

Richard Yarde paintings take watercolor to new heights

By Nancy Stapen
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Richard Yarde works exclusively in watercolor, a medium given less credence than the weightier ones of oils and acrylics.

Art Review

Perhaps that's why we haven't seen a solo show of Yarde's in Boston since 1985. That's a shame. As a long overdue retrospective, "Richard Yarde: Watercolors 1980-1993" at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists demonstrates, Yarde is a master of this difficult medium. Put simply, he is one of the finest living American watercolorists, and he has pushed the medium to new heights.

Yarde, 54, who teaches at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, is a native son. He was born in Boston in 1939 and received undergraduate and graduate degrees from Boston University's School of Fine Arts. Influential teachers there included Walter Murch, Conger Metcalf and Reed Kay. Aspects of Boston life enter into much of the work, from the apartment on Cunard Street (near Ruggles Street Station) where Yarde grew up, to the flamboyant evangelical Sweet Daddy Grace, whose heyday was in Yarde's youth, and whose Universal House of Prayer still stands on Shawmut Avenue.

The exhibition is divided into three bodies of work. In each, Yarde approaches meaning through a series of dynamic dualities. In "The Apartment" series, he explores the merger of subjective and cultural experience. In the "Memory Theatre" series, he searches for the intersection of the spiritual and the physical. The relationship of interior and exterior "Self" is the subject of the final grouping.

Back to childhood

"The Apartment" series is inspired by Yarde's childhood in the '40s and '50s. Rooms from his West Indian family's apartment, like the parlor and the kitchen, are the setting for narrative composites of memory and imagination.

Yarde's emotional stance is revealed early on. He is the detached observer, yet his presence forms the essence of the image. In two versions of "Cunard Street Interior" Yarde paints himself between his brother and mother. On the right, the brother soaks in an oatmeal bath to soothe the eczema from which he suffered (and later died). On the left, Yarde's mother attends to the kitchen table. Both figures turn away from Yarde, who is pictured as a boy of about 10 in the center. A silent observer, he is removed from the action. A nebulous black space behind him suggests his occupation of a kind of no man's land. Yet Yarde's quiet presence forms the heart of the image; there is no question that we are seeing the world from his vantage.

These works also convey Yarde's

RICHARD YARDE
Watercolors 1980-1993

At: The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, 300 Walnut Ave., Tuesday-Sunday, 1-5 p.m.; through Aug. 15

ability to translate the subjective into universal symbolism. The recurring images of clothing mannequins for example, which allude to his mother's dress designing business, convey an enduring maternal presence.

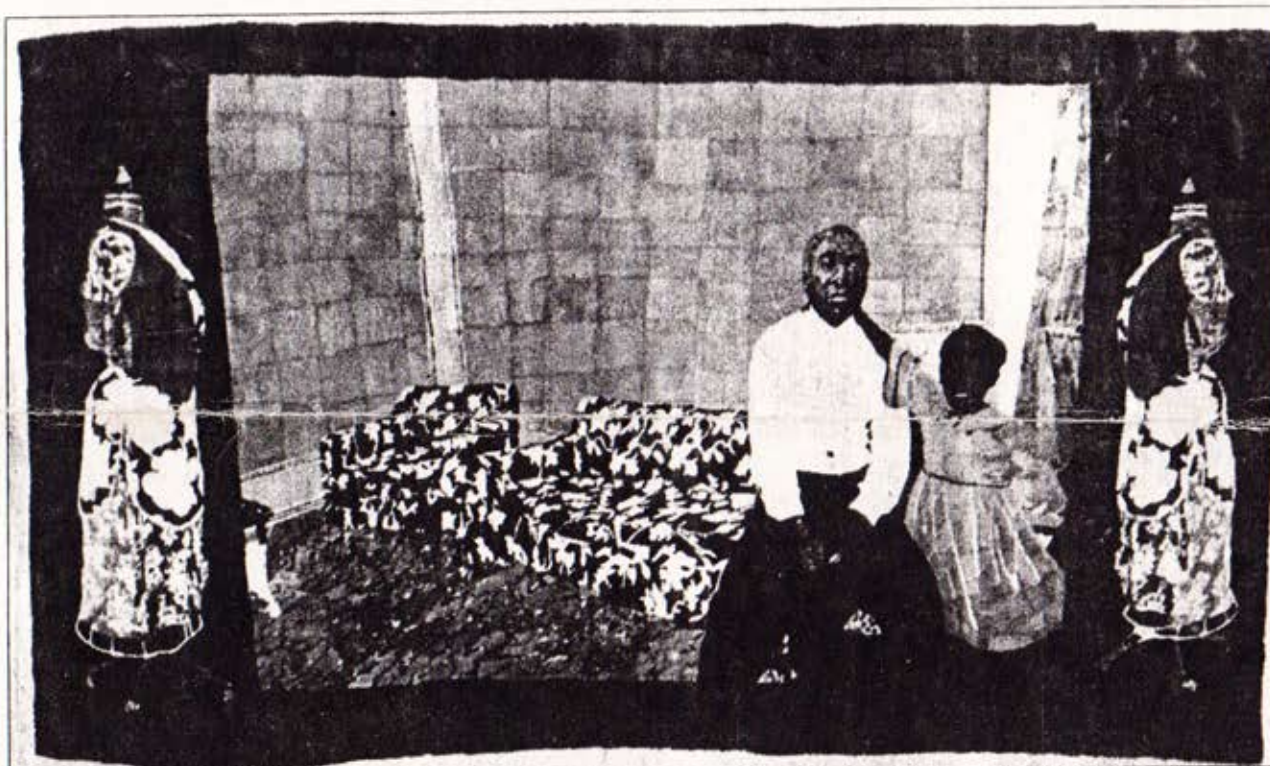
The distinctive formal tenets of Yarde's approach to watercolor are also well in place, notably his consistent use of small, irregularly shaped square patches of monochrome color to define form and space. This series offers a fascinating glimpse into the genesis of this way of seeing. The apartment of Yarde's youth is papered with the floral designs, coverlets and rugs popular in middle-class homes of the era. Yarde translates this into a patterned breakdown of pictorial space.

