# Mojo Hand

Recent Work by Richard Yarde

MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF ART BAKALAR GALLERY SEPTEMBER 9 THRU OCTOBER 19, 1996

Richard Yarde has been an important figure in the New England arts community for over thirty years. He has influenced generations of students as a teacher at prestigious public and private institutions including; Boston University, Wellesley College, The Massachusetts College of Art, Amherst College and the University of Massachusetts. His paintings have been collected by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The National Museum of American Art in Washington DC and The Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Yarde's 1982 monumental installation/exhibition "Savoy", a celebration of the dance, music and fashion which flourished during the Harlem Renaissance, premiered at the Mt. Holyoke College Museum and went on to tour nationally. For the past three decades, Yarde's personal observations of African-American culture have informed his artistic vision, which is rich in symbolism and subtle insight.

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Rich in social insight and historical awareness, Yarde's vision is nevertheless primarily experiential. In his artistic vocabulary, cultural symbols are among the elements of a complicated private dialogue in which the artist asks the work for answers about himself. This ongoing quest towards self-definition was itself dramatically redefined in 1991 when Yarde suffered a catastrophic illness -- complete kidney failure which left him incapacitated with stroke-like symptoms. With impaired movement and loss of speech, Yarde stopped making art for more than a year. After a self-described "spiritual awakening" Yarde slowly returned to painting, although his hands felt stiff and foreign. Palms and hands - wooden mannequin hands -- dominate the works from the first stages of recovery, mirroring the primacy of belief in the healing powers of touch in the evolution of religious thought. Later images include dots and markers derived from the deluge of x-rays and medical data physicians were using to map his body. Eventually he began to organize these dots into messages and prayers "written" in the language of Braille, and embedded among the icons and body parts. In the most recent works, cards, dice and games surface as a reference to the workings of chance amidst the certainties of mortality. Yarde utilized imagery derived from x-rays to mediate the medical investigation of his own inner bodyscape. Viewing these abstractions, one imagines the artist's own on-going search for vital information and perhaps his fate.

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The Massachusetts College of Art is honored to present Mojo Hand, Richard Yarde's compelling new work, completed between 1991 and 1996. This exhibition was made possible with the generous support of the LEF Foundation and is funded in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency which also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Smith College Museum of Art also provided generous support for this exhibition.

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We also acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of both Richard and Susan Yarde, persevering under tremendously difficult circumstances. Additional thanks to The Massachusetts College of Art's Foundation, Academic Affairs Department and Exhibitions and Visiting Artists Committee. We would also like to thank our lenders including the AT&T Corporation. Special thanks to Michèle First, Director of the Visiting Artists Programs; Amy van der Hiel, Departments Project Coordinator; Sandy Weisman, Gallery Education Coordinator; Liz Mackie, our editor; Tom Wong for his consultation; Leland DeSavage, Exhibition Preparator, and our tireless crew. Thanks also to Carrie Gallager for her inspired catalogue design and Clive Russ, photographer and Richard Mühlberger for his insightful essay. We are delighted to share this exhibition with The Smith College Museum of Art in Northhampton, Massachusetts, where Ann Seavers, curator, has been of great assistance.

JEFFREY KEOUGH

DIRECTOR OF EXHIBITIONS

THE SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART JANUARY 16 THRU MARCH 16, 1997

# MOJO HAND

## THE ART OF RICHARD YARDE

Well, I'm goin' tomorrow,

But I won't be gone long;

I'm goin' tomorrow,

But I won't be gone 'till long;

I'm gonna get me a Mojo hand;

I'm goin' to bring it back home.

That's what I'm goin' to do.

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FROM THE SONG MOJO HAND BY

LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS (1912-1982)

It is not a coincidence that the name of Richard Yarde's current exhibition and the name of a Blues song are the same. The painter and the song writer acknowledge the human hand as a maker of spells and give it centrality in their art. But for Yarde, before there was a Mojo Hand, there was music.

