

# Walking in the Valley of the Shadow

Painter Richard Yarde thought he was going home to die. But when he returned to his art, he began to heal himself. The powerful paintings that followed chronicle a journey of courage.

by KATHLEEN KOMAN

Several years ago, Richard Yarde, a fifty-seven-year-old painter whose huge, cryptic watercolors can be found among the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Museum of American Art, and other prestigious places, began to question his artistic ability. One day, he turned to his wife, Susan, and asked, "Do you think I'm a great painter?"

"No," she replied. "You'll never be a great painter until you can work out of your own present experience directly." Yarde, a professor of art at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, didn't speak to her for days.

These days, he would probably not disagree with her. In his early works, says Susan, Yarde's wife of more than thirty years, "everything was second-hand. He was going into the past and using someone else's material. It's not the same as coming out from behind your veil."

The veil was snatched away in 1991, when Yarde nearly died from kidney failure, a result of complications from years of medical treatment for high blood pressure. Like many African-Americans, Richard Yarde has battled high blood pressure for most of his adult life. He started requiring medication at about age forty, but the drugs induced attacks of gout. To counteract these side effects, doctors prescribed high dosages of another drug that the Yardes later learned—through their own research—could damage the kidneys when taken in large amounts.

Stephen Long





Early in his career, Richard Yarde developed an "obsessional interest" in the history of African-American culture. His installation piece of the Savoy, Harlem's famous ballroom, resembled a huge, three-dimensional pop-up book. The exhibition opened at Mt. Holyoke College Art Museum in Massachusetts in 1982, and then toured nationally.

The kidney failure left Yarde incapacitated with stroke-like symptoms. His speech was slurred, he could barely walk, and he lost virtually all feeling in his hands. Worse, the doctors told Yarde's wife to take him home and sit him in front of a TV set, to not let him go up or down stairs, or do anything strenuous.

"I got home and I was emotionally shattered," Yarde says. "[I felt] very hopeless because they seemed to diagnose me in a way that didn't leave me any options for my health to return. I thought they were basically waiting for me to die."

Yarde couldn't even hold a paintbrush. He needed Susan's help to walk to the bathroom, and returned to his bed exhausted from the effort. He was at first afraid for himself—afraid of dying. Then, he began to worry about how his family would survive without him. Then he decided to fight back.

After more than a year of slow, painful rehabilitation, Yarde regained his speech and movement and returned to his Amherst studio. His illness had been a shattering experience, but it had

also jolted him into the present, and inspired dramatic changes in his art. While his earlier works recall his old neighborhood in Boston and celebrate the achievements of such African-Americans as Malcolm X, Josephine Baker, and prizefighter Jack Johnson, his new paintings transcend his past and his race. They're charged with emotion. They deal with contradictions and vulnerability—especially his own.

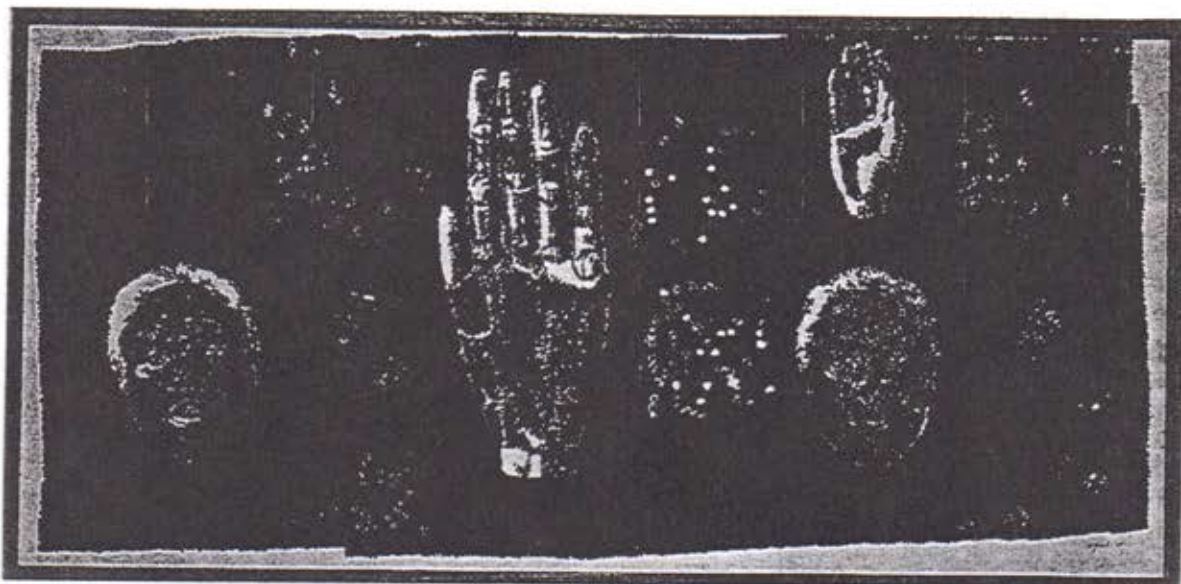
*Back Back Front*, for example, a 1993 triptych, is Yarde's first attempt at a nude self-portrait, and was inspired by a dream in which the artist met three versions of himself. It charts his recent transformation, his passage to the brink of death and back. Yarde once would have considered a nude self-portrait improper, but after his illness, he felt he had nothing left to hide. "When you have a near-death experience, it's traumatic," he says. "You're stripped to essentials."

