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63rd Year

mag

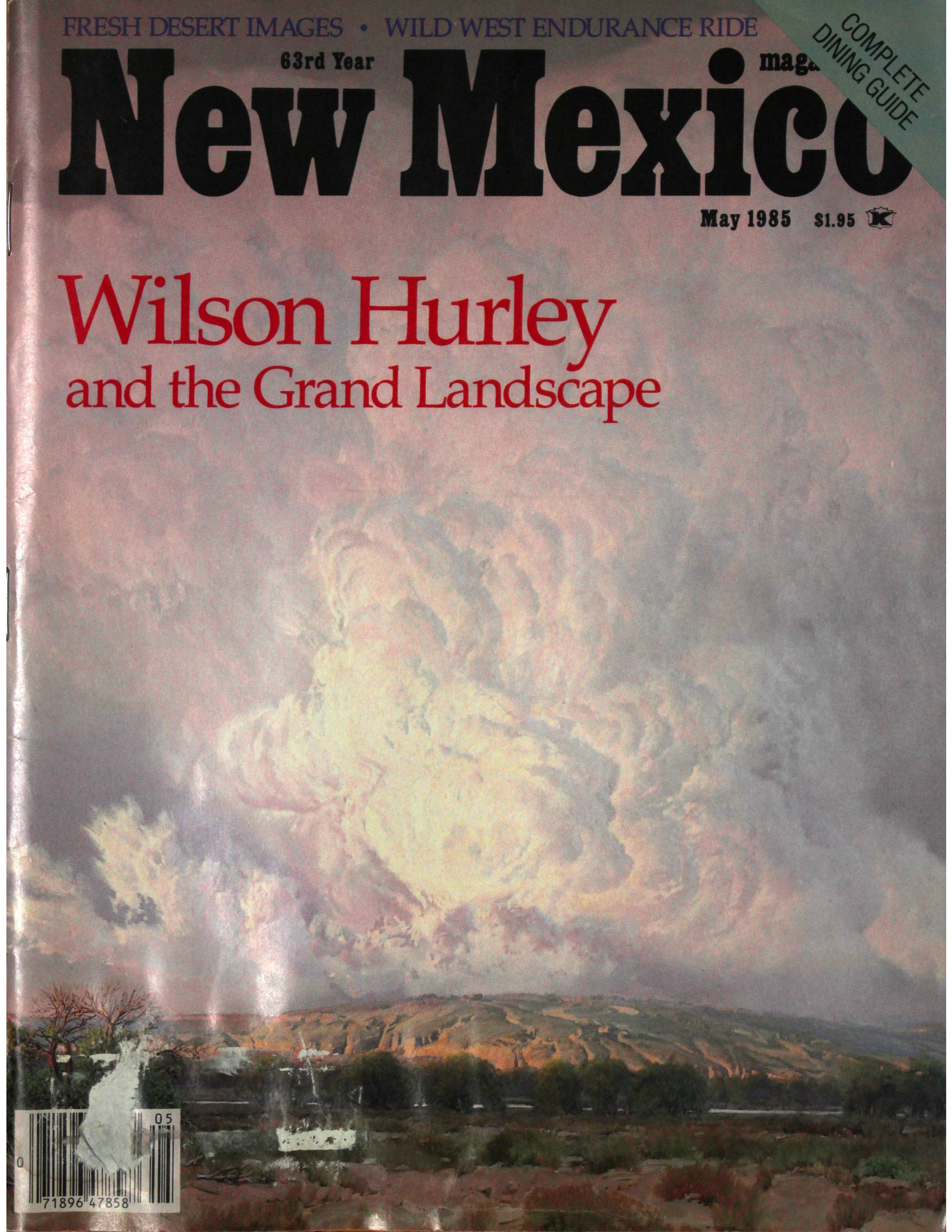
New Mexico

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COMPLETE
DINING GUIDE

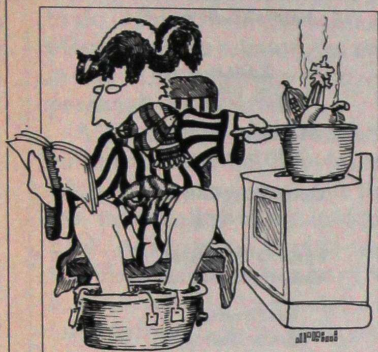
Wilson Hurley and the Grand Landscape



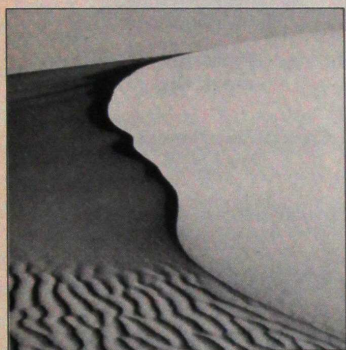
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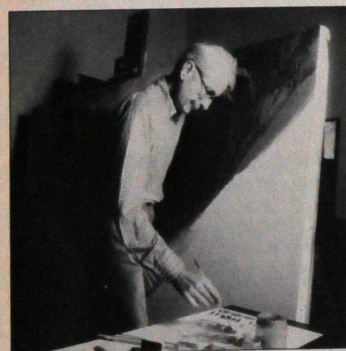
