



# WAXING POETIC

*Aganetha Dyck's respectful collaborations with bees result in sculptures that set the art world buzzing*

**N**OW that she's \$55,000 richer, the question for Winnipeg's art world queen bee Aganetha Dyck is this: Will she be sharing that loot with her artistic associates?

"I have millions of collaborators," Dyck says with a mischievous smile.

"They're all unionized. I look after them well."

As she should. The multimedia artist's 16-year fascination with the industrious denizens of the apary is paying off big time.

Her highly original and strangely beautiful sculptures, everyday objects that the little buzzers have covered in honeycomb and wax, are collected, displayed and sold by public and private galleries across the country.

TV environmentalist David Suzuki featured her last fall on an episode of his popular CBC science program *The Nature of Things*. In February, the Bravo national arts network profiled her for its *Landscape as Muse* series.

Two weeks ago, the Canada Council honoured her with one of its six annual Governor General's Awards for visual and media arts.

This prize, worth \$25,000, came six weeks after she won the Manitoba Arts Council's \$30,000 annual Arts Award of Distinction.

This afternoon at 2 she is being fêted by the city's arts establishment at a public reception at the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

"She's so deserving as a person and as an artist," says University of Winnipeg art historian Serena Keshavjee, who has written catalogue essays about Dyck's work.

"Her work is not just for academics. Though it has a theoretical component, it has a visual and tactile quality that attracts a wide audience."



**Morley Walker**

Dyck, 69, was a late bloomer, art-wise, and in a discipline where almost all the pros have university training, she is largely self-taught.

"I didn't walk into an art gallery until 1974," says Dyck, born and raised in Marquette and the eldest of four children of organic farmers.

"As the wife of an executive, I wanted to do some volunteering. I chose the art gallery. From the beginning I knew I belonged."

This was in Prince Albert, Sask. She was in her mid-30s. Her husband, Peter, worked for Eaton's and had been transferred to P.A. in 1972 to manage the local store.

Dyck, just 20 when she got married, was at home with three children. They liked to draw and paint, and to keep them amused, she did some library research into art history.

Her interest piqued, she signed up for some drawing courses at the regional community college. A young teacher there, George Glenn, changed her life.

"No more painting mountain scenes,' he told us," Dyck recalls.

"From now on, I want you to draw from who you are, what you know and where you live."

But as a homemaker, all she knew, she figured, was vacuuming, ironing, cooking and cleaning.

"Then make art from that," Glenn told her.

She started crocheting odd items constructed from copper wire and rope. She'd take the finished sculptures to Glenn, and he'd tell her what worked and what didn't.

"Aganetha came to those classes with a sense of originality and exploration that was extraordinary," Glenn, now 59 and a veteran of the Saskatchewan art scene, says today.

"She was definitely not a typical student."