Wallpaper daydreams

Several particularly telling works refer to the childhood experience of being sent to bed, or just to wait in another room. Without amusements, otherwise uninteresting surroundings become fodder for musing and fantasy. In "Yellow Paper II," the yellow grid is punctuated by hints of red flowers and an image of the artist's father, which floats to the ceiling. According to Edmund Barry Gaiter, director of the museum and organizer of the exhibition, Yarde has spoken of "being where you didn't want to be as a child and pressing the corners of your eyes—making visual entertainment out of wallpaper." This experience is the origin, too, of "Daydream," where the room's forms break down into purely abstract patterns.

The exhibition's second section, the "Memory Theatre," is a complex body of work intended as a theatrical installation. Yarde has described it as the "Holy Ghost Memory and Healing Machine, an illustration of my personal mythology."

The museum does not have the stagelike setting the work requires; instead, paintings, some three-dimensional elements, and a descriptive diagram are on view. Although the work is no doubt more vivid in a proscenium format, there are some striking parts here, including the recessed figure of Sweet Daddy Grace, arm raised in benediction. In order to reach him, visitors would have to pass through a foreground space, guarded by two black male "Archangels," into a transition space of barbershop poles. Not only do these reference the male confessional forum of the barber shop (a secular version of the church confessional), they also suggest a witty play on the polar opposites that form the basis for so much of Yarde's thinking.



Rooms from his family's apartment are the setting for narrative composites of memory and imagination such as Yarde's "Parlor."

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Bridging body and spirit

Here Yarde contrasts the sacred and the secular, the latter represented by images of Josephine Baker, characteristically bare-breasted but also Christ-like, with arms pinioned to an elaborate Folies Bergere-type costume. Both Baker and Sweet Daddy Grace are surrounded by foliage, that nature may act as a bridge between body and spirit.

The centerpiece of the "Self" series is Yarde's majestic double self-portrait, two enormous companion works of the artist pictured from front and back. As a now massive adult, Yarde still conveys the detached yet insistently present quality evident in his images of himself as a child. Here he pictures himself swathed in a trench coat and fedora, all in monochrome blue, like a removed, mysteriously veiled stranger. Yet his sheer physicality (a real feat to convey with the transparent medium of watercolor) and open expres-



Yarde's "Back/Front."

sion are tangible and without guile.

Even though Yarde doubles his image, there is a consummate sense of isolation here, an existential coming to terms with aloneness. Yet this self-knowledge is a paradox; although the body is a palpable force,

the self remains ungraspable. Even aspects of our physical being remain unknown; we must imagine our backs. And as open and revealing as the self presented to the world may be, it is still a mask shielding the inner self.

The most recent works in this grouping, painted while Yarde was recovering from near fatal kidney

disease, extend the notion of self into the larger human family. Yarde paints his hand, front, back and sides, severed and floating in space. Particularly affecting are the print-like "Palms," where the singular whorls of the artist's hand suggest the individual's indelible uniqueness, yet also imply the universal nature of human experience.