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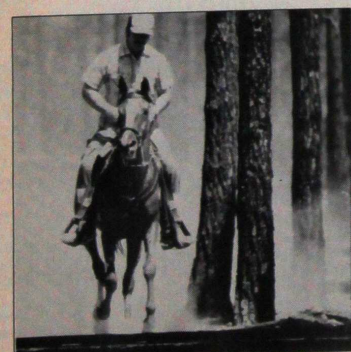
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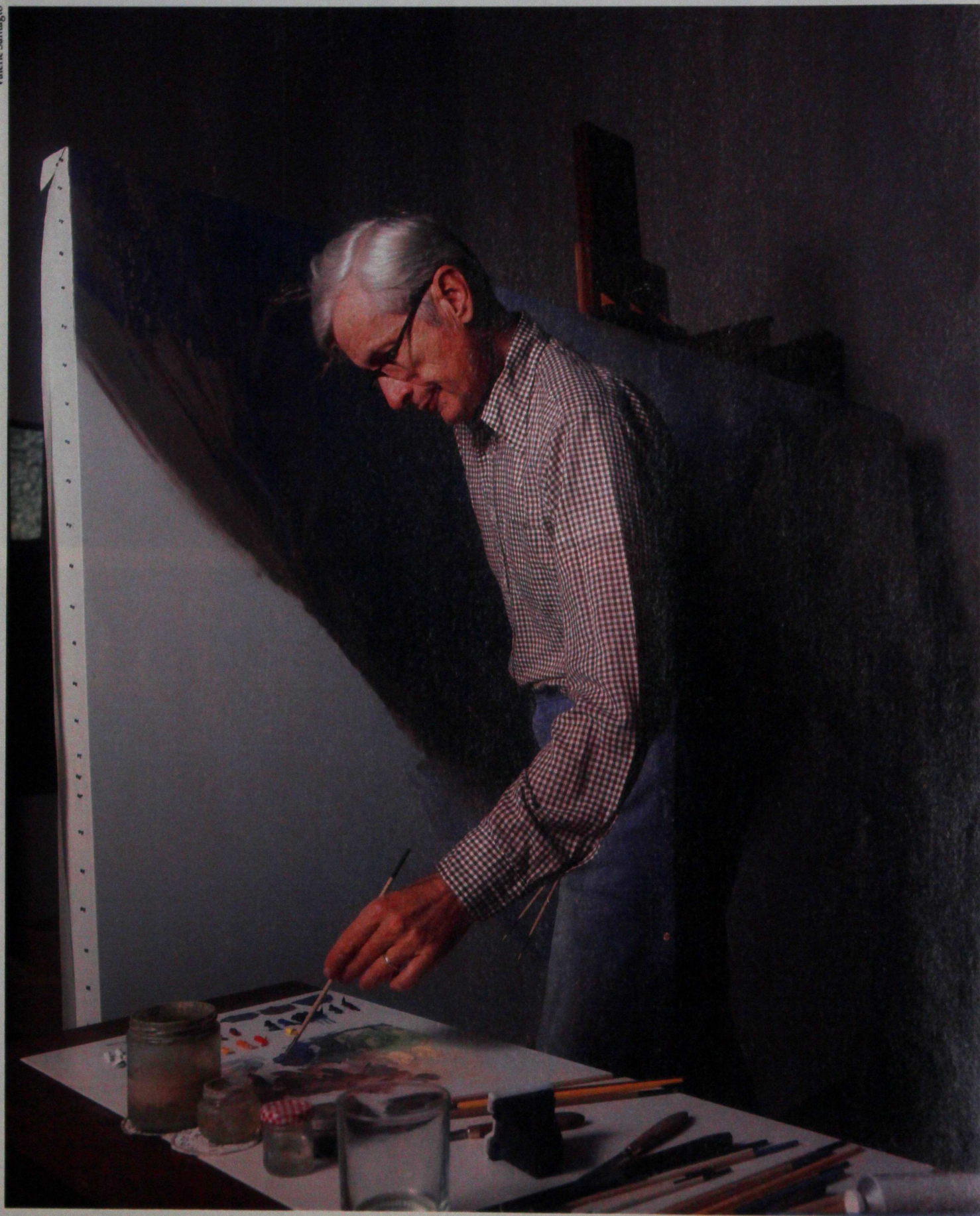
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Cover—Detail from *Distant Thunder*—Río Grande Valley, 66" x 108", by Wilson
Hurley.