Yarde still confronts his mortality every day. He sleeps tethered to a dialysis machine because he needs a kidney transplant. Yet his struggles and triumphs have catapulted his work to a

different place. In a catalog essay that accompanied a recent exhibit of Yarde's new paintings at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, Richard Muhlberger wrote, "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.'" Yarde's paintings chronicle the transformation in his ongoing journey of courage and hope.

Following the onset of the stroke-like symptoms resulting from his kidney failure in 1991, Yarde was referred to a neurologist at a Springfield, Massachusetts, hospital and instructed to abruptly stop taking all medication in preparation for a medical test. But his high blood pressure rebounded, putting him at severe risk of a massive stroke. (Yarde later





Clive Runt photo

*Palm with Dots* [1993, 41" x 69"], from the AT&T Collection. Many of Yarde's huge watercolors feature a grid-like background composed of irregular rectangles of color. This technique, which he has used in his art since he was seven years old, is much like quilt-making to him.

learned that these drugs are supposed to be "tapered" off.) Fortunately, on the day of the scheduled procedure, the nurse who checked his blood pressure immediately cancelled the test, realizing, as she said, that it could kill him.

"She told me to get Richard out of the hospital because the doctor was so incompetent," says Susan.

Yarde decided not to pursue a malpractice suit, but says, "The only reason I'm here today is because [of] that nurse."

Susan rushed her husband to Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, where he was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit. After four days, when his blood pressure was again stable, the doctors sent him home, where he remained in bed until slowly, he began to rally. He began by walking to the bathroom by himself. Then he made it to the kitchen. Then to the mailbox. Then across the street. Within six months, he was walking six miles. His mantra when he was very sick was the Twenty-third Psalm, and as he walked, he would repeat it, often sobbing as he did.

One day, returning from a trip to New York with Susan, he began to hallucinate. Susan checked them into a motel in Connecticut so they could get some rest. "I slept a couple of hours," she recalls, "and when I woke up, I saw Richard on

the edge of the bed, staring at a stained glass lamp like it was a snake. 'I don't like that lamp,' he said."

He refused to go into a restaurant because he thought he was being watched. He told Susan that his stomach felt like it was made of blown glass and that, if he moved, he would hemorrhage. His blood pressure was again rising out of control.

Susan sped back to Boston and once again brought him to the emergency room at Brigham and Women's. The ER staff told them to take a number and wait. Knowing her husband might not survive another few hours, she called Dr. Harold Kosasky, a family friend who had delivered her sons, and who is on staff at the hospital, and asked him to intervene. Within minutes, two

orderlies came running down the hall, loaded Yarde onto a gurney, and whisked him away. Three hours later, his blood pressure was brought down and stabilized again. When Susan met up with the doctor who had worked on him, she said, "I hope that Harold was polite when he talked to you." The doctor replied that he hadn't been.

