Wanambi, and established video artist, David Mackenzie, launched our first exhibition, Christmas Birrimbirr (Christmas Spirit) as an experiment across the spaces of visual art, ethnographic film, and Yolngu ritual performance.



Opened with energetic ceremony at Darwin's Chan Contemporary Art Space (see video below), the exhibition features a 40 minute three-channel video, a number of other shorter videos and projections, a 'forest' of logs painted with clan motifs surrounding a Christmas Tree sculpture, and a series of photographs generated by the project (such as the example above).

This complex and beautiful work is about many things. Drawing on the performative power of Yolngu aesthetics, it explores the Yolngu genius for cultural incorporation and ritual elaboration as an extended family decorate graves and homes in preparation for Christmas. As the sounds and images unfold, viewers encounter Christmas as a season in which the work of ritual is to make the dead—and palpable—to the living. In the process, the work reveals something of the new roles of photography in Yolngu ritual, the social force of shared grief in contemporary Yolngu lives, and the luminous power of tinsel, lights and video itself.



As Gurrumuruwuy puts it, this is a project concerned with “sharing feelings”. To this end, the three screens format allow for a sensuous compression of time and an intensification of affect inspired by the structure of Yolngu ritual. There are no narration or subtitles (although supplementary footage screened in other parts of the gallery does include both these elements). At the centre of the space, the Christmas tree sculpture works to transform the gallery into a site of invisible as well as visible potency (as the text by Gurrumuruwuy placed under the tree explains).

“The lights of the Christmas tree will draw you close. It’s like in a ceremony ground. It’s signalling to all to come, sparking memories and stirring emotions, connecting us to those who’ve passed away. The gamununggu (paintings) I’ve done here connect straight to those three men and their families. There’s so much meaning here. It’s a forest of connection. A forest of feeling”.



We formed Miyarrka Media in 2009 inspired to create a new kind of shared art practice. From the outset our aim was to use media in ways that resonated with Yolngu aesthetics and cultural values while providing new avenues for creativity and social engagement. From the first meeting, through the filming, editing and installation we have worked together to create something new, yet always true to its roots in the remote community of Gapuwiyak in Australia's tropical north.

After years of talking about it, followed finally by several more years of production and post-production, it was totally exhilarating to see gallery visitors (strangers!) become engaged and moved by this intimate family production, staying to watch the full 40 minute loop and then spending time with the other elements of the exhibition. Perhaps even more satisfying (if extremely hard on the pocket) was the experience of installing and launching the work with the Yolngu families involved, experiencing it all coming together—the images activated and authorized through the ceremony—in ways that none of us were in a position to imagine at when we began.

Have a look at an edit that combines elements of the project [here](#):

There's also media coverage [here](#):

Ed note: and some further coverage [here](#) and [here](#)