WILSON HURLEY

AND THE GRAND LANDSCAPE

AMERICA HAS LONG LOOKED TO the landscape as a mirror of its national destiny. For more than 150 years, untamed nature has been regarded as an avenue of meditation and self-knowledge, and as the dormant repository of national riches and industrial might.

Wilson Hurley's landscapes are big, lavish works that draw the viewer into the drama of the West's unparalleled open spaces. Meticulous mountain, canyon, and cloud studies are bathed in light and atmosphere, and resonate with a powerful technique matched by keen observation and interpretive skill. Hurley's work in oil has been compared to that of the best 19th-century American luminists, such as Frederick Church.

"A good painting stops the heart, it makes the throat ache," says the Albuquerque artist, with a passion that is characteristic. At 60, the tall, white-haired Hurley is soft-spoken but unerringly direct. Penetrating brown eyes shine out from his lined face. And his very stature—all six-and-a-half feet of it—somehow reflects the abundance of his native land.

At his Sandía Heights home, which he built two years ago with his wife Rosalyn, Hurley's life seems to follow the same imposing scale as his work. The spacious house is planted a good way up the mountainside, far removed from Albuquerque's sprawling presence below. Enormous Precambrian granite boulders litter the site like the set for a Hollywood Western. Sturdy live oak, graceful yucca, and feathery grama grass—each a familiar component of Hurley's art—abound here also.

From the living room, an immense north window faces directly

onto the Sandía Mountains, providing a larger-than-life view of the antenna-tipped crest. The room is hung with various large paintings, including a full portrait of Hurley's mother in formal gown that reigns above the five-foot fireplace mantle.

Among Hurley's own work hanging here is a sweeping desert canyon view and a striking pair of lunar landscapes. In the latter, the small but gutsy Apollo LEM is suspended in space before a benign, rotund moon, with every lump and crater recorded in loving detail.

"This whole house was built for large work," explains Hurley. In the 16-foot-high studio nearby, his most recent painting, a panorama of the Sandía Mountains, hangs framed and ready for Albuquerque's north-side Presbyterian Hospital. And even at a massive 80 by 100 inches, the work looks comfortably at home. North light streams in, and behind Hurley's easel, an ample mirror is placed to allow him to see his work both at an arm's length and at a distance of 40 feet.

In August last year, the Oklahoma City-based National Academy of Western Art awarded Hurley its greatest honor and a prodigious cash purchase prize, the \$100,000 Prix de West.

Is Hurley sitting on top of the world? If he is, it hasn't been an easy ascent.

For Hurley, art has been a lifelong avocation repeatedly thwarted by personal circumstance. Recognized today as an eminent landscapist, his art career was preceded by 13 years in law (a profession he never enjoyed), and two years as an en-

gineer. In 1964, at the age of 40, he abandoned his previous pursuits to devote himself to painting.

