

I AM INTERESTED IN THE SPACE OF POETRY;  
IT'S THE SPACE THAT GIVES US THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSFORM



**Talwar Gallery** in their Delhi gallery, is currently exhibiting London-based artist **Alia Syed's** films and photoworks in an exhibition titled **Elision** .

Dark and evocative, absent of time and place, Syed's latest filmwork **Priya** (2008) and the photographic stills of the same name are created from 16 mm. film covered in a combination of leaves, earth and waste from her kitchen and buried in Syed's garden. In an unexpected collaboration with nature, the stains of color produced by the film's deterioration contribute to and erase the original scene of a lone, twirling dancer, visualizing times passed and successive memories of entombment, creating a psychological space into which the viewer may enter into the dancer's inner ecstasy. In **Swan** (1989), Syed shows her early prowess of experimentation with the moving image, evocating textures, rhythm and perspective in this cyclical black and white performance of an unwitting performer, a swan. She infuses the subject with a violent yet seductive power, underscoring the popular myth of Leda and the swan. Intimate views seduce the viewer into an uncomfortable yet rich proximity to the subject. For **A Story Told**, Syed creates an environment in which the story-telling is experienced in parts, condensed and expanded, moving from reality to abstraction and from the prosaic to the atmospheric. Fragments of the story are revealed in triptych, often as a direct address to camera, performed by the artist herself, a lover's tale, in which the main character recounts the apparent impossibility of her relationship with an unidentifiable other as they travel through time.



Swan

Alia Syed is an experimental filmmaker exploring issues of identity and representation, often employing rhythmic and cyclical elements. Her interests are in story telling, time and memory. She explores the ways in which language and form both define cultural borders and extend

beyond them, particularly as it occurs in the lives of those people whose personal and social boundaries have been changed by shifts in location brought about by the dispersion of peoples and cultures in the modern world.

Alia Syed was born in Swansea, Wales. The Artist has been working in experimental filmmaking for over two decades and her films have been shown at numerous institutions around the world including Performing Bodies at Tate Modern, London, UK (2000); Personal Space, at Tate Britain, London (2003); British Art Show 6, Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2005); Zones of Contact, XV Sydney Biennale, Sydney, Australia (2006). In 2002 a major retrospective of Syed's films, Jigar, was organized by inIVA, London, UK travelling to Glasgow Museum of Modern Art (GOMA), Glasgow, Scotland, The New Art Gallery in Walsall, UK and Turnpike Gallery, Manchester, UK. The Artist currently teaches at Southampton Solent University and has also lectured at Central St. Martins (1992, 93, 97 and 2001), Glasgow School of Art (1994) and Chelsea School of Art (1996-2000).

A solo exhibition of Alia Syed will open at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sophia in Madrid, Spain in February 2009.



Priya

**How did you happen to choose films as medium for expressing your thoughts?**

**When did you start making films?**

I started making films in the first year of my degree course at University of East London where I was doing a BA in fine art, I had applied as a painter but gravitated towards the film department as I was interested in the debates around representation, but more than anything else I thought the camera's were really beautiful and the idea of making film really exciting – I soon became immersed in the processes of film making; from processing your own negative, making 16mm prints to editing and building relationships between sound and image.

**Tell us about your earlier works.**

My early works were all shot on black and white 16mm film. I had never done still photography before and became really excited by hand processing and watching the image reveal itself in the dark room. I think this initial experience has really never left me; the materiality of film, how light literally carves the image out from the emulsion. I think this is very evident with **Swan**; it has a sculptural element that comes from having to battle with the material aspect of film. But as I mentioned earlier, I was interested in representation and the space that appears through the relationship between sound and image. I made a film called **Unfolding** that is set in a council launderette in Deptford south East London – council housing is the equivalent of social housing. There was a launderette the council had built for people who lived on the estates, as the flats were too small to install a washing machine, at least that's the story the women who I interviewed told me, but also they probably weren't wealthy enough to buy a washing machine. I spent long periods of time there building a relationship with the women, observing the space, from this emerged "Un – folding" a documentary that questions the notion of documentary the notion of an objective truth.

**Tell us more about Swan. You told us that you first shot the cranes hovering over the Thames skyline and you were not happy about it.**

Yes, I was living in Greenwich next to the river Thames, there was a lot of construction development going on, and I used to walk along the river where a family of swans lived. People fished from the Pier. Someone told me a story of how swans often choked to death on hooks left from fishing tackle. The route back home passed by a building site with a lot of demolition work going on I suppose it was the last throws of the transition from a working river into the creation of Greenwich as a leisure industry. But the movement of the cranes resembled the movement of the swans neck, long sweeping movements, so I began with the idea that I would juxtapose these two elements together – however I was never happy with the crane footage and became far more engrossed with the footage of the swans – I had by then moved location to the serpentine in Hyde park as I was able to get a lot closer to the swans...

