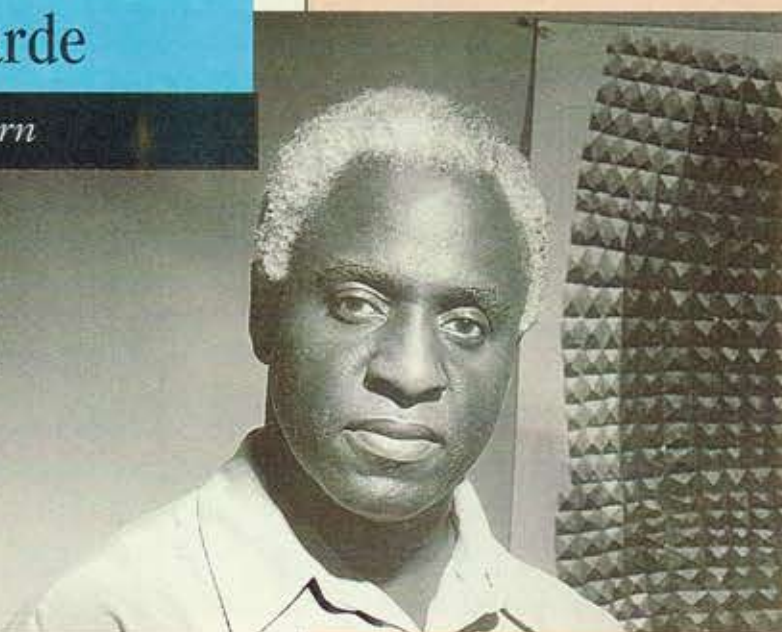


Showing Vital Signs

The Watercolors of Richard Yarde

by Alona M. Horn



All photos courtesy Richard Yarde

Richard Yarde's work defies the concept that watercolor paintings should be small, charming renderings of landscapes or flowers. His paintings are monumental in scale, and they express poignantly personal themes, using a medium that has traditionally been described as translucent and temporal. In 1996 Yarde's latest series of watercolors, *Mojo Hand*, was unveiled in Boston, prompting Christine Temin to write in *The Boston Globe*: "His handling is



"Kismet," 58 by 72 inches, 1995-96.



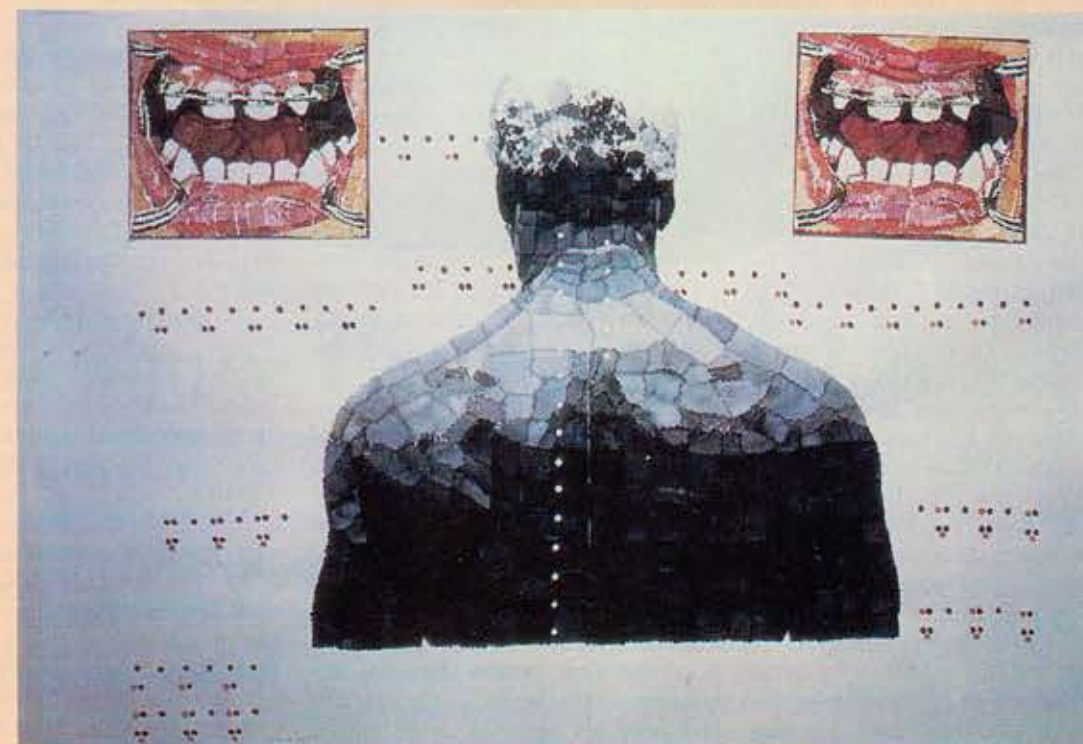
"Mojo Hand," 72 by 140 inches, 1994-95.



