

# Wilson Hurley

## A Tapestry of Feelings

by Susan Hallsten McGarry



Wilson Hurley is an articulate man. Ask him a question about art and, along with a well-heelled knowledge of the creative process, his response will likely include allusions to jurisprudence, science, engineering, aeronautics, music and philosophy. In this age of specialization when a "Renaissance man" is difficult to find, Hurley probably comes closer to the label than most.

Born in Tulsa, OK, in 1924, Hurley spent more than half of his 61 years engaged in pursuits seemingly far afield of aesthetics. After high school in New Mexico, he attended the United States Military Academy at West Point. From 1945–1949 he flew with an air-sea rescue unit and a fighter squadron. Dissatisfied with military bureaucracy, however, Hurley resigned his commission and went to George Washington University for a law degree. He graduated in 1951 and for several years practiced his trade, primarily in Albuquerque, NM. A lingering discontent prompted him to re-evaluate his engineering and flying skills and in 1958 he went to work for Sandia as a consultant on weaponry used for Air Force fighter planes. When this, too, failed to fulfill his creative needs, he decided to pursue what had been up to this time a mere avocation—painting.

It was in 1964, at the age of 40, that Hurley became a full-fledged landscape artist and, with the exception of a 1968–69 call to duty in Vietnam with the New Mexico Air National Guard, he has persevered to place his name at the top of the list of representational contemporary western landscapists. The going has been rough. Essentially self-trained, Hurley had to seek the advice and criticism of many. His



Can there be passion in a landscape?  
Hurley believes so. *SWA* talked to this New Mexican  
painter about the poetry that exists in all things.



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Wilson Hurley

*above:* *BLAZING SUNSET* (1983), oil/canvas, 36 x 60

*left:* *T PLUS 30* (1982), oil/canvas, 40 x 36

*photos:* courtesy the artist, Lowell Press, and the Buffalo Bill  
Historical Center



success has been acknowledged in one-man shows at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, the Utah Museum of Fine Art and the Thomas Gilcrease Institute.

This summer and fall, Hurley is once again the subject of a one-man show, this time showing at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY (through September 12), and the Albuquerque Art Museum (opening September 22). The twenty-year retrospective covering 1965–1985 includes 50 paintings. In the accompanying catalog, published by Lowell Press of Kansas City, MO, author James Forrest explores Hurley's relationship to the American landscape tradition; the color plates which sandwich his interview make clear why Hurley ranks with his forebears as carrying forth the grand parade of great panorama painting.

*Southwest Art* talked with Hurley about the retrospective over the phone one early morning in May. We found him reflective but not the least bit apprehensive about viewing two decades of work. His wonderful sense of humor was intact, and as Hurley put it, "The whole point of the painting process is improvement. And I expect to see some."

**SWA:** *Out of the 50 paintings in this retrospective, how many are for sale?*

**Hurley:** Eight.

**SWA:** *Are they brand new?*

**Hurley:** Yes, I've been working on them over the past year.

**SWA:** *That's a lot in one year.*

**Hurley:** Oh, no. Not for me. It varies, of course, but all in all, my track record is over 25 paintings per year.

**SWA:** *Do you work on one at a time?*

**Hurley:** Yes, I set them up and then I just go. I love the big ones so much that I often find it just as hard to do a little one as a big one. There may be more time involved, but the big ones turn me on. I think that the use of brushes, oil paints and canvases was first designed for life-size paintings.

**SWA:** *What role does size play in your work?*

**Hurley:** Well, I think that the bigger the canvas, the more I leap into it.

**SWA:** *Is the same true for the viewer, in your opinion?*

**Hurley:** I think so, although it depends on subject matter, of course. When you paint broad, open spaces, there is a psychological effect—a window effect—that you get with a moderate-to-large canvas. Look at the very successful vista-type landscapes by Church, Bierstadt, or Moran—they are fairly large. Of course, you run a terrible risk with size because if you paint a big one that goes flat, it's like an elephant dying at the circus!

**SWA:** *Isn't it also a little harder to place a large work—both financially and in terms of the size of people's homes?*

**Hurley:** They are slower selling, but eventually they do go. If I were up to my ears in them here [at the studio], I'd probably not do so many, but I love doing them. They are really for larger rooms—foyers, corporate headquarters, bank lobbies, things like that. A lot of my big ones are designed specifically for places, like the Grand Canyon painting that was displayed at the Cowboy Hall of Fame for a while. It was built at 74- by 120-inches so that with its frame it would hold the far end of the 26- by 104-foot back wall at my 1983 Gilcrease retrospective. I did my geometry so that the viewing distance would be 45 feet.



