



DiMassa, Diane (b. 1961)

by B.J. Wray

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A portrait of Diane DiMassa by Love Alban. Courtesy Diane DiMassa.

Diane DiMassa is best known as the creator of the controversial and widely popular comic-zine *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*. She is also the illustrator of a number of books, including Kathy Acker's *Pussycat Fever* (1995), Kate Bornstein's *My Gender Workbook* (1998), and Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2000).

DiMassa's illustrations and artwork have been featured in group and solo shows across North America. Recent shows include "Picturing the Modern Amazon" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (SoHo, March 30-July 2, 2000); "Fashion Magazine" at the See Gallery (Springfield, Mass., February-March, 1998); "Hothead Rising" at the Rising Cafe (Brooklyn, May 1997); and "Hothead L. Terrorist and Friends" at the SAW Contemporary Arts Centre (Ottawa, Canada, January 10-February 22, 1997). DiMassa is also regularly invited to give guest lectures at colleges and art institutes across North America.

In 1991 when DiMassa was in drug and alcohol recovery programs, she began drawing *HotHead Paisan* as a form of therapy. DiMassa's therapist instructed her to use artwork as a medium for dealing with her anger, and as a result the comic character, Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist, was born.

DiMassa never intended to publish her journal sketches of Hothead, but her then partner, Stacey Sheehan, suggested that DiMassa market HotHead in the form of a comic-zine. Published by DiMassa's newly created Giant Ass Publishing, issue number one of *HotHead Paisan* made its way into lesbian and feminist bookstores across North America in 1991 and became an instant best-seller.

As an underground cartoon character, Hothead attracted an audience of lesbians, bisexuals, and straight women throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, and England. Published quarterly from 1991 to 1996, DiMassa's comic-zine consistently sold out.

Hothead's brand of vigilante justice allows women to find strength, humor, and solace in the outrageous acts of a cartoon figure. In the comic-zine, Hothead begins as an ordinary, well-adjusted lesbian who explodes into rage one day while watching television. Hothead decides to take the law into her own hands and act out her revenge fantasies against a heterosexist and patriarchal culture.

In addition to Hothead, the regular characters in *Hothead* include Chicken, Hothead's cat and sidekick; Roz, Hothead's mentor; Daphne, the love interest; Miss Woo, Roz's cat and Chicken's best friend; and the Lamp, Hothead's own guiding light.

DiMassa's graphic depiction of violence (for example, in issue number eleven Hothead pulls a rapist's spine out of his ass) is often criticized as obscene, and issue number seven was seized at the Canadian border and labeled "hate literature" by Canada Customs.

The popularity of *Hothead* resulted in the publication of two book-length collections of the comic-zine from Cleis Press: *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* in 1993 (9 zines plus 20 new pages) and *The*

Revenge of Hothead Paisan in 1995 (9 zines plus 30 new pages). The subsequent popularity of these collections resulted in their recent republication in a single volume, *The Complete Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (Cleis Press, 1999, all 21 zines).

In response to the cult status of *Hothead Paisan*, the candy manufacturer True Confections asked DiMassa to design a line of Hothead candy bars. Hothead's Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist Booster Bar and The Femme Dyke Bitch Bar are bestsellers.

DiMassa currently lives in Westport, Connecticut.

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About the Author

B.J. Wray lectures in the Department of English at the University of California, Davis. She is revising her dissertation on nationalism and sexuality in English-Canada lesbian cultural texts into a book-length study of the performance of sexual citizenship in the United States and Canada. She has published on lesbian performance art and queer choreography.