Hurley was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1924. Public service took his father, General Patrick J. Hurley, and the family to Washington, D.C. The only son among four children, young Hurley spent his early years in Williamsburg, Virginia, where regular museum outings brought him into intimate contact with American painting that moved him deeply at an early age.

"I remember the Corcoran [in Washington, D.C.] had George Inness's *Peace and Plenty*, and I made a scene," says Hurley. "I broke down just crying. My mother was very embarrassed." Emotion wells up as he continues. "It still gets me. It's the most beautiful damned thing. The light comes right out of the canvas through the elm trees."

As a boy, then, Hurley unwittingly joined America's landscape tradition, which had begun to move west in the mid-19th century, spurred by the government's ambitious geographic and geological surveys. In 1863, Albert Bierstadt unveiled his seminal work, *The Rocky Mountains*, and professional artists proceeded west in droves, including one of Hurley's favorites, Thomas Moran. The evocative powers of Bierstadt, Moran, Church, and Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole stirred the young Hurley. Today he still measures his own work by their stringent standards.

But Hurley's vision of the West is not that of his 19th-century mentors. "I'm an absolutely different person," he says emphatically. "I have a far wider world view than Thomas Moran. He couldn't even imagine being strapped into a pressurized jet fighter. I can conceive of what the

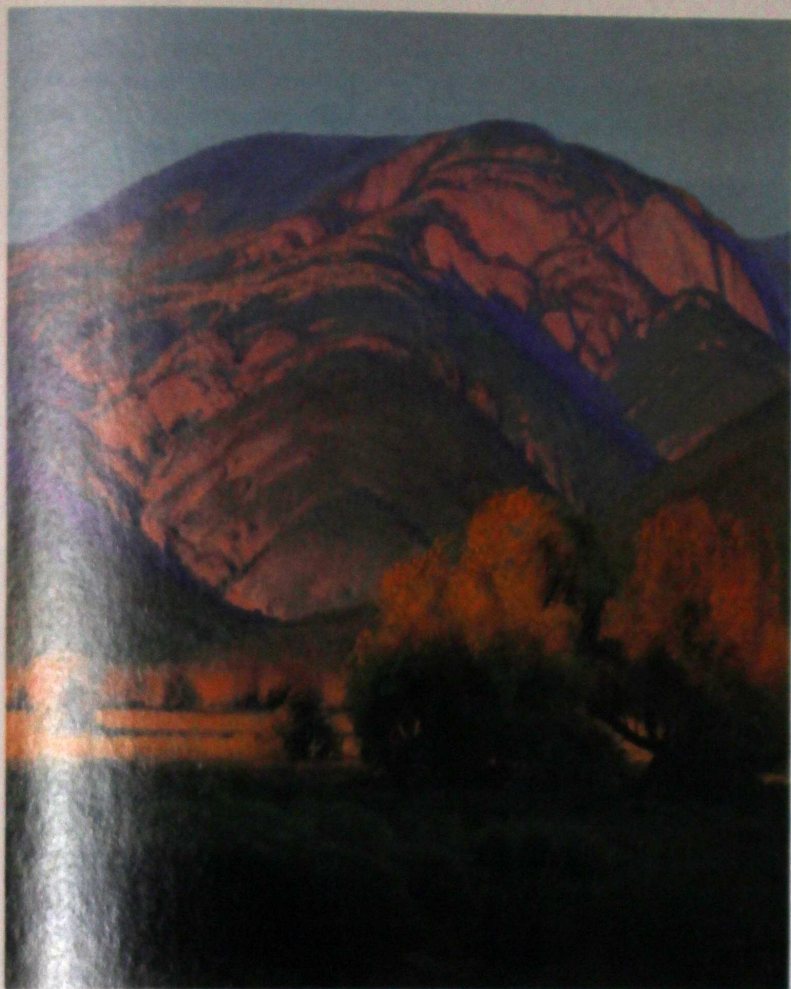
BY NICOLE PLETT



TRAIL TO THE LIGHT, OIL, 48" X 76"

THUNDER ON THE MOUNTAIN, OIL, 60" X 72"

