



Richard Yarde's "Mojo Hand," which incorporates a Braille text of the 23d Psalm.

## THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW



"Head with Hands I."

### Richard Yarde makes immortal watercolors



"Palms with Dots II."

By Christine Temin  
GLOBE STAFF

**T**he subject of the earliest work in Richard Yarde's show at the Massachusetts College of Art, the 1987 "Johnny's with Wreaths," is death — the image of an open coffin with a young man inside. Yarde's most recent works deal with death, too, and if anything, the treatment is even more urgent. In 1991 the artist suffered a catastrophic illness: kidney failure, which led to limited movement and loss of speech. His return to painting was slow and tortuous, his recovery incomplete. He now spends seven hours of every day in dialysis, a mechanical process cleaning the sick body that is the theme of the Mass. Art show — a subject he makes cosmic rather than macabre. He waits for a kidney donor.

Yarde's medium, watercolor, is treacherous and unforgiving: You can't go back and correct. It's also a medium that is ephemeral. The light so essential for human life spells death for watercolor, a fact that is especially poignant in this life-and-death show. Yarde's watercolors are often huge — 10 feet or longer, a heroic scale more often associated with oils or acrylics. His handling is virtuosic, his colors dazzling. He has become one of the great American watercolorists of the 20th century, as much a master of the medium as Homer was in the 19th.

There's much to see in Yarde's work, and much to say about the Mass. Art show — for starters, that the college's ex-

hibitions director, Jeffrey Keough, has once again provided us with something stunning and surprising. Visionary curators are as rare as visionary artists. Keough — who has created shows of drawings from the Terezin concentration camp and of prints by Australian Aborigines, not to mention a current installation by Kiki Smith, one of the most sought-after young artists in America — is one. That he creates such shows on a budget of next to nothing at a state-funded school is near miraculous. Like most of Keough's shows, the Yarde exhibition comes with an attractive catalog, this one with a fine essay by Richard Muhlberger.

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# A great watercolorist walks in the valley of the shadow

■ YARDE

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And like many of Keough's shows, this one has a life after Mass. Art: The Yarde works will travel to the Smith College Museum of Art and other venues to be arranged.

Keough came under considerable pressure to make this show a full retrospective of Yarde's 30-year career, but decided that the recent work was so powerful it should be shown on its own. "Leave the retrospective to the MFA," he says. Dream on. The Museum of Fine Arts has shown limited interest in showing Yarde. Its 1993 "Awash in Color: Homer, Sargent and the Great American Watercolor" sputtered to a halt with tepid, mid-century Andrew Wyeths instead of integrating Yarde — or other great contemporary watercolorists — into the show.

Integration of another sort has been an issue in Yarde's career. He is African-American. He richly deserved to be included in the MFA's 1993 extravaganza. Instead, he was relegated to an accompanying solo show at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Roxbury. He has been in a couple of group shows at the MFA, most notably the 1988 "Massachusetts Masters: Afro-American Artists." He was one of 34 artists who had nothing in common besides skin color and a Massachusetts address.

## Started painting early

Yarde, 56, has been working in watercolor for nearly half a century, ever since his mother gave him a paintbox when he was a small child. A native of Boston, he was educated at Boston University and has taught at several colleges and universities in the state, for the past 15 years at the University of Massachusetts, both in Boston and Amherst. He has exhibited widely and often, and his work has been bought by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and, bless them, by the MFA, which owns five watercolors, one large and four small ones.

So it's not that Yarde hasn't been shown, but that he hasn't been shown as much as his stature warrants, or in the context he deserves. That has been clear ever since a fine 1983 exhibition of watercolorists working on a large scale, at the Danforth Museum in Framingham. Yarde was clearly the star.

When he's not being categorized as a watercolorist, he's categorized as a black. His subject matter has often been distinctly African-American, whether it's a portrait of Paul Robeson as the Emperor Jones or his monumental, metaphorical 1982 installation on the

## MOJO HAND:

### RECENT WORK BY RICHARD YARDE

*At the Bakalar Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, through Oct. 19. The gallery is open Monday through Friday, 10-6, and Saturday 11-5.*

Harlem Renaissance, "Savoy," which toured nationally.