Now, if that painting were in a small room it would push you right out.

**SWA:** *Who decided what works would be in this retrospective?*

**Hurley:** Peter Hassrick [director of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center] and Ellen Landis [curator of the Albuquerque Art Museum].

**SWA:** *You didn't play a role in the selection?*

**Hurley:** Well, I tried to, but they said, "Down, Fang, we'll handle this."

**SWA:** *Were their selections pretty much coincidental with ones you would have made?*

**Hurley:** Yes. They took my records and went through and decided which paintings represented advances. I look at some of those 20-year-old pieces and find them pretty primitive now.

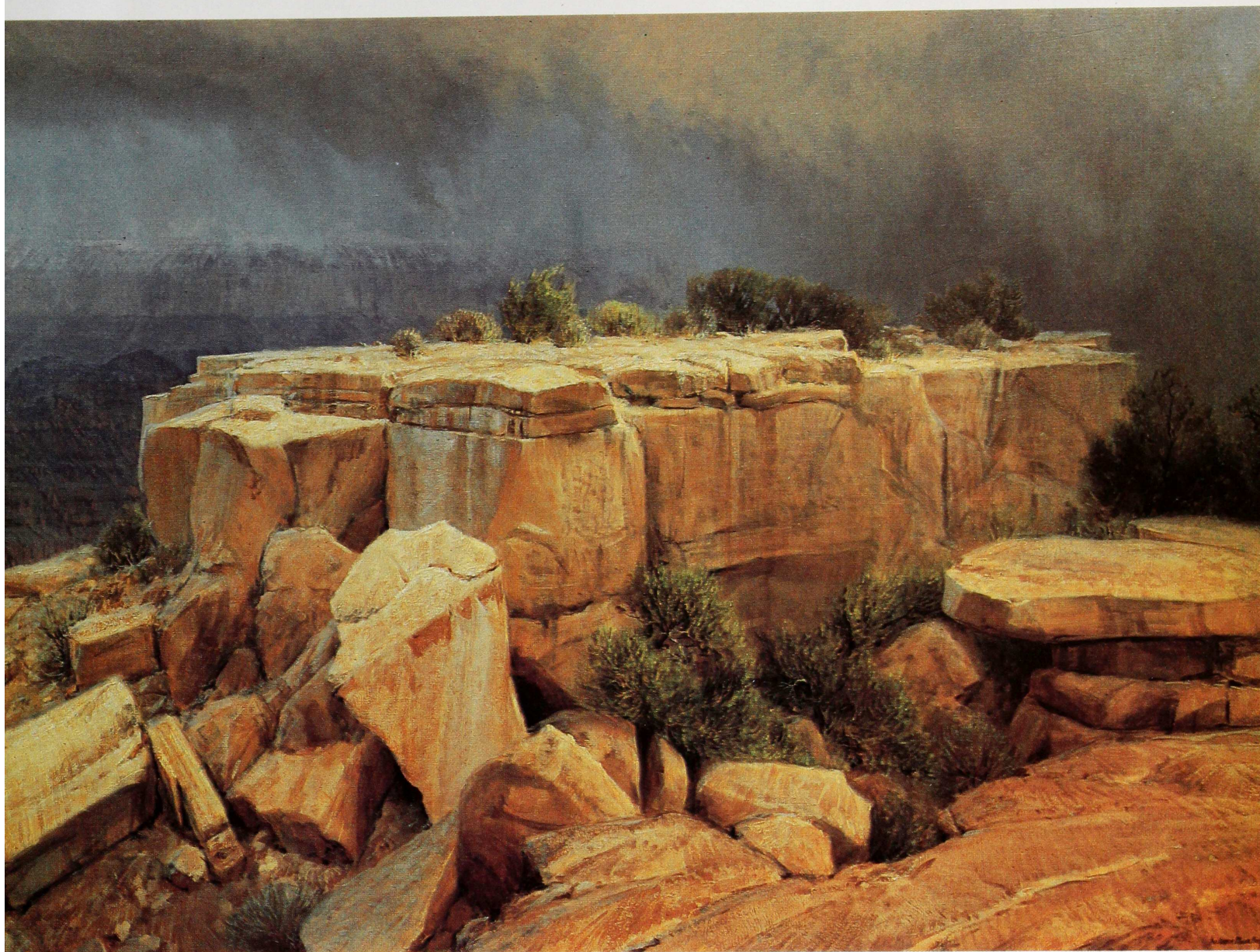
**SWA:** *But most seem to carry the Wilson Hurley hallmarks—large scale, unique points-of-view, dramatic light, and non-traditional compositions. And most exhibit some kind of risk in terms of not being commonplace or expected.*