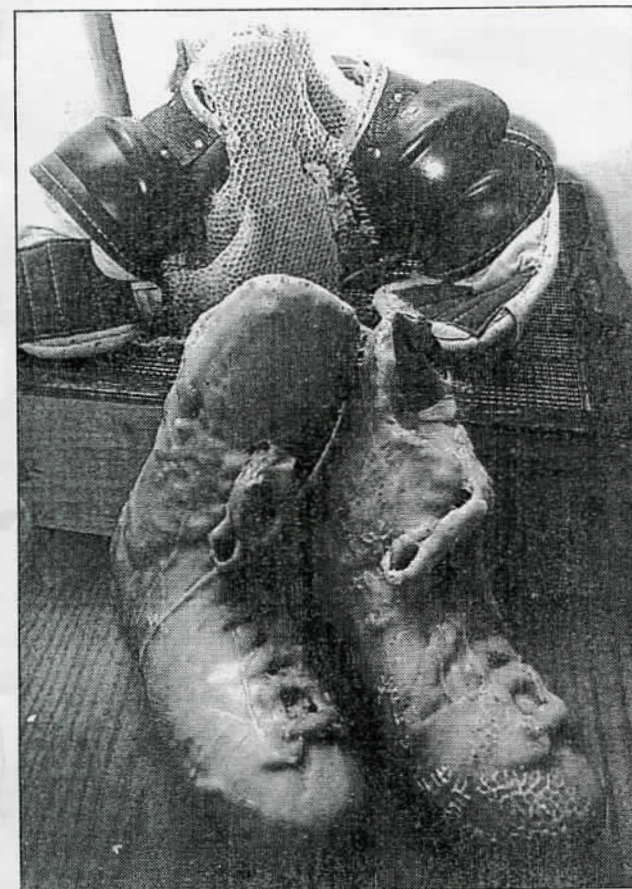
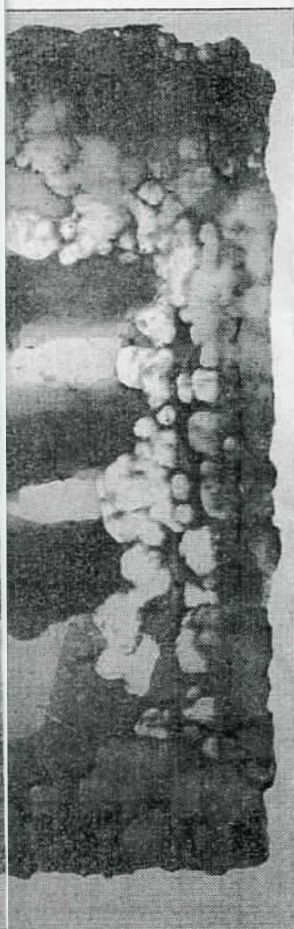
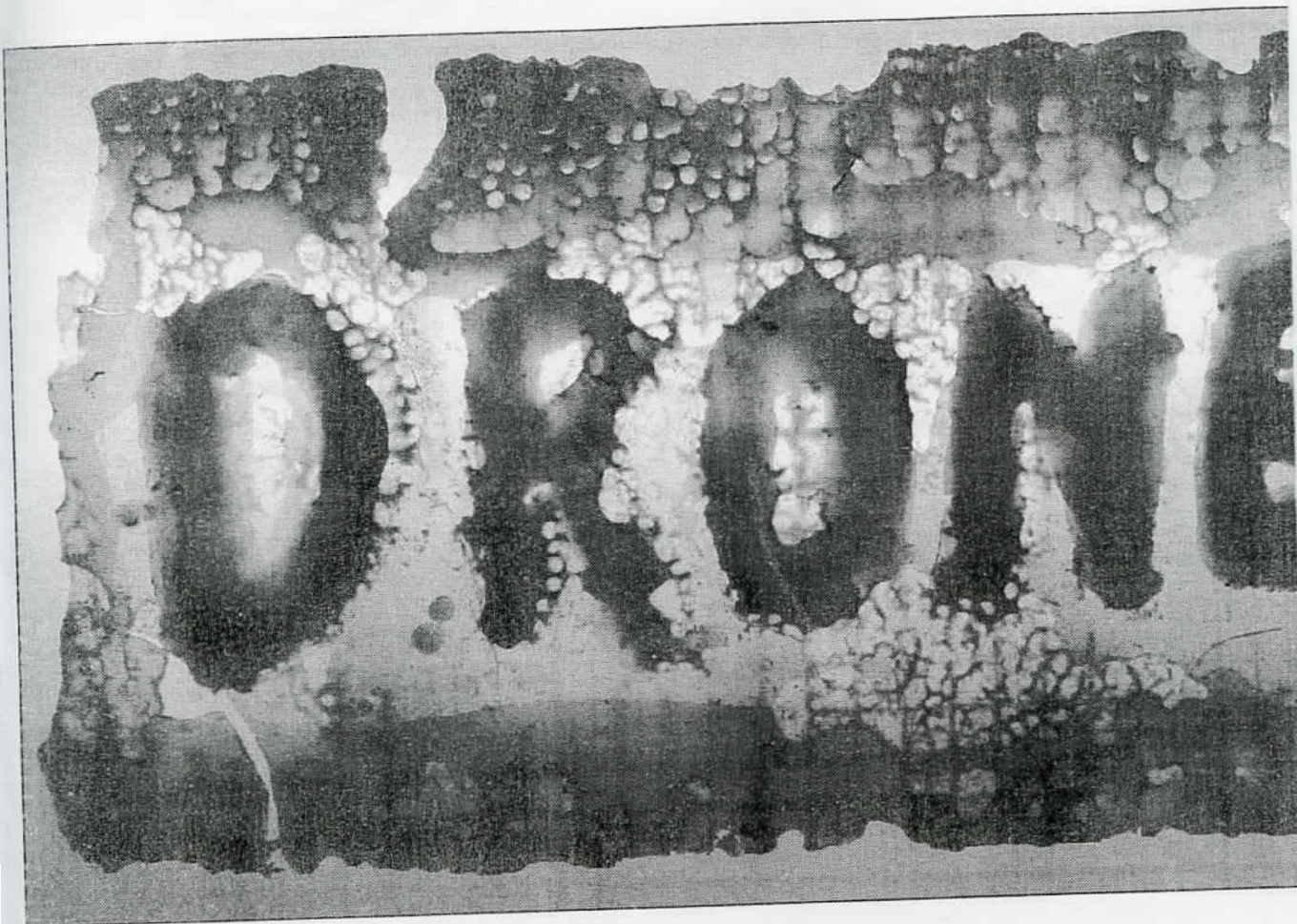
Prince Albert soon received a visit from the curator of Regina's MacKenzie Art Gallery, Carol Phillips.



