



## Death and Transfiguration — The Art of Richard Yarde

BY CHRISTINE TEMIN

**R**ichard Yarde's older brother used to entertain his younger sibling by making little paintings of World War II, based on magazine photographs. Yarde was three years old at the time. His brother, Edgar, was six. The year was 1942; the place, the Yarde family home in Boston's South End.

That same year, Edgar died of asthma. Richard Yarde himself soon started painting, on the flip sides of the old bills his mother brought home from the furniture store where she worked. His subjects were often animals, painted in a patchy grid. He painted with watercolors, because that's what his mother had bought for him.

Yarde (*SFA*'64, '65) went on to be-

come one of the preeminent contemporary masters of that difficult medium, heir to the great traditions of Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. The grid also stayed in his work: his is a loose, watery, swimming version of the rectilinear format that has governed so much of twentieth-century art. The specter of death has remained in his work, too: consider his 1987 *Johnny's With Wreaths*, an image of an open coffin with a young man lying inside. Yarde meant it as a memorial both to his brother and to the singer Johnny Ace, who committed suicide.

Yarde's more recent work, too, has dealt with death, a subject he makes cosmic rather than ghoulish, in works often based on X rays, both his own and other peo-

ple's. He's had lots of X rays. In 1991 Yarde suffered a series of mini-strokes that resulted in kidney failure, curtailed movement, and loss of speech. His return to his life as a painter was excruciatingly slow, his recovery incomplete: he waits for a kidney donor, meanwhile spending every night on dialysis.

Nonetheless, "I'm lucky," Yarde says. "If I'd had this disease twenty years ago, I'd be dead, because they didn't have the facilities to keep me alive. I'm still strong enough to teach, to work, and to enjoy my family. If your spirits are lifted, it lifts your body, too. And wonderful things have been happening to me."

*Christine Temin is the art critic for the Boston Globe.*

### Get Thee to . . . a Ghetto?

One was the powerful exhibition of a decade's worth of work at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston last year. So successful was the show that it travels to the Studio Museum in Harlem in July. While it's wonderful that the show will appear at the high-profile museum, it's also another example of Yarde's work being ghettoized because he is black. A more glaring instance was his exclusion from the Museum of Fine Arts' 1993 *Awash in Color: Homer, Sargent and the Great American Watercolor*. Yarde deserved a place in that exhibition; instead, his work was relegated to a companion show at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Roxbury.

That Yarde's name isn't as well-known as Homer's or Sargent's is also because he has chosen to spend his entire career in Massachusetts, first in Boston, then in the western part of the state (he teaches at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst). "I didn't want to raise my kids in New York," he says, "and I didn't want to be pushed around by the latest trends there."

What started him on a career as an artist was an evening course in advertising he took at Boston University right after graduating from high school. "The instructor took me aside and said, 'Interesting illustrations, terrible copy,'" he recalls. So he stuck with the illustration part, entering BU

with an eight-year plan to alternate a year of school with a year of work to pay for more school, until faculty member Conger Metcalf threatened to quit if the University didn't award Yarde a scholarship. It did, and Yarde earned a B.F.A. from the School for the Arts in 1964 and an M.F.A. a year later. He cites Metcalf and the painter Walter Murch as his great mentors at BU. "Murch had incredible insight, and not just about getting the drawing correct," Yarde recalls. "He'd ask, 'Does the work have poetry? Does it reflect your personal experience?'"

Yes, to both questions. Yarde's art is a poignant and occasionally ecstatic meditation on his life. Its hallmarks have remained constant: the patchwork grid; the dots that have been compared to those of aboriginal art, braille, and pointillism; the figure as the essential subject. Yarde's art is also technically dazzling: watercolor, that most treacherous of media, whose translucence allows



*The Savoy Ballroom, Mixed Media, 1981-82, approximately 24' x 60' x 10', Studio Museum in Harlem.*

no covering of mistakes, holds no terror for him. "I don't think of watercolor as a challenge," he says. "I think I'm at the point where it's a direct extension of my thoughts. The challenge is to get the image going."

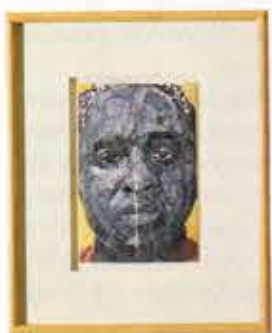
### Figurative Prescience

Once he does, he sometimes multiplies it, as in the 1990 *Yellow Suit*, a double portrait. The figure on the left is whole, the one on the right is interrupted by patches of white, as if he were starting to disintegrate, a prophetic image from the year before Yarde's illness.

Yarde often works on a huge scale, one that contradicts the stereotype of watercolor as a dinky medium suited for polite little pictures of flowers. Witness his commanding ten-foot-tall diptych *Back/Front*, another double portrait.

While Yarde's subjects have sometimes been black-specific — from a portrait of Paul Robeson as the Emperor Jones to a monumental 1982 installation on the Harlem Renaissance — of late they have been universal. Dots that outline parts of the human body also look like constellations of stars. X rays, those maps of the body's interior, also

*Fold-Unfold, Watercolor, 1991, 18 1/2" x 22 1/2" and 41" x 41".*



resemble maps of the world.

Yarde's work may be in the collections of Boston's MFA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, but he has not achieved the star status many art

world observers feel he deserves. He cares more about individual response, like the reaction from the young student who visited his Mass Art show, looked at a figure made up of dots, and said, "I see

that figure breathing."

"That child," Yarde says with pleased excitement, "picked up on just what I'd intended, which was to create a pulse with the dots — to make that figure live."