**Hurley:** That's what I'm trying for.

**SWA:** *What risks have you encountered and overcome in your career?*

**Hurley:** Just getting started as late in life as I did was a risk. I





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Wilson Hurley, *MORAN POINT, GRAND CANYON* (1978),  
oil/canvas, 40 x 80

got some good advice from Peter Hurd who painted eastern New Mexico as it was—not as he thought it should be or wished it was. He painted it with love and with fidelity and he enriched our lives. When I was a mall-show painter and practicing law, I asked Peter what school to go to. He told me that because I was in my 30s, most schools would break me and I would come out of them a weaker person. He suggested that I read and study books, especially ones with good reproductions. If ever I could take what I felt, paint it the way I wanted to and express myself so that the public could accept it, he said, then I would have that treasure beyond price—originality. That was great advice.

*SWA:* In the catalog, James Forrest draws parallels between your work and Thomas Moran's. How do you feel about that?

**Hurley:** I'm honored. On his good days, Thomas Moran could whip the socks off of me. I really admire his ability; but I'm still working and if I can hang around here as long as Thomas did, I may give him a run for his money! What Moran does (that I have tried to do) is use paint to create texture, particularly in rocks and canyons. So when they picked Thomas, they picked an awful big chunk to chew.



**SWA:** *Why did they pick Moran?*

**Hurley:** I think it probably is because many of my subjects are similar to his and therefore you could put both of us up and ask, "What is the difference?" In some cases, I think my approach is more understandable than his romantic approach. In other cases, when he has done his work with heart and soul, and gone to it with care, his paintings stand as monuments. I don't know that I've done that yet.

**SWA:** *Who are your painting heros?*

**Hurley:** The fellow who first grabbed me as being great was George Inness. He was a very quiet painter in his own right, but a daring one in what he tried to express. The first thing that struck me about him were his scenes with light seeming to pour out of the canvas. That really got hold of me.

**SWA:** *How do you "get hold" of your viewers?*

**Hurley:** I think it is usually with composition. It is a limitless challenge. Many people never recognize its importance. I've always wanted to know how to paint a bluff, for instance, like Frederick Waugh who could place it so that it looked ominous and strong—so that there was no other place that you could put that rock and have it perform its job. Success at composition, I think, comes from painting many, many paintings and devoting a whole life to daring further and further. The whole process of painting—the risk or the adventure—is improving yourself. I think it's a commonly-held viewpoint that if someone wants to become a good artist, it's just a function of time. It just takes a long time to get past the technical end so that you can add the passion.

