

Professor faced death, let it move him to new heights

By PAT CAHILL

Staff writer

The studio is packed, stacked and strewn with so many works-in-progress that it's hard to believe the artist who occupies it was near death only seven years ago.

It's the studio of Richard F. Yarde, art professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He was already famous as an artist and educator when he was stricken with kidney failure in 1991.

Not only did he survive, but the paintings that grew out of his ordeal may be the most powerful he has ever done. They were widely praised when exhibited under the title "Mojo Hand" at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and at Smith College in Northampton last year.

Yarde, 58, still undergoes kidney dialysis every day.

But, like his art, his teaching seems to have reached new heights. Last year his



students voted him a Distinguished Teaching Award. His watercolor class is held next door to his studio at UMass, in a room about 20 feet high, with six tall windows that let in the natural light artists so prize. On a recent afternoon his students were at work on their final assignment, which brought to bear all the issues of light, texture and color they have worked on through the semester. Their task was to choose a subject and paint four versions: close up, far away, from above, from below.

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They stand at large counters, dipping their brushes into the dents of white plastic palettes. Many of them are painting scenes from the campus — a dormitory, a parking lot. A young woman has set before her a green pepper cut in half. A young man is intent on the treetops outside his window. Another is painting his own face from a magnifying mirror.

Yarde moves from one student to the next, engaging them in murmured conversation. His gift as a teacher, students say, is that he is clear and specific, but makes room for individual style.

"It doesn't matter if he likes or doesn't like what they're doing," says Diana L. Natti of Gloucester, 20. "It's what THEY want to do, and he helps them."

"I can't tell you how much he's taught me," she says. "He's a great teacher."

"He's very specific about feedback, but it's in an encouraging way, not critical," says Kathleen D. Jacobs of Northampton, 39. "He's a fantastic teacher."

"He's made me push my boundaries," says Lisa S. Winter of Amherst, 24, adding that Yarde gives many assignments and always expects high quality.

"He's helped me loosen up," says Nathan D. Sullivan, 20, a sophomore from Washington,

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Mass., explaining that his classmates have been trying to budge him from the "tight" realistic detail in his paintings.

"And he's the best dresser — really classy," says Natti, referring to the artist's wardrobe.

Yarde, a soft-spoken and modest gentleman, chuckles when this last is repeated to him.

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., the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

He has won awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Endowment for the Arts. Later this month he will receive an honorary Ph.D. from the Massachusetts College of Art.

One of his paintings recently appeared on the cover of American Visions, a magazine devoted to Af-

rican American culture.

He was born in Roxbury to parents from Barbados. They were educated people, he says, though not traditionally so.

In the neighborhood where he grew up, many people admired the black nationalist Marcus Garvey. In fact, the 1978 painting on the cover of American Visions portrays such a family from the '20s or '30s — father in the uniform associated with Garvey, mother in rope pearls and a sleek hairdo, child in a sailor suit. It's one of a series of the artist's "Garveyite" paintings.

As a boy Richard attended art classes at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He loved Egyptian art, though he now confesses, "I probably just wanted to see the mummies." Other favorites included the English mystic William Blake and French impressionist Paul Gauguin.

Later, Japanese screen painting and Indian miniature painting would influence him strongly.

Yarde was taking a night class in advertising copywriting at Boston University when the teacher advised him to give up on writing and study art instead.

Yarde proceeded to do so, graduating from Boston University cum laude and going on to earn a master's degree. He still speaks reverently of his professors there — Walter Murch, Reed Kay and Conger Metcalfe, who "followed me

throughout my career and always came to my shows."

He went on to teach at B.U. himself, as well as Wellesley, Amherst and Mount Holyoke Colleges and the University of Massachusetts in Boston and, since 1990, Amherst.

He had started out as an oil painter, but changed to watercolor around 1977. He was married, had a family, was commuting long distances to work. His "studio" was essentially the kitchen table, and he couldn't risk exposing his two little boys to the fumes of turpentine and other chemicals involved in oil painting.

That's how his unusual large-scale watercolors came about. They are huge, the figures built from little squares like a mosaic.

An example lies on the floor of his studio, where two jitterbug dancers explode into life. They are part of a series inspired by the Savoy Ballroom in New York City.

Yarde says his wife, writer Susan Donovan, has been "amazing" in helping him rebuild his life and his work since his illness.

But the ordeal is still on his mind and in his soul, as his work shows. He continues to produce the powerful dream-images that caught people's imaginations at the show at Smith last year — the images about meeting death face to face and coming back to tell about it.