



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TALWAR GALLERY

Panopticon Letters: Missive I (2010–13) by Alia Syed.

ALIA SYED

'Panopticon Letters: Missive I'

TALWAR GALLERY

Quietly confident and methodically beautiful, Alia Syed's new short video *Panopticon Letters: Missive I* uses a re-treating series of understated revelations to point first to the imperial quality of the way we organize the world we see—or simply of vision as such—and then to the delusional nature of that infinite but infinitely tenuous supposed imperium. She has five simple ingredients: a male voice reading aloud philosopher Jeremy Bentham's 1787 pamphlet proposing the "Panopticon," a round prison building which would allow a centrally located warder to surveil, or seem to be surveilling, every prisoner at once; a male voice reciting Psalm 139, which assures the Lord that he has searched and known the singer's heart, in Hebrew; a female voice singing the same psalm in Jacobean English; the artist's voice, reading aloud a short, allusive text of her own (*Haunting I*); and a series of broad landscape shots of the waters of the Thames under cloudy, rolling skies. From these shots,

Ms. Syed has chopped out the middles, so that clouds and water disappear into each other and the world becomes a primitive microscope, or a *2001*-style claustrophobic trip—or she blacks out the sky or the river, to highlight how choosing is also rejecting. As views shift, patterns change and change what seems natural: narrow bars of river and sky, divided by black, make more sense than a whole screen of clouds, which seems incomplete. Bells ring, we hear an airplane land, and then the river pixelates, leaving us with nothing, which is more than we started with. (*Through May 18*) —W.H.