The new work at Mass. Art is about the black experience only insofar as it's about Yarde's own experience. More than anything he's done previously, it transcends race. Its theme is intensely personal — and so it's also about the human condition, and humanity's relation to the cosmos.

Its sources are as wide-ranging as imaginable. The dots that are a staple of Yarde's vocabulary refer to other art — to Aboriginal "dreamtime" painting and African art more than to Pointillism — but also to Braille, to constellations of stars, and even to acupuncture points, those dots diagramming disease. The smallest mark an artist can make, the dot is also one of the most powerful, and this building block of Yarde's art is also symbolic of the building blocks of life, the molecule or atom.

Keough demonstrates the constants in Yarde's style with two works that predate the artist's illness: "Johnny's With Wreaths" and the 1990 "Yellow Suit." Like most of the later works in the show, these are based on loosely painted, irregular blocks of color, more akin to the homespun look of a hand-made quilt than to the grid that has governed much 20th-century painting, though there are affinities between Yarde's squares and those of Chuck Close. Muhlberger, in his catalog essay, compares the small squares to beats of the artist's heart. Together, the squares form a larger square inside the rectangular white paper, whose geometric perfection Yarde disregards, preferring to create his own lopsided, ragged-edged, fabric-like planes that look as if they're floating or flying off the flat paper.

## Man has many parts

When the squares of the background give way to the figure, they become a crazy quilt or travel in swirls, like a Roman mosaic. Man is made of many tiny parts, Yarde was saying even before his own body's disintegration. To reinforce that fragmentation, he often seams several pieces of paper together in one painting.

With hindsight, it's easy to read a prophecy into "Yellow Suit," which is a double portrait, a format Yarde favors. The man on the left is whole, self-contained; patches of blank

