

MOJO HAND

Richard Yarde's art is influenced by his memory, dreams and personal experience. Born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, Yarde received his B.F.A. and M.F.A. from Boston University, studying with Conger Metcalf and Walter Murch. One of Yarde's earliest artistic influences was his godfather, Amos Gibson, who operated a portrait photography studio in Boston's South End. Later influences included Cézanne, Matisse, and Gauguin—"the painter who made me realize I could be an artist. He showed me people of color were subject matter for art."

An exhibition of Yarde's work, *Mojo Hand*, runs from January 16 to March 16 at the Smith College Museum of Art. The SCMA show is a smaller version of the exhibition originally organized by Jeffrey Keough at the Massachusetts College of Art, according to Ann Sievers, Associate Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs. Recovering from a life-threatening illness, the artist created these watercolors during an

intense creative period, painting eight to twelve hours a day. Yarde, who is a professor of art at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, sat down with the *Newsletter* staff recently, and talked about his work and the exhibition.

Smith College Museum of Art (SCMA): You have said that memory is a key element in your work. How so?

Richard Yarde (RY): I use memory as one of the major sources for my imagery or content. This includes thoughts and feelings about my private life, past and present, such as the largely black world of my youth in Roxbury, and the recent recall of medical procedures during my illness. The recall of dream content and musings about areas of African-American history that have a personal resonance are the "book-ends" of my body of work.

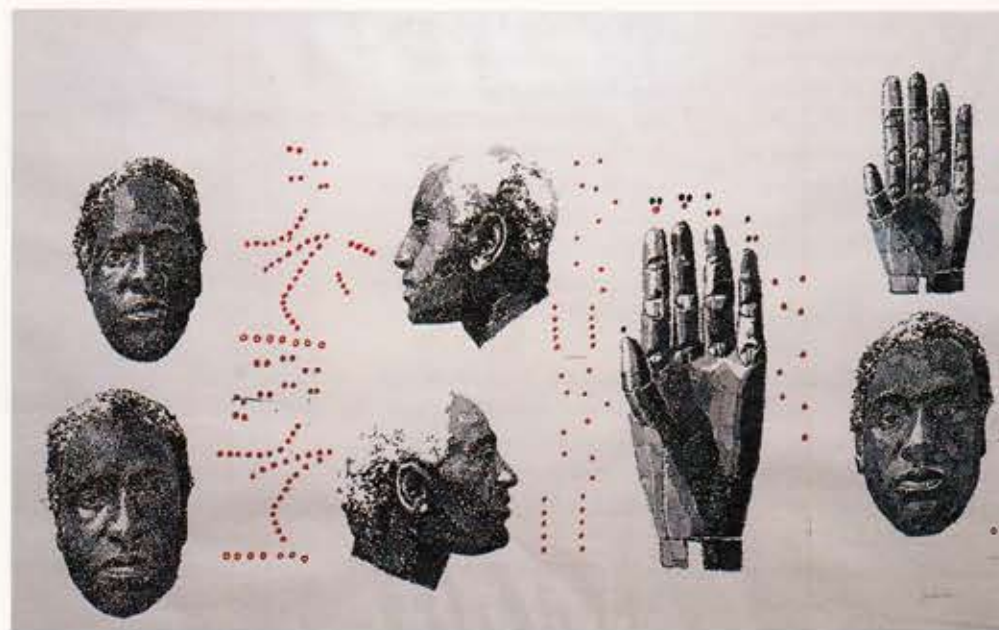
SCMA: How do dreams fit into your work?

RY: Dreams are more conscious factors; memory is very subconscious. What I'm affected by in dreams is the potency of images, not the meaning. I may not know what an image means, but I'm drawn to the directness of it. In painting that's what I'm trying to clarify. These recent paintings are more about questions for me, not answers. The thing I found fascinating: people have very precise reactions to these works based on their own experiences. Whether they've had a major medical problem or been around someone who has, whether they are African-American, white, or an immigrant, they are able to relate to my new work. As an artist I'm very grateful for this fact.

SCMA: The *Mojo Hand* title came from a song lyric by Lightin' Hopkins, and you've said listening to jazz and blues is central to your painting process. How has music influenced your paintings?

RY: Jazz is an important source of energy and inspiration when I paint. I see the visual structure of my paintings as being very musical. The grid is like the backbeat, it keeps time in the work. The images that break through the grid are similar to improvisation. My process is free-hand, not mechanical. I do not determine or plan everything that happens.

SCMA: You are known for producing large-scale works, which is considered unusual for a watercolorist. What is your work method?



Richard Yarde, *Head and Hands II*, 1992, watercolor. © Richard Yarde. Photo: Clive Russ. Yarde combines several disembodied self-portraits, with mannequin hands and carefully coded dots from acupuncture, braille and biochemistry in this work.

RY: I start with the idea for an image which will resonate strongly in me. I construct it from a fragment to the whole. Because many of my images grow so large, I often work flat on the floor. I establish a palette, often from the memory of a color in a dream. I arbitrarily apply an irregular rectangle of color and then I respond to that until the surface is covered. The grid of irregular rectangles is really my main vocabulary. I try to get the negative space to read as positive space. I come back in later and paint the figurative elements. Working this way gives me a lot of flexibility. I am able to both add and subtract thanks to this method.

SCMA: You have been very candid about the illness that nearly caused you to die and that forced you to stop painting for a year. This exhibition focuses on your

post-illness work. Can you describe the relationship between your illness and this latest work?