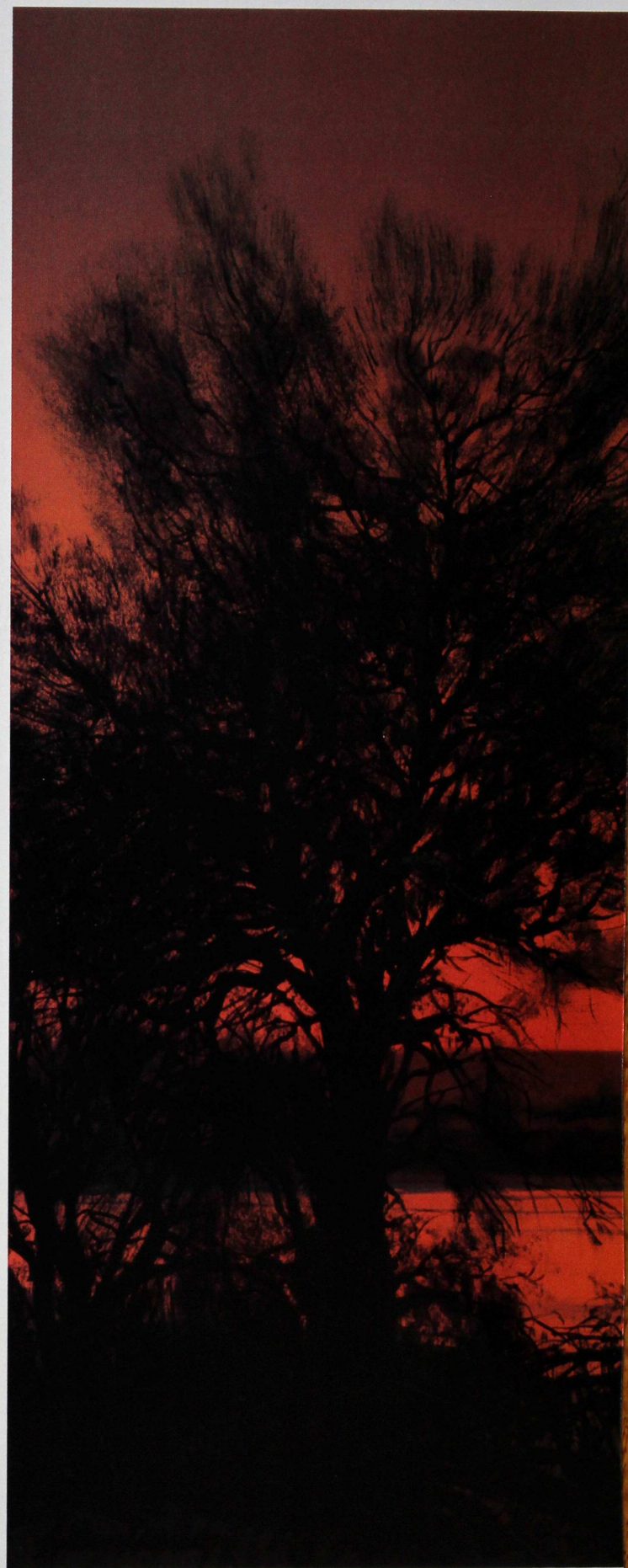
**SWA:** *Passion?*

**Hurley:** I'm not talking about energy or anything like that; I'm talking about subjective emotions and reactions to the world. The whole tapestry of feelings that intertwines with our intelligence and makes us human beings.

**SWA:** *How has your vision of the world been changed by the visions of others? We have talked about the artists, but how about all these other areas you've been involved in?*

**Hurley:** I think poetry exists in all things. I was flying in formation with another fighter jock in a pair of F-100s out of Buckley Field one fall afternoon, for example. We had a heavy load of fuel and had to hit Albuquerque light enough to land, so we were kind of dusting the tops of the mountains. The cottonwood trees and the aspens had just been hit by the frost and this guy looks over his wing and says, "Look at that—just glaciers of gold." I've never painted a painting with that title, but isn't that beautiful?

I've also talked a long time with astronaut Jack Schmitt about the moon and what the earth looks like when you're in orbit; it's very exciting. And, of course, I've worked at NASA and the University of Arizona on different projects—like the painting I did of the Horsehead Nebula [in Orion]—just think, it's four light years across! Now, I've always liked doing clouds, but



Wilson Hurley, *RED TWILIGHT ON THE RIO GRANDE* (1984), oil/canvas, 24 x 32







this one is a real humdinger!

**SWA:** And I must say that *T PLUS THIRTY* is a painting with some poetry in it, too.

**Hurley:** I did a more conventional one of the first shuttle launch that NASA liked, but then I thought, "Gee whiz, wouldn't it be nice to get above it and show it coming up at you." So I just imagined how it might be. I had a devil of a time with the geometry of it. At first I thought I could just set up a vanishing point and have the shuttle pointing out of it with a flat map-like drawing of the launch pad. But I couldn't get the shuttle to stand up: it kept wanting to rise out of the picture. I ended up giving the shuttle and the launch pad the same vanishing point. After I got finished with all of a week's work, however, I realized that all I had done was add some curves to the roads around the launch pad. But it made the shuttle stand up, so it was worth it. There is no length to which one should not go to get a good painting. Now, someone suggested that a camera up there would have solved it for me, but although the camera resolves those kinds of problems, it creates other problems of its own. It's very hard to make your painting attain anything more than what you've photographed.

**SWA:** I understand that you use a camera quite a bit in your work.

**Hurley:** I use the camera for details, but I don't use it for composition or for color or for values, because it is a crude instrument in those respects. Actually, the camera is the Industrial Revolution's answer to representational art. And it's part of representational art. All the specifications that went into making a camera had to first be solved by painters. We had to know what we were looking for before we could create the camera to do it. So we had solved all of the problems of the camera before it was invented.

**SWA:** In the interview with James Forrest you talk about the impression of reality in our minds being truer than a photograph. Could you expand on that?