Music has had a hold on Yarde since his youth and a pervasive place in his compositions. The musical aspect of his paintings is not usually in their subjects, but in rhythmic patterns. The elements of Yarde's compositions are also brought into being in a musical way, often starting with a dot of color like the first note on a staff. A rhythm is established in which foreground and background are created simultaneously, like the base and treble notes of a Bach Two Part Invention that Yarde practiced on the piano as a boy, or the jazz he heard on the radio and phonograph records. The consequences of this back and forth rhythm are other patterns of regularity and irregularity as much like nature's ebb and flow as like musical examples. Yarde's method of painting need not be known to realize that the most conspicuous aspect of it is its improvisational character. His underlying goal is a rhythmic movement that supports the subject matter.

Background blocks are the most continual and regular movement in Yarde's works. They are also persistent. As a pre-school child, he splashed colorful squares onto sheets of paper. Though play may have been their impetus, these flattened cubes became part of the furnishings of the theatre that is the artist's autobiography. This interior space, made rich with the symbols of a lifetime, is the primary subject of Richard Yarde's art. The blocks are there like the beats of his heart.

Painted with an elemental impulse, the finely outlined squares are repeated again and again. Nothing is mechanically worked out. The blocks in early paintings often are muted in color, but they are strong stains in recent work. Changeless tan or gray, acid green or mutating shades of blue, they pervade the paintings like the jazz riffs of distant memory.

Forming a warm field of color, or a cool one, the blocks warp at their edges revealing the white of the paper underneath, cracks to a space beyond.Each block wants to stand alone. The tension between the individual and the whole results in a melodic undulation of the picture plane. This movement is

heightened to restlessness by the oblique outlines of the image ground. The artist declines to adopt the edges of the paper for his margins. He creates his own. They allow his images freedom from the restraints of the rectangular sheet of paper as a picture window or story page.

Head with Hands I 1992 36"x53" watercolor

Lopsided rectangles, Yarde's paintings partially fill the paper, leaving white remnants that further confound the equilibrium of straight lines and right angles. Geometry is once more skewered by the artist's habit of adding sheets of paper at sloping angles to the original one in order to increase the size of the picture surface. White, or unpainted, areas therefore vie with painted ones for compositional prominence. The emptiness of the white holds the possibility that the artist's painted reflections will be made whole. For now, white's

Palms with Dots 1993 41"x58" watercolor

-en: Front (of Back Front Back) 94"x41" 1995 watercolor

neutrality separates Yarde's remembrances and dreams from the viewer's recall of reality. It allows Yarde's creations an independent existence as his own imaginatively and almost instinctively construed world.

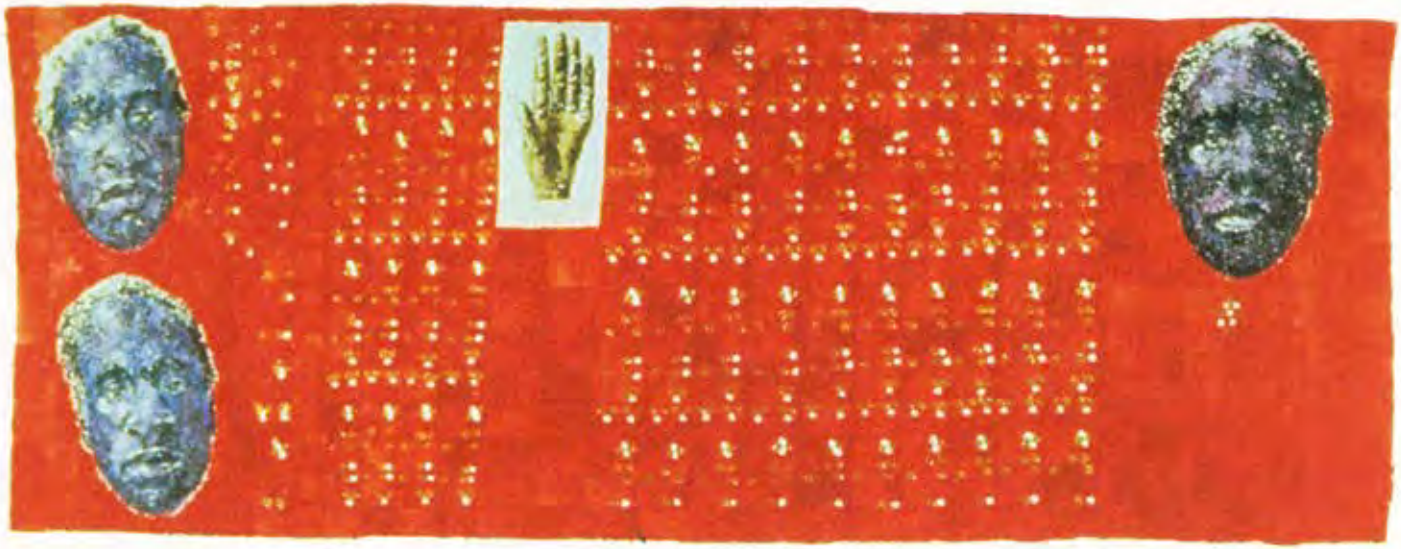
Yarde has used watercolor since he was a child (he has also produced powerful oil paintings, particularly in the 1960s). An early inspiration in Yarde's life was his godfather, Amos Gibson, who operated a portrait photography studio where he hand-tinted black and white photographs. At seven or eight years of age, Yarde tried to imitate him by adding watercolor to newspaper photographs that interested him. His work can still be described as hand tinted memories and dreams. "The touch of the hand is very important in my work and in my appreciation of the work of other artists,"

