

## Aganetha Dyck

Winnipeg Art Gallery

Perhaps the most spectacular piece in Aganetha Dyck's retrospective at the Winnipeg Art Gallery was *Lady in Waiting*. The artist installed hundreds of bees, a glass dress and a beehive inside a large plexiglas box. The bees, in turn, transformed the dress by making honeycombs in and on it. A tube connected the box to a hole in the ceiling of the gallery enabling viewers to watch as the bees move in and out of the space. Dyck's honeycomb-making bees are not her conscious collaborators (bees cannot choose, for example, to take a day off), yet the final piece is the direct result of the bees' activity. Distinctions between human agency and animal instinct do not collapse here. In using bees, the artist makes a rhetorical parallel between human obsession and animal will. The work also prompts associations with fertility and the social life of women. This is because of – and not in spite of – the careful manipulation of bees as the unconscious agents of human production.

Though the entire show made a strong argument for the uniqueness of Dyck's work, some affinities are worth mentioning. Joseph Beuys, for example, the late shaman of post-war German art. Like Beuys, Dyck became interested in highlighting ideas around artistic agency; and so she began exploring the natural processes of bees. *Lady in Waiting* also recalls a work by the Englishman Damien Hirst, who installed rotting meat, flies and electric bug killers in plexiglas boxes. Dyck's honeycombed dresses and shoes, as well as the candy apple coatings of her beeswax-covered purses, are reminiscent of Calgary artist Eric Cameron's "Thick Paintings." And her affinities with surrealism are very strong. In Dyck's early work, found objects (including buttons, mason jars, briefcases and books) are made into glamorous surrealistic objects which call to mind Salvador Dali's jewellery-work, Meret Oppenheim's famous fur cup, not to mention the countless surrealist motifs in popular culture and advertising. Looking at the plastic tubes, electrical wire, miniature plastic figurines and other things that Aganetha Dyck has attached to cigarettes in *Hand Held: Between Index and Middle Finger*, several again-fashionable neo-primitive practices like corseting and piercing come to mind, as if each cigarette were a wad of human flesh rolled up into paper tubes. Ouch.

In conversation, the artist champions lateral thinking, an attitude to art-making and life which has as much allure for many artists today as "automatism" had in the 1920s and 30s. Lateral thinking is an attempt to puzzle out the problems of artistic production in a side-long, intuitive, non-rational way. Much of her earlier work is about an intense hands-on object-making – the lateral thinking happens directly through her hands as she makes the objects. For example, she covers tattered, second-hand things like briefcases in goo (rhoplex) so that they become glossy fetishes. Small objects such as doll heads and pipes ooze up unexpectedly out of a book or briefcase.

Dyck continues to use a technical means that gives her work artistic currency and glamour, while encouraging reflection on other levels.



Aganetha Dyck – Top to bottom:  
*Canned Buttons* (1994), mixed media  
 / from "The Library" (detail, 1995),  
 mixed media / *Ladies' Shoes* (1994),  
 shoes covered with wax / Photos by  
 Sheila Spence, courtesy of the  
 Winnipeg Art Gallery

Cliff Eyland