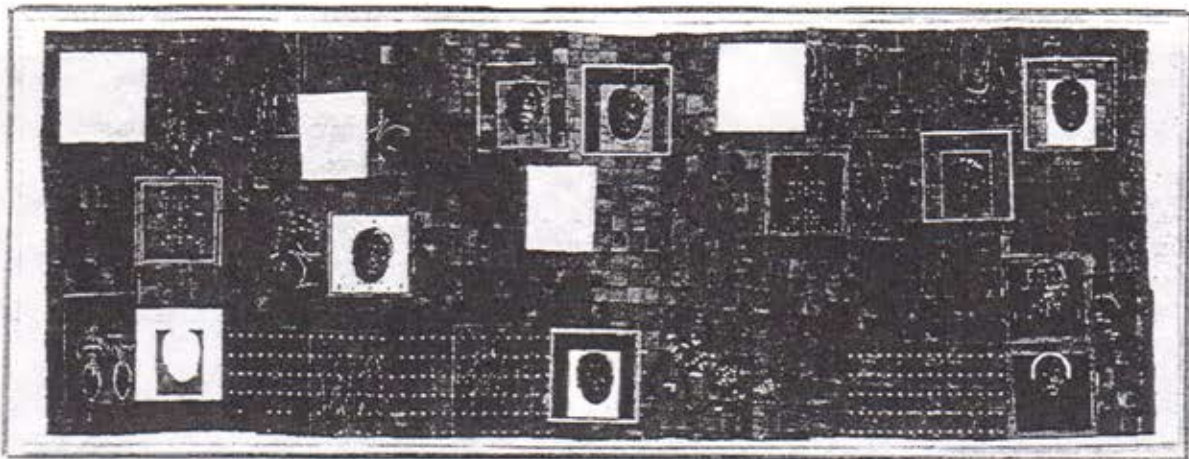
"This guy can be very ferocious when he wants to get something done," says Yarde. "He saved my life." Kosasky, who owns more than two dozen of Yarde's paintings, says it was Susan who saved her husband.

When Yarde was released from the hospital, he and Susan decided to stay with friends in Boston for a week before daring to return to Northampton. "I wept, the day we left...because I was so afraid to be alone with Richard," she says.

Feeling physically and spiritually out of whack after the hospitalizations, Yarde decided to explore alternative approaches to healing. He experimented with oils. He visited a chiropractor. He worked with a masseuse. "This sense of being touched in a kind of loving way—I felt so renewed after that experience," he says. And while he continued to receive traditional medical treatment, he also began to question some of his doctor's decisions. He cut back on his

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*Coming and Going* [1996-97, work still in progress, 67" x 180"], which was featured in the "Mojo Hand" exhibit, was inspired by a dream and a seventeenth-century Japanese screen painting. Several icon-like self-portraits and several pairs of men's shoes float on a vivid chartreuse background. "To me, the painting is about discovery," Yarde says. "I think this really charts my experience from illness to health. The shoes are a symbol for having been one place and gone to another."

Stephen Peregony photo

medication, and refused to take certain drugs when he reacted badly to them.

Around this time, Susan also encouraged her husband to attend a religious service conducted by Father Ralph DiOrio, a Catholic priest with a healing ministry in Worcester, Massachusetts. Yarde was skeptical at first. "It didn't pass intellectual muster," he says. But he continued to attend services with Susan, and one day, Father Ralph touched him on the forehead, and Yarde dropped to the floor. Describing it later, Yarde says, "A heat, an electric current, started in the low part of my body and just started to move up, and when it got to my head, I was down."

**W**hen Yarde first returned to his studio in 1992, he cried a lot. "The illness cracked me open," he says. "Things that you normally brush off, I had a very dramatic reaction to." He bought fingerpaints and paper and began to make handprints like the ones he made as a child. He also experimented with clay. "It was like playing in a sandlot," he says. "The work wasn't for people to look at. I was trying to get back to something more primal."

The watercolors beckoned. As Yarde worked with them again, he began healing himself

by exploring his transformation from a sense of fragmentation to one of wholeness. He painted wooden mannequin hands in some of these works to represent his own numbed hands and rigid body during the worst phase of his illness. He also incorporated disembodied self-portraits into some of these works to convey the feeling of splitting into many parts.