"Back" (of triptych "Back Back Front"), 1993.



"Coming and Going," 62 by 158 inches, 1996-97.



"Mouths and Back," 41 by 58 inches, 1996.



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virtuosic, his colors dazzling. He has become one of the great American watercolorists of the twentieth century, as much a master of the medium as Homer was in the nineteenth."

The Mojo Hand series takes viewers into the deepest realm of the human body, searching for its soul. Yarde uses images from his dreams from 1991 to 1996 to convey the impact of his life-threatening illness and his gradual healing—both physical and spiritual.

The painting "Mojo Hand" is Yarde's largest to date. A white bony torso, an X-ray of a human female, floats against a background mosaic of dark, muted shades of blue. The patches of blue are both transparent and opaque—like life itself. Yarde's hands surround the figure, recalling the power of the human touch in healing. A pattern of tiny white dots is etched into the sea of blue to form the words of the 23rd Psalm in Braille. Yarde's belief in the power of prayer to heal inspired him to recite the words of the Psalm daily: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of death ..."

The catastrophic illness that changed his life resulted from his body's vehement reaction to years of medication for high blood pressure. The combination of medicines used to control his blood pressure and to counterbalance side effects almost took his life. In 1991, his health began to fail. He suffered a series of small strokes that left his speech slurred, his walking impaired and his hands numb. He lost the function of one kidney, and he is now attached to a kidney dialysis machine every night. Although he awaits a kidney transplant, he can be found painting—or, as he says, "pushing paint"—in his studio every day.

His spirit is resilient. "This may sound a little bit weird," he says, "but I think the fact that I'm alive, still alive, has something to do with my painting. I think that's why I was put here: to make paintings. So as long as I am able to paint, I will be here." As he continues to mull this over, he says, chuckling: "I turn into a real mess when I'm not painting. I'm not much fun to be around."

Yarde's family also helped him through his trials. He has been married to Susan Donovan, a writer, for over 30 years, and they have two adult sons, Marcus and Owen. In early 1997, their first grandchild was born. Being a good husband and father (and now grandfather) is an important part of Yarde's daily thoughts and practices.

In "Head and Hands II," another watercolor from the Mojo Hand series, he begins to tell his story of recovery. The scattered body parts reflect the fragmentation of his own body and spirit at a time when he was trying to pull together the most important aspects of his identity, which were left devastated by the strokes: his creative mind and hands. In this painting, the hands are not his; they are wooden mannequin hands, symbolizing the limited use of his own hands. "There was a period of about two years when I didn't do any painting," he recalls. The face is his, distorted and weakened from the strokes.

On the wall of Yarde's studio are posted specific instructions for the construction of a mojo, from a book by Zora Neale Hurston. According to the book, the mojo will last only six months, and then it must be revised. "My notion, in general terms, of a mojo is some kind of charm or spell that is



"Front" (of triptych "Back Back Front"), 94 by 41 inches, 1993.

sometimes used for healing, sometimes for other purposes," Yarde says. "It is illusive, and it is not something that can be described in a linear way. For me, it was a question of putting some things together that are random that can be put together for the purposes of healing."