During a painting career of thirty years, Richard Yarde's art has explored his own history. This personal world is sometimes meticulously recalled and sometimes veiled. A fixation with images of his family and the famous of the days of his youth marked his art from the start. There were also "thoughts about aspects of my private life, areas of African-American history, and recalling of certain dreams," Yarde stated in 1987. In the same interview he stressed that there was also improvisation when memories blurred. "The deeper the memory the less aware I am of its surface reality, he explained.[1] The result is a series of images of the artist's own consciousness. They explore the rooms of Yarde's childhood, plunge into Harlem's famous Savoy Ballroom, and tip toe inside the barber shop where neighborhood men confessed secrets. They also celebrate the place of pop music idols and boxing heroes, of

Sweet Daddy Grace and Josephine Baker, in the imagination of a Roxbury youth in the 1950s.

Today, Richard Yarde's imagery is different. There are no rooms, no shadows, and no separation of figure and ground. Traditional narrative is gone. Scattered forms float. Heads and hands frequently are not connected to bodies. The deepest spaces are inside of the artist's body, represented by x-rays. The paintings are carefully coded with dots from acupuncture, Braille, and biochemistry, to balance otherwise disassociated elements. The paintings are raw and miraculously more personal than the autobiographical musings of the elegant earlier works.

In 1989, Yarde began his Memory Theatre, a series of paintings and sculpture that were daring in the way that they exceeded autobiography and probed the artist's inner self. It was inevitable that dreams would also be probed, "the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul," in the words of Carl Jung. These changes in Yarde's focus allowed him to maintain much that was familiar in his art: the blocks, pieced formats, water color staining. The artist's shift in orientation also enlarged his theatre, for as Jung points out, "the dream is the theatre where the dreamer is at once



scene designer, actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic."[2]

The dramatic change was not only a shift from memory to dream (for dreams are only one source of Yarde's current imagery), but one from autobiography to poetry. The change came about in 1991 when Yarde experienced a health crisis from which he still emerges. Two works completed soon before are presentiments of artistic themes that have accompanied him ever since. He pictured a pair of closed doors with a lock positioned between them, based on the doors of a Pentecostal church. Until 1966, Yarde's work was abstract and his first figurative painting was of a door. Doors, to him, are transitional symbols. The unlocking of doors is also a metaphor of critical meaning in Yarde's life. In his paintings, doors find surrogate icons that are understood as openings to the interior of the body to self and to spirituality.

The second work that looked to Yarde's future is a small self-portrait, closely cropped, paired with another self-portrait unfolded and framed geometrically. This unfolding, or unlocking,

above: Head with Hands III 1992 30"x82" watercolor

of the head resounds in a later painting of an x-ray of the artist's brain. Yarde's self-portrait, disembodied, floats in many compositions near hands, instruments that unlock, open, and make whole -- **Mojo Hands**.