**Any special reasons that you have included Swan in this exhibition?**

Both Swan and Priya exist in a silent space frequented with strong rhythmic gestures, they create an inner rhythm building on association, affecting the body of the viewer. They are very visceral, linking into a collective mythical space - the images go beyond their own literal interpretation, they create a dialogue within themselves.

**How did Priya evolve? You mentioned during our earlier conversation that the footage for Priya was with you for a long time.**

I had done a major film shoot with Priya Puwar, the Kathak dancer, and worked with a small film crew including the cinematographer Noski De Ville, who is someone I often work with, we gathered a lot of footage including a shot that we devised by suspending the camera directly above the dancer, the camera was suspending from a hook in the ceiling and a rope. We wound the camera up and then let go enabling the camera to twirl downwards towards the dancer when

it reached its furthest point the weight of the camera made it twist up again so that the camera then twirls in an anticlockwise direction against the direction of the dancer which creates the feeling the motion of the dance is working against the tide. This particular shot stayed with me but I was unable to use it as it was too perfect in a way, too romantic, so I came by with the idea of burying it in the garden in my compost bin. The deteriorating vegetable matter eats away at the surface of the emulsion so that different layers of emulsion appear. This process took a long time; I had no idea how long to keep the prints buried. In the final piece I used some of the undeteriorated imagery alongside the deteriorated imagery - this is what creates the tension within the film we become immersed in the initial beauty of the dancer and then slowly observe this image disappear: we are then placed in a position of longing; we become aware of our desire to consume the image in its entirety without consideration or reflection.



A Story Told

**Tell us about the third film - A Story Told - you have exhibited here.**

This was a major project that I undertook and finished in 2006 it exists in many forms - it is a multi screen piece. There are seven separate elements in all; each image you see in the version in the gallery also exists within its own screen. **A Story Told** uses established film notions of the 'long shot', to create a film that exists within the specific geography of the gallery, the sight of the gallery becoming the space of the edit - the sight of the *mise en scene*. **A Story Told** is a love story; a woman sits in a roadside cafe recounting her quest through time to find perfect union with her lover. The film is installed within the geography of the gallery, architecture at once reveals and veils the telling, you enter into the body of the film. Territory becomes defined through sound informing the viewer of spaces of transition, movement is inscribed, but the lover stands still - her refrain pulling you - in words. I wrote the script as a historic novel drawing on many different sources, both historic and religious. I also used one of the fables from *One Thousand and One Nights*, the story of Yunis or Jonah from the Koran and Bible and also the life story of Ibn Khaldun, who was a Muslim scholar born in the 13th century. Ibn Khaldun was a bit of a maverick and worked in many courts eventually finding favor in the Fatimid court of Egypt when he sent for his family in Tunisia, they all drowned at sea on the outward journey to Cairo which is where my invention starts; I developed a character and named her Nazia Khaldoun.

**Is this the first time you have used video (for sound)?**

Part of what I was interested in, in this piece was how the medium that one uses is not neutral how, it carries its own history, and how we view a work imbibes it with meaning. So some of a story told is shot on 16mm some on video. I used Video for the voice over this is the medium of television which was developed primarily as a means to impart information, historically it was a tool to educate the masses it is also very accessible, I imagined that Nazia Khaldun who is cursed to travel through time until she finds unity with her lover would use it if she visited our time - she would post it any where so that her lover would find it and through finding her story, find her.

*They promised me they would reach you. I would never have parted with them otherwise for they contained my lifeblood. Breath like, they would fall caressing your skin healing the furrows in your brow allowing you to continue your battle unhindered.*

*All of everything was contained within them, I wept uncontrollably, it started to rain but the letters remained dry and light while they where gathered and blown away.*

*– A Story Told*

**You also indulge in writing....**

I write a lot, writing makes me think in a different way. I find it very difficult but enjoy the discipline sometimes. It's a form of drawing. I am interested in the space of poetry; it's the space that gives us the opportunity to transform.

**You prefer to shoot in 16mm than using a digital medium to make your works. Please tell us why.**

Film and video seem to be very inter-changeable. But they are very different and the process is not the same. They describe space very differently. Video has a tendency to make things flat and with the advent of high definition there is a surfeit of information within the image that makes it hyper real. I am interested in the dream space, film has that quality, every single frame is different the grain of each film frame changes that means we are seeing a different picture every 24 frames per second. I like how film describes shadows - it flickers.

**Do you ever have thought of shooting in 35 mm?**

Definitely, I would love to shoot something in 35mm but funding is a problem!

**Thanks and all the best Alia. We hope to see more works by you in the future.**