

Tactical Video

[BY BILL O'DRISCOLL]

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THE SADDAM HUSSEIN MASKS were all well and good for bus rides in Pittsburgh. But Fereshteh Toosi figured that if Saddam were on holiday state-side, the place he'd really want to see is Washington — and he'd probably take along one of his body doubles.

So six weeks after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, down to D.C. and out on the Mall went Toosi and her friend Tsvika Solan, wearing, respectively, a loud polyester shirt and a colorful muumuu along with their masks.

The Coast Guard dudes who passed by weren't amused. "I almost thought one of them was gonna hit us, he got so mad," recalls Toosi. Many passers-by in the tourist-heavy district thought the costumes were funny, and wanted their pictures taken with the faux Saddams. But the Mall security guys — summoned, apparently, by the Coast Guard members — weren't among them. "You can't be here," one said. "You're not allowed to protest."

Toosi and Solan weren't protesting, though. They were making what Toosi calls "tactical media" — public art designed to engage people on pertinent issues. The results are documented in the short video "Saddamites," which Toosi will screen at the Feb. 8 Film Kitchen along with shorts featuring two other public-intervention art projects. Also screening are music videos from the 1990s by ATS, Pittsburgh's longest-running post-punk outfit.

"I'm interested in works that happen outside of structured uses of what art is or what media is," says Toosi, 28, an instructor in Carnegie Mellon University's art department. "Rather than getting permission to do a project, I just do it."

Her efforts to probe the popular mind on history, culture and current events have taken Toosi to

Boston, where last summer she and frequent collaborator Carolyn Lambert dressed in black outfits with white wigs and tri-corner hats, posing as members of the Tea Party. They handed out tea bags whose tags read "SecuriTea: A homegrown blend of the finest fear and intimidation from the District of Columbia."

"A lot of what I want to do is listen to people and hear people out and get them talking," says Toosi. Something like the Yes Men — pranksters who point out the failings of corporate America by posing as corporate Americans — Toosi co-opts the language of institutions and the marketplace for ironic purposes. In Pittsburgh, for instance, she and Lambert have posed as private investigators searching for Pittsburgh's legendary "fourth river" (a project that got them some unironic press on a local TV news channel).

"Yo, dawg," says the kid from Battersea, England, in Toosi's "Collection of Accents" (2003). The

FILM KITCHEN

VIDEOS BY FERESHTEH TOOSI

plus ATS music videos and a free secret bonus film, screen at Film Kitchen at 8 p.m. Tue., Feb. 8 (7 p.m. reception). Melwood Screening Room, 477 Melwood Ave., Oakland. \$4. 412-316-3342, x178 or www.film-kitchen.org.

video was shot in 2002 in London's Bankside district. Toosi, in England breaking from a project documenting the Asian carpet industry, was pondering how her Americanness was betrayed only when she spoke, and how Americans tend to be isolated from how the rest of the world regards them. She asked passers-by to do their best Yankee.

"Now you want me to say something American," says another Brit, obliging with, "What's wrong with this goddam country?" A visiting Belgian, Australian and South African also give lip service.

It's a cute but telling exercise — not unlike "Remembering Ron," in which Toosi asked Boston pedestrians to speak about Ronald Reagan while standing next to a life-sized cardboard cutout of the late president. Shot the day after Reagan died this past June, it's intended to counterbalance the panegyrics to Reagan that dominated big media.

Similarly, "Saddamites" was designed not to make any point but to elicit a response unconditioned by accepted ways of thinking and talking about the Iraq war. The cops' reaction intrigued Toosi — even though the stunt got them thrown out of the park.

"I think what I like is the [confusion] of, 'What is the meaning of it?'" she says. "They couldn't decide what was wrong with what we were doing." ☞