Working on these paintings was Yarde's method of reconstructing himself. After they were finished, he gave the series its title: Mojo Hand. "It is rare that I would have a title of a work before I've completed it," he says.

Yarde was born and reared in the Roxbury area of Boston, where his parents settled after emigrating to the United States from Barbados. He talks of growing up in a Caribbean home filled with conversations about politics and literature. Although he characterizes his family life as economically impoverished, he was reared culturally



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middle class. His mother, a dress-maker whom he describes as a cultured woman, enrolled him early in piano lessons and art classes.

He took his first art class at age 9, at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Watercolor was his medium from the beginning; his mother had given him his first set. By age 14, he had completed the portfolio that would qualify him for acceptance into the art program at Boston University.

He enrolled immediately after high school and completed the program in 1964, earning both his undergraduate degree and master's in fine arts. Since that time, he has taught at several prestigious colleges and universities in the New England area, including Boston University, Wellesley College and the University of Massachusetts.

In 1977, he accepted the position of visiting artist at Amherst College. After his tenure with Amherst was completed, he remained in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, nestled in the Berkshire Hills. Although he commuted for 10 years to his teaching position in Boston, he made the valley his home. It was a difficult move at first. "Everything annoyed me when I came here—small town, small businesses," he recalls. "I grew up in the city, and I didn't know if I could take this."

"The very things that annoyed me when I came here are the things that I like about being here now. I like that small-town feel. You know people on the street. The place isn't so big that you feel like a number. You feel like a person." Even though he sometimes misses the energy of the big city, he finds the tranquillity of the valley seductive. "It's easier to shut out stuff when you're really ready to work. Since I'm trying to work from inside me, I find it very helpful."

Mojo Hand differs from Yarde's prior work, which dealt with African-American history and his early years. "The histories are not really from my time period," he explains of his previous work. "They are from somebody else's—my parents', really. They are not my present; they are my parents' present. You have to be in your own present to make work that is really vital."

Yarde began exploring themes of black history shortly after he graduated. "In the late 1960s and 1970s, artists of color started digging into their history," he says. "I was just one of a large number of people doing the same thing."

He remembers men, sometimes family members, parading through the streets of his Roxbury neighborhood dressed in uniforms that identified them as Marcus Garvey followers. "My cousins were staunch Garveyites," he says. "When you went into their homes, you would see photographs of Marcus Garvey and his various units. I used to see parades coming down the main drag and all these guys dressed up in uniforms, and that really affected me."

In the narrative series *Garveyites* (1970s), Yarde provides us with vignettes of African-American life. "I tried to get as many photographic sources as I could," he says, "and I tried to document as much information as I could related to Garvey." By taking a photograph and reinventing it as a watercolor, Yarde makes his own document.

He learned to introduce color into photographs from his godfather, Amos Gibson, a portrait photographer who hand-tinted black-and-white photographs in his studio. Yarde used to imitate his godfather's work by applying watercolor to images torn from newspapers and magazines. "As a kid, I tried to copy him," Yarde says, his voice

quietly wandering back to a childhood memory. "I thought he was great, so I would go home and pull out my watercolors and old black-and-white newspaper prints and try to do what he did."

"The Sitting" is a family portrait depicting the trappings of middle-class life: mother, father clad in uniform, son accompanied by family dog. The colors of Yarde's memory are faded shades of green and ochre. This story evolved from more than one place in Yarde's life, the way many of his stories do. His source photograph is by James van der Zee, who gave the world stunning photographs of the Harlem Renaissance.

The narrative watercolor paintings from the *Apartment* series, created in the late 1970s, give us a glimpse into Yarde's childhood home. In the tidy, simply furnished kitchen-bath of "Cunard Street Interior I," Yarde is absent, but his presence is felt with the placement of the painting on the wall. He takes on the role of historian, and his recording instrument is the visual language of painting.