RY: Like many African-Americans, I have had high blood pressure for most of my adult life. Complications from treatment led to kidney failure. I am awaiting a kidney transplant. Five years ago I had a series of mini-strokes. I lost feeling in my hands, devastating for anyone, especially an artist. I felt the doctors had written me off when they sent me home. As soon as I could, I turned to my work again. I was literally trying to heal myself through my process of working and imagery. When I got sick, I felt as if my self had started to split. There was the self that was able to paint and the self that was locked away inside a body that was fragmenting. I was afraid I was going to die. With the help of a

couple of wonderful doctors who cared about me as an artist and a person, not just as a kidney, heart or neurology problem, and with the support of my family, I began to recover. My work was one source of my healing. Through my illness, I became interested in the ideas of transformation: positive and negative aspects. In many ways this is the work which shows me at my most vulnerable. As an African-American male, the son of immigrant parents, there has been a life-long pressure on me to be strong, to achieve, to strive for myself and be a role model.

My illness forced me to confront another aspect of my humanity: my need and dependence on other people and on my spiritual resources. My early work is all about pride, heroism and the struggle to be creative. Now, I am dealing with the contradictions, the fragility.

There are tremendous contradictions in the roles required of African-American males in this society which contribute to the pressure we live under, and they can be deadly. These contradictions are in the very fiber of my work: I use a traditionally intimate medium of watercolor to work on large pieces. I work on historical and archetypal themes on a transitory base of paper. From the Japanese art I love, I am indebted for understanding the meaning of the interval, a space which is not empty but pregnant with meaning, just as it is in music.

SCMA: What do the series of red dots and mannequin body parts in many of the works represent?

RY: When I had the mini-strokes, I lost feeling in my hands; they felt wooden. I was unable to paint. The wooden mannequin pieces are stand-ins for that experience. At the same time, medications put me on a biochemical roller coaster. I've come to believe nothing is as solid as it appears to be. The dot coding has a variety of meanings, changing as the context in the work changes. In *Mojo Hand*, the Twenty-Third Psalm is painted in braille. Dots were originally chosen because visually I liked the patterns. I feel, for me, they represent also the mystery of basic chemical formations, the lottery of DNA, the basic building blocks of life that hold us together. Beginnings.

SCMA: How is the healing process represented in your work?

RY: First and foremost, just to work is an assertion against the tremendous odds of illness and is healing in itself. I have state-of-the-art medical care, including a dialysis machine which I am hooked up to every night for nine hours. Father Ralph DiOrio is a priest who is a noted healer and an artist. He is a friend who comes and prays with me. I feel I have put the mechanical process, the intellect, the heart, the soul and the body all in my work. I have exposed myself, literally, to make a statement. I am nothing but a man on the same journey as any other human being. And I am also an artist. When all is said and done, I see the most important thing I have to offer is my art, which is an act of mediation between myself and the awesome mystery of creation.

SCMA: You have continued to teach despite your illness. Why?

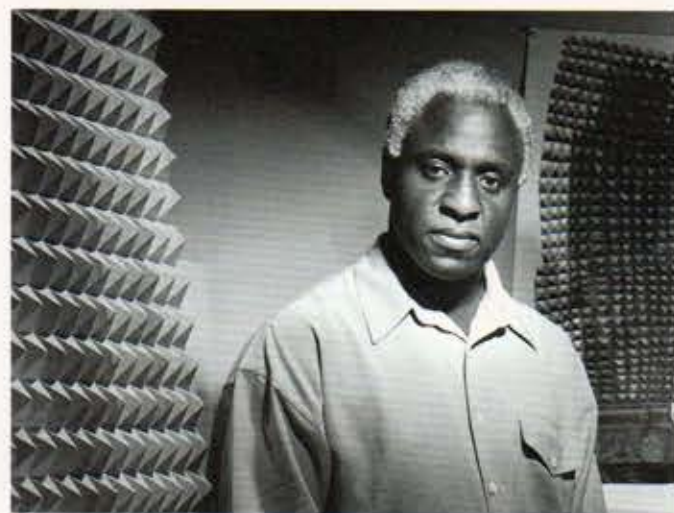
RY: Besides my need to earn a living, I need to be in an environment where I am able to interact with new people and new ideas. On a deeper level, I feel I have come full circle. At Boston University, Conger Metcalf and Walter Murch both empowered me with the quality of their teaching. I feel a responsibility to pass on my knowledge of visual history and literacy. I hope I am guided as a teacher and as an artist by the feelings Franz Kline expressed when he wrote: "It's not about knowing, but about the ability to give." ♦

The Smith College Museum of Art is located on Elm Street, Route 9, at Bedford Terrace, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. Street parking is available nearby. Parking is available in any campus lot evenings and weekends. For information about exhibitions, events or membership, please call 413 585-2760 or 413 585-2786 (TTY).

The museum galleries and restrooms are wheelchair accessible. Handicapped parking is available behind Hillyer Art Library. Assistive listening devices are available for hearing impaired visitors. If you need special accommodations because of a disability, please contact the museum for information and assistance. Requests for sign language interpreters for museum events must be made three weeks in advance.

Group visits and tours
We welcome group visits and tours. Please call in advance to request a tour guide or to schedule a group visit. Museum education staff are available to consult with faculty and teachers on making use of the collection for teaching. Thanks to the generosity of our members, we can help schools with the cost of bus transportation for visits (while funds last). Call Nancy Rich at 413 585-2760.

Admission
All museum exhibitions are free and open to the public. Admission may be charged for special programs.



Richard Yarde, Photo: Steven Long