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Downtown streets jammed with culture

By JOE BELANGER, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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Matador by Aganetha Dyck, made from a lamp, beeswax and honeycomb, is part of an exhibition at the Michael Gibson Gallery in London. (DEREK RUTTAN, The London Free Press)

If you want to experience culture in London, it's as simple as taking a stroll down Richmond, Dundas, King or any other street in the core.

It's not tough to find. It's just about everywhere downtown, from the busker on the corner, to a good restaurant, club or gallery.

It's the doing, any time of the day and well into the night and you don't have to wait for the three-day celebration of Culture Days, which begins Friday.

"I don't think people realize that you could come to Richmond and spend an entire day experiencing culture," said Michael Gibson, owner of Gibson Gallery on Carling St. just west of Richmond.

"It's not just about shopping, drinking or dining, but as you walk further along towards Dundas, take any of the side streets. Stop into Attic Books and you'll find it. Stop in here. If you're willing to take just a little bit of time and a little bit of a risk, the rewards will be there for you. And you're not just going to experience culture, you're going to meet the man or woman who has staked their claim and their livelihoods in a piece of the downtown's cultural fabric."

A visit to the Gibson Gallery Saturday is just one of dozens of opportunities for the public to celebrate London's culture over the next days with one significant difference: the gallery is hosting a new show by one of Canada's premier artists, Aganetha Dyck, who collaborated with photographer William Eakin to produce breathtaking sculptures and photographs of light, colour and form using Eakin's collection of old lamps and Dyck's decades of experience "collaborating" with honey bees.

The show is titled *Light 2011 Apiary Works* and the artists will be at the gallery Saturday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. to meet the public and discuss their work.

Dyck is only too happy to oblige.

"(Culture Days) talks about the creativity we have in this country," said Dyck in a telephone interview from her Winnipeg home.

Dyck, 74, has received a Governor General's award for her work, which for the last 23 years has focused on the creation of sculptures using bees.

"A lot of the public might not know what is available to them," said Dyck. "It should be like this every day. But when there's a special weekend, maybe the public will be more engaged. It will help everybody understand who we are and what we do."

Gibson said London has a thriving arts and culture community that is typically not appreciated by those surrounded by it.

"There is culture every day, every week to experience in London, not just these three days," said Gibson. "My sense is there is more and more of it here than when I started 27 years ago. I think it's in good shape in London, but like most of Canada we have an inferiority complex, a sense that we're not as good as Toronto and that's just not true. I think we should be a little more aggressive and confident about the state of our culture."

Gibson said culture is as simple as an experience in a restaurant eating good food and meeting friends or strangers and talking; it's what gives London and other communities their identity.

"Culture (especially the arts) expose you to new ideas and new ways of looking at things," said Gibson. "Artists really reflect the 'now.' Culture comes from the ground up. It can't be mandated or forced."

Without a vibrant cultural core, a city won't thrive, said Gibson.

"It's a lot like a garden: if you ignore it, it will wither and won't look very good."

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