As he continued painting, Yarde says he "...tried to document what it felt like to be in the grip of a certain problem and what it would be like to be healed of that problem." An exhibition of these paintings, called "Mojo Hand" (after a Blues song by Lightnin'

Hopkins), was recently held at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, and at the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton. The paintings can be seen from July to September 1997 at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

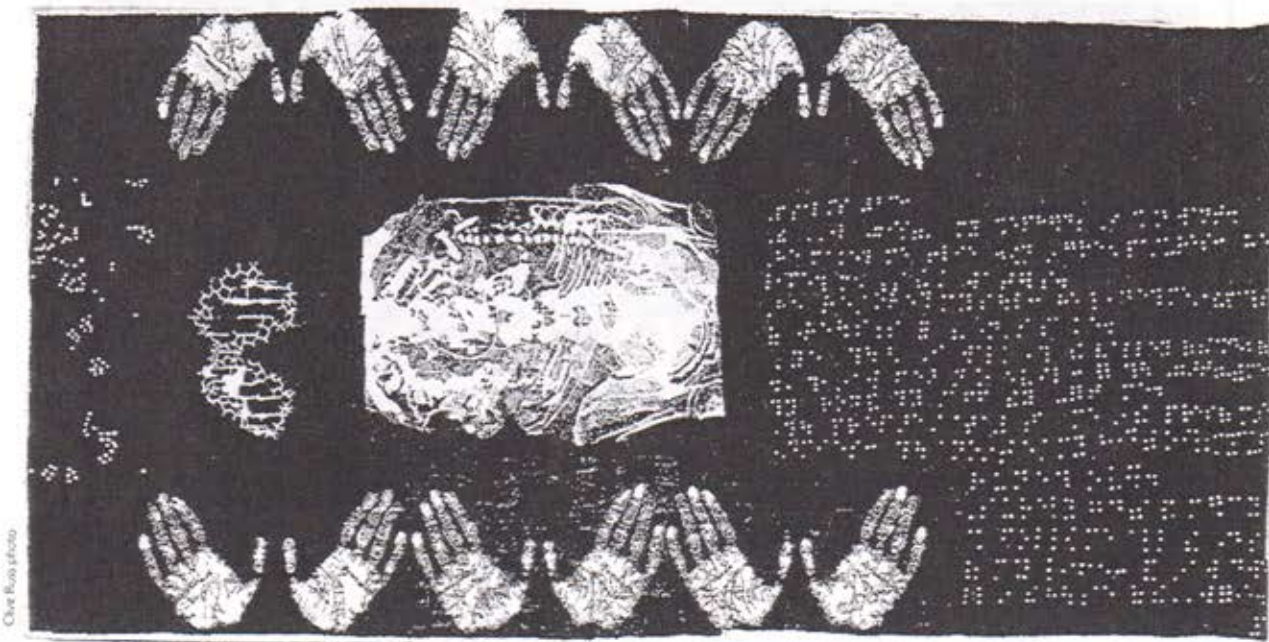
In an introduction to Yarde's show at Smith, Ann Sievers, associate curator of prints, drawings, and photographs, wrote: "The title 'Mojo Hand', with its reference to the occult power of voodoo amulets or charms, suggests the potent role these new paintings have played in the artist's recovery.... Although intensely personal, inspired by the artist's memories, dreams, and the spiritual journey occasioned by his illness, these works are at the same time universal in their confrontation of human vulnerability and mortality, and in their assertion of the creative spirit."

According to Jeffrey Keough, exhibitions director at Massachusetts College of Art, many young artists today assume the mantle of victimhood in an attempt to get their work noticed. He says of Yarde's show at the College, "What was so incredibly powerful about Richard Yarde's work is that it was not an exhibition about illness or victimhood, but an exhibition about faith."

Yarde's watercolors are huge—some measuring more than ten

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*Mojo Hand* [1995, 80" x 148"], the twelve-foot-long watercolor that gives Richard Yarde's current show its title, includes an elaborate pattern of dots that spell out the Twenty-third Psalm in Braille. It was Yarde's mantra as he struggled with an illness that almost claimed his life.

feet long. "Watercolor is considered to be, at least in the Western tradition, a medium in which you make cute little things. I want to challenge that," he says. It is one of the first mediums he worked with as a child, and one that feels very natural to him. "I worked for twenty years with oil paint and it was always a struggle," he says.