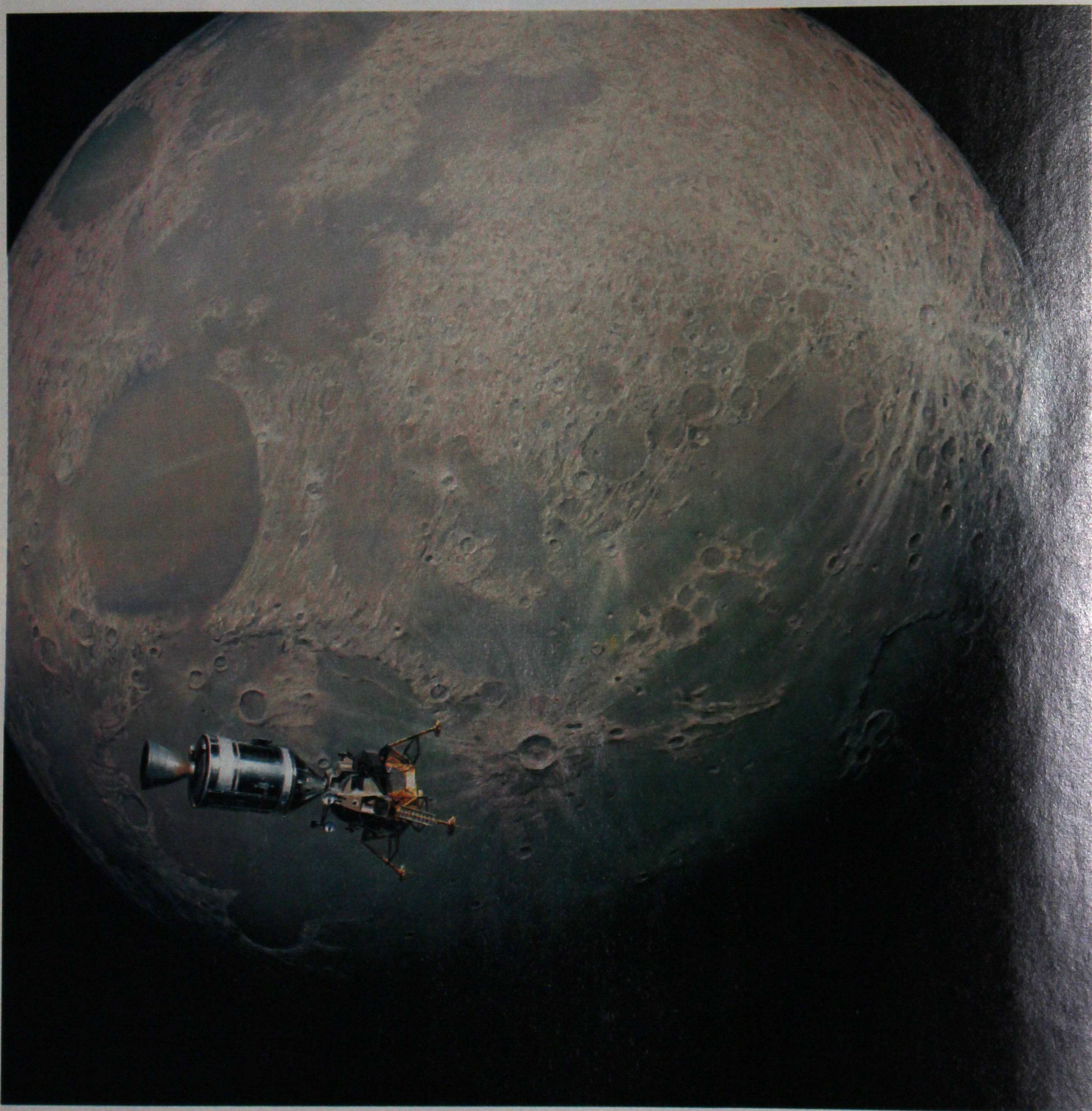




TAOS AUTUMN, OIL, 30" X 24"

BLAZING SUNSET, OIL, 36" X 60"





APOLLO, OIL, 48" X 48".