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*'Aganetha is fascinated by bees in a way that people who work with them kind of miss'*

## Aganetha

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Now the executive director of the Winnipeg Arts Council, Phillips took one of Dyck's crocheted sculptures for a group show called *Saskatchewan Fibre*.

A year later, after Dyck had begun making art out of shrunken clothing, Phillips gave this new genius of domestic art her first solo show.

"It all happened so quickly," says Dyck, a soft-spoken woman of five feet tall who seems unable to blow her own horn. "I've had so much support and guidance."

In 1976, Peter was transferred back to Winnipeg. Fired with ambition, Dyck rented a studio in a warehouse at 376 Donald St. She was always home at 4 p.m. when her youngest, then in junior high, came home from school.

Thirty years later, she still shares a space in that building with fellow artists Diana Thorneycroft and Reva Stone.

In those early years, she became friendly with

the printmaker Suzanne Gauthier and the painter Wanda Koop, who introduced her to the city's close-knit visual-arts community and provided intellectual and emotional support.

Meanwhile, she continued to make sculpture out of found objects, canning buttons and gluing cigarette butts, work that attracted much attention.

Bizarre though these things sound, they have a long tradition in 20th-century art-making, from the urinals of Marcel Duchamp through the felt and fur sculptures of Joseph Beuys.

In 1990, short of paraffin wax for a project, she visited Bee Maid Honey in St. James, thinking she'd buy some beeswax. In the store she noticed a sign carved out of the insects' actual honeycomb.

"Immediately I saw that the bees were natural sculptors," she says. "I knew I wanted to collaborate with them."

Louise May of the St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre introduced her to Phil Veldhuis, an apiarist and philosophy instructor who had set up his hives on the St. Norbert grounds. Almost 17 years later, they are still working together.

"Aganetha is fascinated by bees in a way that people who work with them kind of miss," says Veldhuis, who did his philosophy graduate work in the area of animal intelligence.

"Part of her success is that she sees the mystery of these small creatures that are so amazing and makes artifacts that are big enough for people to relate to."

Each bee season, which runs from late June to late August in Manitoba, she and Veldhuis place objects in the hives — shoes, jars, even sports helmets (this summer it will be tiaras) — which the bees cover in honeycomb and wax.

It may look like the bees do all the heavy lifting, but Dyck shoulders her share. She has learned methods by which to organize the bees' instinctive activity. She visits the hives at least twice a week to remove the sculptures in progress, to carve off extraneous wax and to redirect her collaborators' efforts.

During the off-season, she finishes, paints, cuts, carves and mounts her summer's work. And she prepares objects for the following year.

Through the years, Dyck has developed a bee in her bonnet about the fate of the stingered crea-

tures. She has become an amateur biologist and environmentalist.

She has worked closely with Simon Fraser University bee scientist Mark Winston, profiled by *The Nature of Things* last year. With her MAC and Governor General's prize money, she expects to travel abroad to meet other scientists and visit ancient sites of cave drawings of bee images.

"The best science is generated from places outside of science," Winston tells Suzuki in the TV documentary. "Aganetha is one of those people who explores things I do in a completely different direction."

Worried by the fact that 95 per cent of honeybees in the wild have gone extinct, Dyck hands out packets of soil with flower seeds to her studio visitors, hoping this will result in new nectar sources. Her and Peter's own yard in East Kildonan has no grass, only flowers and plants.

"They say that 30 to 50 per cent of the world's edible crops are pollinated by bees," Dyck says. "If they are endangered, so are we. But the bees will be around a long time after we are gone."