Many of Yarde's works feature a grid-like background composed of irregular rectangles of color. This technique, which Yarde has used in his art since he was seven years old, is much like quilt-making to him. It's a convenient way to stitch things together, he says, and is the way he usually builds his imagery, unless he's working on a plain white background. A jazz-lover, he also sees a musical structure in his paintings. He describes the grid as the backbeat, and likens the overlying images to improvisation. His newest paintings are coded with patterns of dots, derived from a variety of sources as diverse as Braille and biochemistry.

In 1995, Yarde spent seven months working on *Mojo Hand*, the 80" x 148" watercolor that gives the current show its title. Inspired by a dream Yarde had

after Father Ralph's laying-on-of-hands, the painting depicts an x-ray of a pregnant female torso against a deep blue background. In his dream, Yarde saw the figure of a woman lying face-down, but he was unable to work this image into his painting. He had been studying radiographs at the time, and when he found one with an interesting pattern, he interpreted it for *Mojo Hand*. He didn't actually know what it was until a doctor saw the painting at an exhibition and told him it was an x-ray of a pregnant woman. "I couldn't have made a better choice," says the artist. "It is a symbol of regeneration."

On either side of the torso are six sets of white hands, instruments for blessing and healing. The right side of the painting is punctuated by an elaborate dot pattern, which is actually the Twenty-third Psalm, Yarde's mantra, spelled out in Braille: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...."

Because the paintings in this exhibition are so personal, Yarde worried that others would not be able to connect with them. So he was astonished when 450 people showed up on a weekday

afternoon to hear him speak at Smith. The gallery was so crowded, in fact, that the artist couldn't see his own paintings. "It was the best attended gallery talk I've seen at Smith," says associate curator Sievers, adding that Yarde's new works have "an emotional depth and resonance and universality that is beyond anything he's done before."

Judging from viewers' comments, the paintings move people, especially those who have faced serious illness and their own mortality. Peter Linden, a forty-year-old artist in Ridgefield, Connecticut, found the show at Smith by chance. In 1993, surgeons had removed a lemon-sized tumor from his brain, but bits of cancer left behind still trigger epileptic seizures. After seeing Yarde's paintings, Linden wrote to him: "I felt as though I had found a brother whose hand, through honesty and hope and vision, was held out, inviting me and encouraging me, helping me to face my own fear and uncertainty, helping me to accept the truth of what I have come to see through my cancer—even though others may disagree, or be unable to understand."



Yarde, a striking man with smooth black skin and snow white hair, exudes a fluidity when he walks into a room. His face reveals both the brilliance and translucency of watercolor. He was born and raised in Roxbury, a predominantly African-American neighborhood of Boston, to British West Indian parents who worked hard to maintain their sense of connection with their culture. His father was a proud, staunch man who worked for Western Union, first as a janitor, then as head of maintenance. He was also a legendary cricket player, traveling to games along the East Coast and in Canada.

Before the artist's mother suffered a stroke in her early forties, she made lace and taught embroidery. Determined to see her son develop into a cultured young man, she read poetry to him, sent him to music school, and bought a piano for the house. She also bought art supplies for him and sent him to classes at the Boston Museum.

"As a child, I lived a very split life," says Yarde. "I lived in this neighborhood that was partially very tough and partially very sophisticated." He was taking music, watercolor, and sculpture classes, but he had to fight his way to and from school every day. "On the street," says Yarde, "I had to take on a certain persona. There was one kid who was very quiet, not aggressive—and he was beaten every single day. I had a friend from the West Indies and we used to box every day. I had another friend from the South, and he saved me. He said, 'If anyone picks on you, go crazy. Pretend you've lost it completely.' One of the neighborhood toughs picked on me, and I used my friend's advice. I moved in on the bully and beat him as hard as I could. He was completely embarrassed. I had a little reputation after that." At home, he played the piano and did his schoolwork. He asked his mother, once, if he could join a gang, but she said no, so he didn't.

Among his earliest artistic influences was his godfather, Amos Gibson, a portrait photographer who operated a studio where he hand-tinted black and white photographs. "I thought this was

**"I feel like the world as I have come to know it is very mysterious, and I would like to make work that parallels that in some way."**

a very magical activity," says Yarde. As a child, Yarde tried to imitate Gibson's work by tearing out magazine and newspaper photographs, and applying watercolor to them. He had a book on the wildlife of North America, and he copied every illustration in the book, laboring over the drawings and over the watercolors he applied to them. For his mother, who was very religious, he copied elaborate prayers in old English script.