(OPPOSITE PAGE) *Hurley, second from right, at flight school in Corsicana, Texas, 1944. Hurley and his sister Mary on their horse, Dunny, 1932.*

earth looks like from the moon."

Hurley's complex and essentially technological world view gives his work its contemporary edge. Extensive aviation experience brings an elevated perspective to almost everything he does, and he's not afraid to paint his landscape from the air traveler's point of view. Moon portraits and nighttime urban landscapes are further evidence of the delight he takes in technical challenge.

Hurley's sense of adventure initially attracted him to aviation, and later to space travel, for which he believed himself qualified, but found he was excluded. "My leg's too long!" he continues to lament today. "My femur is 28 inches, and Randy Lovelace told me that NASA was not going to spend an extra \$2 billion to enlarge the diameter of the entire Apollo program so that I could get my leg in."

Nevertheless, Hurley's on-site oil sketches record the launch of the first space shuttle, Columbia.

In 1936, the Hurley family went west to become part-time residents of Santa Fe, and 11-year-old Wilson was enrolled in the Los Alamos Ranch School. The exclusive boys' preparatory school was especially recommended for the sickly scions of prosperous Eastern families. Its rigorous academic curriculum was augmented by an equally rigorous outdoor program of horseback riding, skiing, outdoor exercise, and other athletics.

"I was a little runt and I was scrawny and I had a cough and hay fever," says Hurley. "And I'm sure that was what guided the family out here and put me in Los Alamos."

"They just ran you ragged. We even slept outside all winter long on screened porches and wore short pants. I mean you had to be tough to survive up there."

But Hurley's Western experience was real and immediate. It had little to do with the cowpunchers and covered wagons of the old frontier. To this day, Hurley's lack of nostalgia for a more perfect past has set his work apart from that of New Mexico's art colony founders and from many of his contemporaries.

"The world was so obvious as a kid that I didn't look at Taos and Santa Fe through a romantic's eyes," he says. "I was a little kid living on East García Street with Paul García and Dan Ronquillo and Andy Sánchez, and we formed a gang against the Piatts down there on old Manhattan Street, where the Mighty Nice Creamery was. They threw rocks and we threw apricots—that was about the difference between the gangs."

With the support of his mother, summer vacations provided Hurley with opportunities for study with several New Mexico art colony members. He spent three weeks washing brushes and stretching canvas for Taos artist John Young Hunter. Later, he accompanied Jozef Bakos on outdoor sketching sessions

and studied with Santa Fe artist Theodore Van Soelen. This, however, did not diminish his father's rigorous opposition to his painting, an opposition that lasted almost a lifetime.

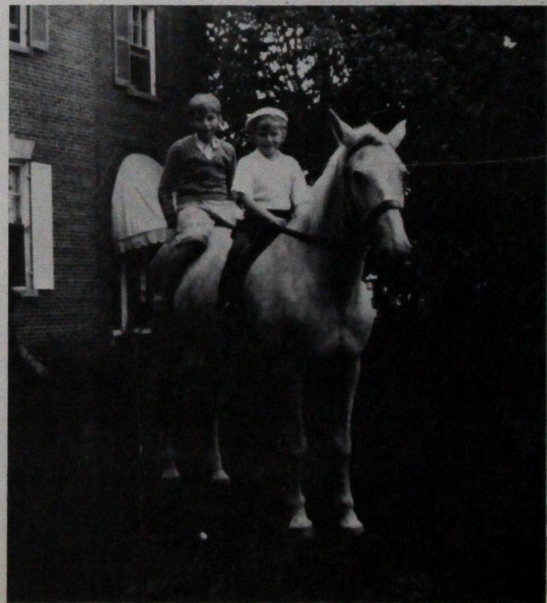
"When I was a young man, I was punished when I drew because all artists were Bohemian, perverted, tragic, and inadequate personalities. And it was a sissy, corrupt thing to be. That was the reputation art had then."

Although Hurley is not a member of the Cowboy Artists of America (CA), he credits that group for its contribution to the present status of art in the West.