This family scene tells of the simplicity and complexity of privacy. His mother goes about her activities, and his brother sits next to his father, who bathes in the corner of the room. They respectfully share the space of this multifunctional room. Yarde cautions that the faces are not to be understood as literal renderings of those dear to him. Instead, he wants viewers to bring a part of themselves to each scene.

Yarde has never been reluctant to experiment with his own work—mediums or subjects. In 1982 he re-created the famous Savoy Ballroom, the Harlem nightclub that flourished in the 1920s. It was his first attempt at an installation piece. A black-and-white photograph of the ballroom served as a bridge, a memory from the past. The figures and the stage were constructed with a strong sense of realism. His three-dimensional characters danced about their environment in brightly colored costumes.

He wanted viewers to experience the magic of the past by becoming part of the action. By walking around the installation, they would become a part of that world. An exhibition of Yarde's work traveled across the country and included Yarde's watercolor narratives of lively scenes from this historic ballroom. Appropriately, the exhibition's final venue was the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Today, Yarde can be found in the classrooms and art studios of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he holds the position of professor of art, as well as the respect and admiration of his students and colleagues. He loves his relationship with his students. "Part of it is energy transmission going both ways," he says, "and part of it is just the transmission of knowledge. I've developed an intuitive sense of what the student needs."

At a gallery talk at the Smith College Museum of Art in 1997, he held a group of 450 people mesmerized for over an hour, speaking candidly of his art and his motivation to create the Mojo Hand series. He was stylishly dressed and physically fit, and his deep, clear voice resonated through the gallery space that evening as he conveyed his encyclopedic knowledge of art history.

At 57 years old, he is a distinguished gray-haired gentleman with chocolate-brown skin who has had difficulty shaking the label "black artist." "I have never had a review where someone has not referred to me as a black artist or an African-American artist," he says. "That's the first thing they want to do, is pin you with that label. They want to identify you with that."

He acknowledges that there was a time when an African-American artist was expected to create identifiably "black" art, but he also knows that it is important for him to stay true to himself and the work he must create. "I'm at a stage where I'm making decisions as I



The brilliantly patterned wallpapers and floors of "Cunard Street Interior I" are dazzling. The color palette that forms a background grid for Yarde's images is often informed by his memory of a color in a dream. A lover of jazz, especially the music of John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk, he likens these colorful mosaics to the backbeat in jazz, for it is the backbeat that holds the jazz composition together.

want to make them. It probably affects how far my work is going to be accepted by some people, but it can't stop me from doing what I'm going to do. It can make it difficult, but it can't stop me."

His work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but he shies away from the commercial gallery circuit, understanding that this decision inhibits his commercial success. Sadly, African-American collectors of his works are few, but he sees a shift taking place and a more active philosophy of collecting one's own heritage taking hold in the black community. African-American private collectors have recently acquired some of his paintings.

Though not limited by the label "black," Yarde is limited by his chosen medium, so he must devise methods that allow him to add and subtract material from his stories. Unlike oil painting, overpainting in watercolor distorts the colors and deteriorates the paper, so he uses "white space" as an image and sometimes creates smaller paintings that can be attached to these spaces on a larger work. He loves the immediacy of drawing, and watercolor is a drawing medium. It is a me-

dium he learned early in his life and the one with which he feels most comfortable.

To create his enormous paintings, Yarde works on the floor in his studio. He sits in the middle of the work and paints from the center of the work to the outside edges. When he has more to say than the paper allows, he adds another sheet of paper to the work. Unlike painters of the 1950s abstract expressionist movement, such as Jackson Pollock, who stood on the canvas and dripped or threw paint and other material onto his work, Yarde employs a more contemplative process. At one time, he had a photograph in his studio of a Zen painter painting. The artist was seated in the center of his work—Yarde sees his own working style as reflective of this Zen process.

Yarde's oeuvre is dynamic, forceful and provocative. With Mojo Hand he focuses on himself and his fight for life by creating images that reflect the fragility of the human body and the endurance of the human spirit. This powerful series is his most intimate, personal journey. The images remind viewers of their own vulnerabilities and the temporal nature of life.

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