With a portfolio that he had completed by age fourteen, Yarde applied to Boston University (BU) and was accepted into the art program after he graduated from high school. Conger Metcalf, his freshman drawing teacher, was a mentor to him that first year, and later put his own job on the line for his protégé. As Yarde describes it, "The last day of classes, he said, 'I'll see you next year.' And I said, 'No, you won't see me because I'm going to work for a year so I can earn my tuition.'" Metcalf took it upon himself to go to the chairman of the art department, threatening to quit if Yarde wasn't given a scholarship. BU awarded him a scholarship for part of his tuition, and Metcalf hosted a wine-tasting party to raise the rest of the money.

After receiving a master's degree in fine arts from BU in 1964, Yarde taught there for five years. He went on to teach at Wellesley College, later working as a visiting artist at Amherst College, Massachusetts College of Art, and Mount Holyoke College. In 1981, he took a job as associate professor of art

at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, where he stayed for ten years. "He had rave reviews from his students," says Hal Thurman, the former chairman of the art department who had hired Yarde.

This year, Yarde was chosen from among seventy finalists for a Distinguished Teaching Award at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He teaches two classes at the university, and works with undergraduate and graduate students on committee assignments and thesis projects. Says graduate student Rebekah Wetmore, who has known him for two years, "I'm astonished by

his nimbleness in going from one student's work to another. He has endless energy for visual exploration." Despite the fatigue caused by his ongoing illness, she says, he is always on when he teaches. "He has an enormous amount of patience with students and never makes you want to fold up your tent and walk away," she says, adding, "He has a strongly spiritual sense of painting."

For the past two years, Richard Yarde has been on a waiting list for a kidney. He used to carry a beeper so he could be notified immediately if an organ became available, but gave it up after several false alarms (including calls from drug dealers) that whisked him out of class. His sons Marcus, age thirty-one, and Owen, twenty-seven, were both furious when their parents decided they should not even be tested to see if they could donate a kidney to their father. "Marcus also has high blood pressure and we thought, if he gets sick, we might need Owen," says Susan. "I would have given my kidney, but I have the wrong blood type."

Being tied to a dialysis machine every night has been a huge burden for Yarde and his wife. The machine beeps if it's not draining properly, often disturbing their sleep. Susan worries about what she would do if the electricity went out at night, or how she would get her husband out of the house in case of fire. "I've become hypervigilant," she says. "I'm his wife, but sometimes I become his mother."



During his intense creative periods, Yarde paints eight to twelve hours a day. He lies on the floor of his studio when working on the large watercolors. He listens to jazz for inspiration, preferring John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis. "The kind of emotional energy that gets released in the music is something that I would like to be able to do with the painting," he says.

As Christine Temin wrote in *The Boston Globe* last year, Yarde "has become one of the great American watercolorists of the twentieth century, as much a master of the medium as Homer was in the 19th." According to Temin, Yarde richly deserved to be included in the 1993 show, "Awash in Color: Homer, Sargent, and the Great American Watercolor" held at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. "Instead, he was relegated to an accompanying solo show at the Museum of the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Roxbury," she noted. As Temin explained in the article, "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."

Yarde doesn't see the value of trying to convince museums or galleries to exhibit his work. "I spend my energy just doing the work. And teaching. And trying to be a good husband and father," he says. He also spends a lot of

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energy dealing with his illness.

Richard Yarde has changed profoundly in his six-years-and-counting struggle with illness. "He was complacent, and he's lost that," says Susan. "He's more tender now. More compassionate. A little less hard-driving."

His art has also changed. "Before my illness, my art was straightforward," Yarde says. "I was interested in color, form, but not different levels of meaning.... I feel like the world as I have come to know it is very mysterious,

and I would like to make work that parallels that in some way."

Now, when Yarde picks up his brush, he is no longer just an artist. He is a caster of mojo. His new paintings are about questions, not answers. They challenge people to interpret them. And for those who have faith, they have the power to heal. ▲

*Kathleen Koman is a freelance writer who has written for Hope about nurses who care for rape victims and a rural hospital that thrives with help from volunteers.*