"You know, the CA did something that needed to be done. They made art respectable to the masses. The CA came out and said, 'Look, we're regular people like you, we're just good old boys, but we paint.' And they sold this to the public. They were the opening wedge into a tremendous market that the Southwest has experienced that has yet to open up in the rest of the country."

From Los Alamos, Hurley went to West Point and, as World War II ended, he took up military service flying air-sea rescue missions in the Philippine Islands. Days spent above fertile lagoons, extensive beaches, and tree-covered mountains solidified his love of landscape. His unconventional art education, he says, consisted of flying lessons instead of life drawing classes.

"My father—and this was typical of that age—more or less looked on



me as an extension of his own personality and as a person who was going to, in fact, accomplish those things which he had been unable in his life to achieve. And it seemed like a good idea at the time," Hurley explains.

General Hurley became secretary of war under President Herbert Hoover, then ambassador to China. He later campaigned unsuccessfully for the Senate. "Probably what he wanted was for me to run for Congress, to become a member of the bar, and if possible to be a presidential candidate," says Hurley, who, on his return from the Philippines, studied law and was admitted to the bar.

"I think that my father had rather a Joe Kennedy approach to life," he adds with a measure of humor. "He didn't have a number of sons but he had one, and he wanted to see how far he could run him up the pole."

Years later when, at considerable financial and emotional cost, Hurley finally turned to art, it led to the virtual estrangement of father and son. Late in his father's life, however, they were reconciled.

"I find joy in the beauty of the landscape and I like to communicate it," says Hurley simply.

"What moves me, where I get my emotion, is from my perception of the way I think things are. In other words, I look at something and it im-

presses me, it captures my heart, it thrills me. I experience a tremendous exhilarating pleasure looking. So I hope, when I paint, to come with that feeling first. I want people to get my feeling of the beauty of it."

Late in the 19th century, Moran's watercolors provided Congress with "visible truth of Yellowstone's wonders," and helped influence its designation as a national park. Hurley, too, believes in the virtues of a wilderness the public can share.

"The more people who see these things and really get out there and feel them, the more joy there is in the world, and the better judgment those people have when they get back to town."

Hurley wants viewers of his paintings to see things his way. And that takes skill, and all the descriptive geometry and engineering know-how he can muster. Working directly from nature, he makes color sketches in oil on primed or canvas-covered board. These are taken back to the studio as models for the larger works.

"I find that I usually have the concept and the feeling first and then I go out and hunt for reality to reinforce it. And more and more, I'm leaving the camera behind," he says.

"The camera is absolutely marvelous for detail, and I can get more detail of the Grand Canyon in 125th of a second on 35-millimeter film than

Moran could get in a whole summer with his sketches. But if I use that photograph to control even my composition, I have weakened what I want to paint by that much. The more you use the camera, the more you cannot achieve more than the camera in your canvas."

During the Vietnam War, Hurley was recalled to active duty. Then some frightening years followed during which health problems included a brain stem tumor and a car wreck. Each took its toll physically, but Hurley relishes his work and says he is as productive today as he's ever been. His concept of mortality, however, "is fairly vivid and very direct."

"I look at life as the capacity to live, to produce, to create, to enjoy, and I don't feel as if anybody has a warranty," he says.

"Nobody knows what grade he gets for the course. All he can do is keep his honor bright and paint as well as he can and try to improve. I have fun doing that. I really do like doing it, so life is a pleasure." ☼

Wilson Hurley is the subject of the *New Mexico Magazine 1986 Distinguished Artist Calendar* to be published this summer.

Nicole Plett is a La Puebla-based freelance writer specializing in the arts. Since December 1983, she has been Santa Fe editor of Artlines.



NEW MEXICO VETERANS' ART SHOW

A different aspect of Wilson Hurley's work can be seen this May at the New Mexico Veterans' Art Show at the Governor's Gallery in the state capital in Santa Fe. Hurley, a Vietnam veteran pilot, has a collection of his war paintings on display at the show. The paintings include scenes from the Second Tet Offensive of 1969, an air strike east of Anh Pass, and jet fighters taking off for a mission from Phan Rang. Other veteran artists in the show include Michael Naranjo, Doug Hyde, Edward Gonzáles, Dan Gates, Glynn Gómez, and Richard Sortomme.