**Spiral** was the first painting executed by Yarde after his illness began. Based on a dizzying dream of a few years earlier, he said, "I felt split when I started working on this." Still, he held to a central axis from which his forms are flung. Tne sensuous wafts of inky black and maroon paint, the delicate points of light within the spiral, and the stillness of empty paper at the edges induce restful meditation, contradictory sensations to the one of vertigo experienced by the artist. The spiral image is unique in Yarde's work, but certain aspects of it migrate to recent paintings like split images and curious, dislocating forms. Very specifically, the luscious physicality of **Spiral's** surfaces echo in a series of paintings of radiographs.

With a heightened awareness of the physical and the psychological, Yarde executed a series of paintings in which identical, multiple self-portraits figure as enigmatic emblems. The repetition of the same features hint at a split, one head being the clone of the others. Hands are an equally important symbolic feature in these works, and dots, often used by the artist in his old sketch books, appear again. In other works, the head is not present. In every painting in which dots appear, they are from a different source or sound a different message. **Back Front Back**, a triptych, is based on a dream the artist had of meeting himself. Red dots are positioned like the symbols that represent the basic elements in the forming of matter -- in the artist's mind, the self. Other dots indicate the acupuncture points of healing. The strongly elemental nude figure, repeated, seems to have been diagnosed by Yarde's brush as both healer - the caster of mojo -- and as in need of healing. **Coming and Going** (Heads and Shoes), with its startling yellow-green ground of blocks, is based on another dream image. It finds its structure in an old Japanese screen that shows a landscape with inserted figures. The dots that cross the framing devices, invading the icon-like heads, are from Tibetan medical charts. Dot patterns also derive from geomantic figures used to divine such practical things as the location of water.

Coded dots and hands become less mysterious when Yarde combines them with a new element, the most personal aspect

of his epic poem, an x-ray image of his torso. With six sets of white hands, **Mojo Hand** is clearly about blessing, consecration, and healing. The torso, accompanied by DNA patterns, is the object of the laying on of hands. Braille dots spell out the Twenty-third Psalm. The incantation, "... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ..." seems to echo through the composition, carried by the blue blocks as they change size, color, and direction. A series of thirteen small paintings called **Suit: Mojo Hand 2** take up the mojo theme quite literally; they are based on electrophotographies of a healer's fingers but are also treated as a suit of playing cards, suggesting chance.

Individual x-ray paintings are as much self-portraits as are the images of Yarde's face. But the solitary x-rays are so subtly rich in their color, so sensuous in their curving lines, and so wedded to their blocked grounds, that they easily stand away from the reality of their medical laboratory origins. They are landscapes of the artist's self, studies of the interior intarsia that is the creative spirit. Yarde's works on paper frequently contain intellectual conceits that make sense of often disparate images at odds with themselves. In **Kismet: Snakes, Squash, and Nipples**, ideas from an antique board game called "Snakes and Ladders" organize the profoundly strange assortment of images. They came to Yarde in a disturbing dream. The game has one hundred squares, but its moral message appealed to the artist more than its grid. The ladders allow players to escape from evil, represented by the snakes. Players win words. The good words, like bravery or obedience, save them, but others like vanity and dishonesty doom them. White dots located at critical positions across the rust-brown field repeat those words, translated into Braille.

Antique Oriental acupuncture charts, x-rays, words from the Bible, DNA patterns -- all are associations that link hands to healing. Perhaps the hands in Yarde's newest paintings are his most authentic self-portraits. As he paints, the hands are for his own healing; and as from the start, there is healing in his art for others.

Yarde's art has changed. It has left the parlor of his youth and the memory theatre of his consciousness to create paintings more basic and more powerful than autobiography. They spring from the sanctuary that is the artist's psyche, conceived of illness and fear, but born from a creative spirit that is stronger than ever. Like the cloud in Shelley's poem, Richard Yarde's art says, "I change, but I cannot die."

Richard Mühlberger
Springfield, Massachusetts,
August 8, 1996

above: Palms with Dots II 37.75" x 66.25" 1993 watercolor

front cover: Mojo Hand 80"x148" 1996 watercolor

Designed by Carrie Gallager

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Note 1. Artscene, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts, January 11 - February 8, 1987

Note 2. Carl Gustav Jung, Collected Works, vol. 4, p. 83, and vol. 8, p. 58.3

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