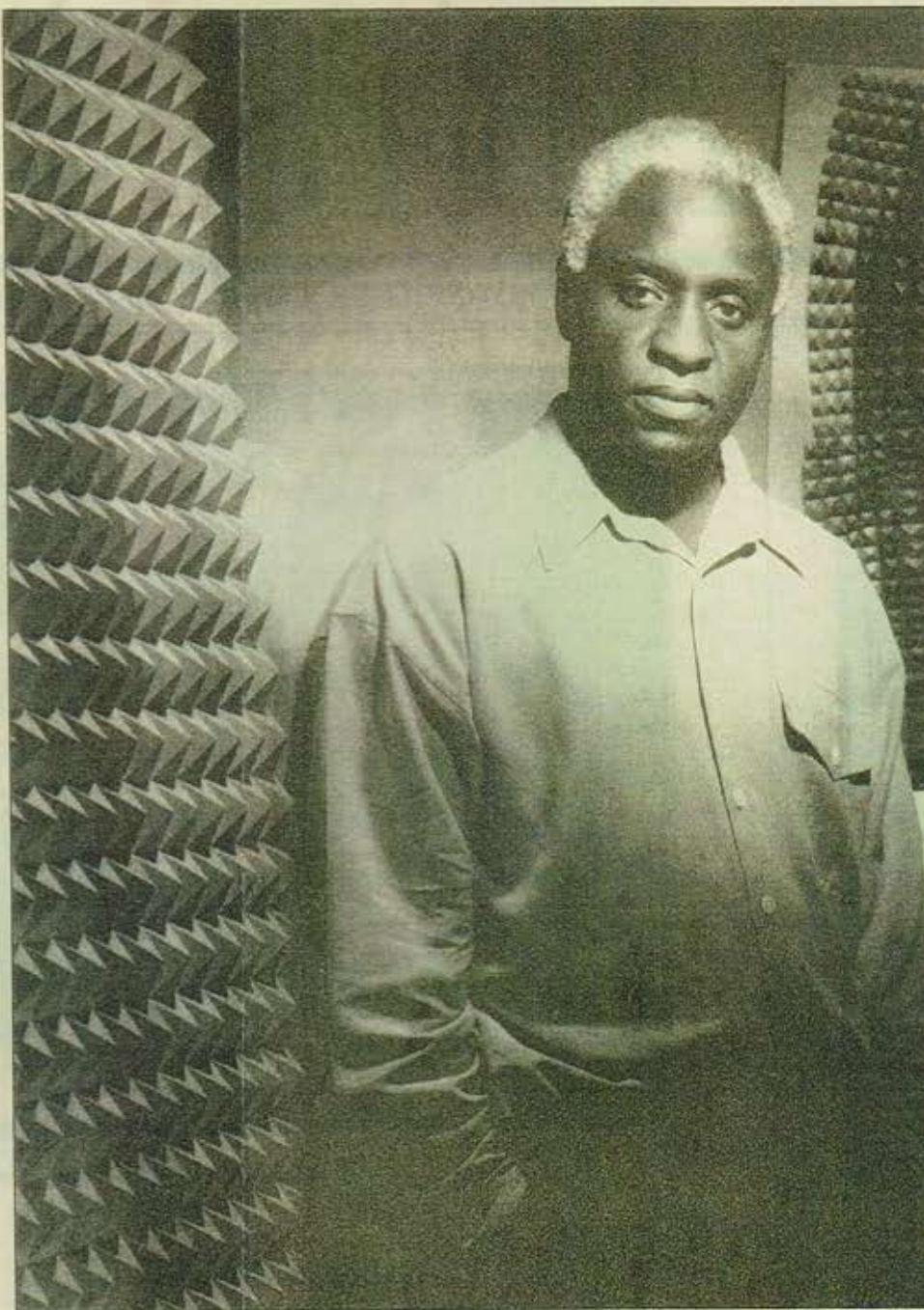


PHOTO / STEVEN LONG

Although it confronts death, Richard Yarde's work offers a sense of wonder.

white appear on the man on the right, as if his body were starting to dissolve.

After these two opening works comes an explosion, in the form of "Mouths," a row of four of them, each open in a silent scream. The mouths reside in squares lined up in the lower right; the rest of the large paper is left blank, its whiteness almost confrontational.

Yarde's people tend to be doubled or divided, as in a quartet of paintings, two of his wife, two of himself, with faces split down the

middle, which makes you think of how faces are no more perfectly symmetrical than Yarde's squares are. Sometimes the figure is notable for its absence: One yellow square outlines a face that isn't there.

His figures generally adopt straightforward frontal poses nothing fancy or artsy. Even before his illness, they stood or lay down as people do for X-rays. Yarde uses his own X-rays as fodder for his current work, creating lyrical, fluid, blue-gray paintings

based on them. These maps of the body look more like maps of ancient civilizations; they're part of another theme in this show, the relation between the body's interior and the rest of the universe, as if the barrier of the skin weren't there. The watercolor leaks, bleeds and blurs, underscoring the idea of oneness and interdependence. Yarde tells you that the notion of the body as discrete and self-sufficient is false, that we're part of everything else. Our notion of up and down is equally off, he says: He presents a world seen from odd vantage points, unshaped by Western perspective, or viewed from above, the way God might see us.

## Mystery and adventure

Disembodied hands and hand prints reappear throughout the show, potent reminders of the touch of the artist's own hand as well as hands that heal or bless. Some of the flattened palms look like the hands on depictions of medieval saints, raised in benediction. A pre-rational, pre-Renaissance mysticism pervades these pieces (some of which are based on Yarde's dreams), but so does a quasi-scientific, Leonardo-like spirit of exploration.

A similar spirit pervades the Kiki Smith installation, "Landscape," upstairs from the Yarde show until Oct. 9. The correspondence is coincidental, but so strong it startles. Smith's paper rectangles on the floor are like Yarde's squares; her red glass circles are like his dots, also often red; her bloody, disembodied arms are like his body fragments; her idea of harmony between man and nature, expressed through glass deer who keep a vigil in the room, is like his incorporation of dream animals.

Yarde is one of many contemporary artists making art about death, sometimes their own. Much of this work is rooted in specific diseases, most often AIDS or breast cancer. Those politicized diseases have led to art that is sometimes angry or, worse, sentimental. Instead of sentiment or self-pity, though, Yarde offers a sense of wonder. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work that gives the show its title, "Mojo Hand," a name Yarde borrowed from a Lightnin' Hopkins blues. Against a background of squares in rich blues that can be read as sky, sea or an operating theater of the spirit, Yarde floats the skeleton of a torso. On either side of the torso are hands, six pairs of them, palms fanned in a gesture of blessing. Nearby are patterns of dots that look like twinkling stars but are actually the 23d Psalm, written in Braille: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."