**Hurley:** Well, it's the impression we carry with us.

**SWA:** It's memory then?

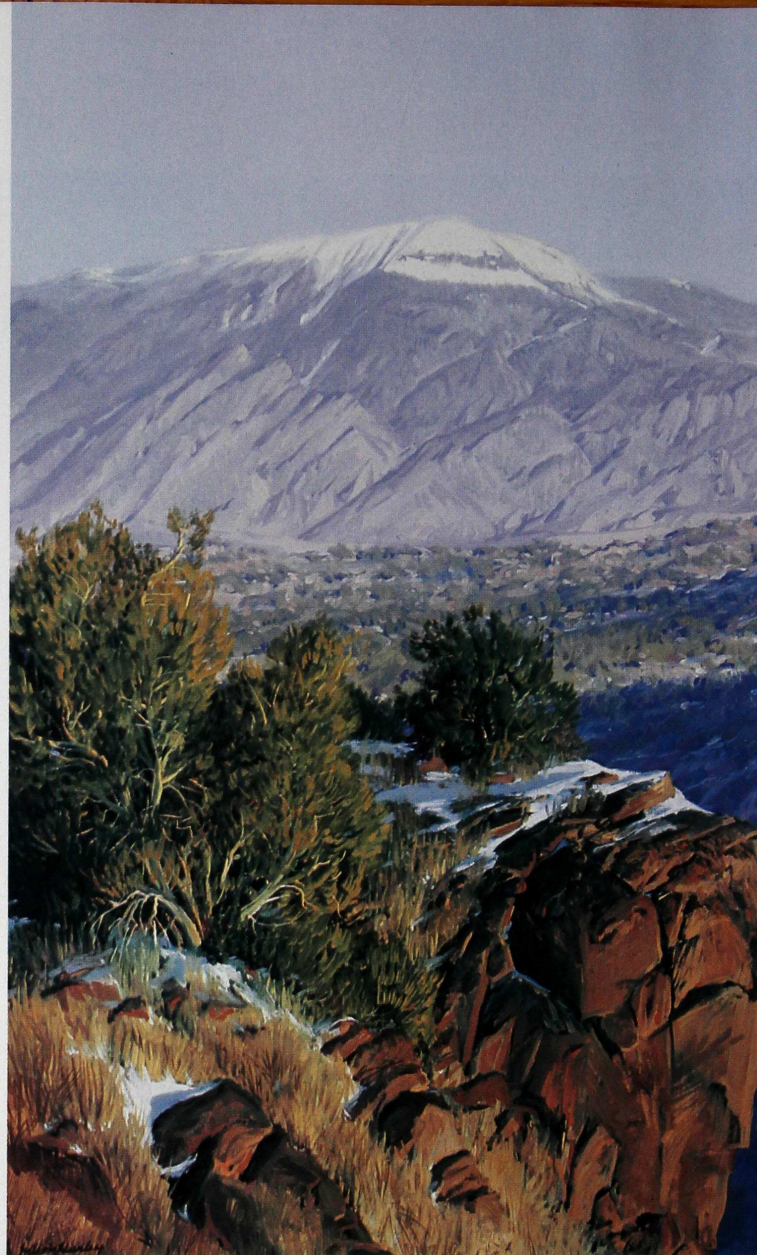
**Hurley:** Yes, it's like eidetic memory. Our visual memories are utterly fantastic. We create an image of reality in our minds that is extremely detailed and so vivid that you think you are seeing the real thing. It's really a matter of how we use that memory. I know that I've kept mine pretty well alive and I work from it quite a bit. On my easel right now is a work that is directly from an experience I had looking out the window the other night. That's all it takes and it stays vivid. I think Moran worked the same way on many of his paintings.

**SWA:** With your skills you can get that vision down pretty quickly.

**Hurley:** Yes, but the impression can stay that vivid for a considerable length of time. I find what fades more quickly than the visual image is the passion. If you can't recreate the passion, you probably can't complete the painting.

**SWA:** How do you rekindle the passion?

**Hurley:** It's very difficult. It's usually by accident. You can't do it like an actor who creates tears on command. You have to really feel it. If you fake it, your painting will go flat. It's funny, because I will be seeking passion in one respect—for example I'll plan a trip to the Grand Canyon or some place that turns me



on. Then I'll go to the grocery store with Roz [Hurley's wife Rosalyn] for the picnic stuff and I'll see something on the way back from the store and I'll say, "That's it, we don't have to make the trip!" In other words, you usually find it by surprise.

**SWA:** Can you detect in your paintings when you have not had the passion?

**Hurley:** You bet!

**SWA:** Do other people notice it too?

**Hurley:** Usually not, because either I destroy the painting or I don't finish it.

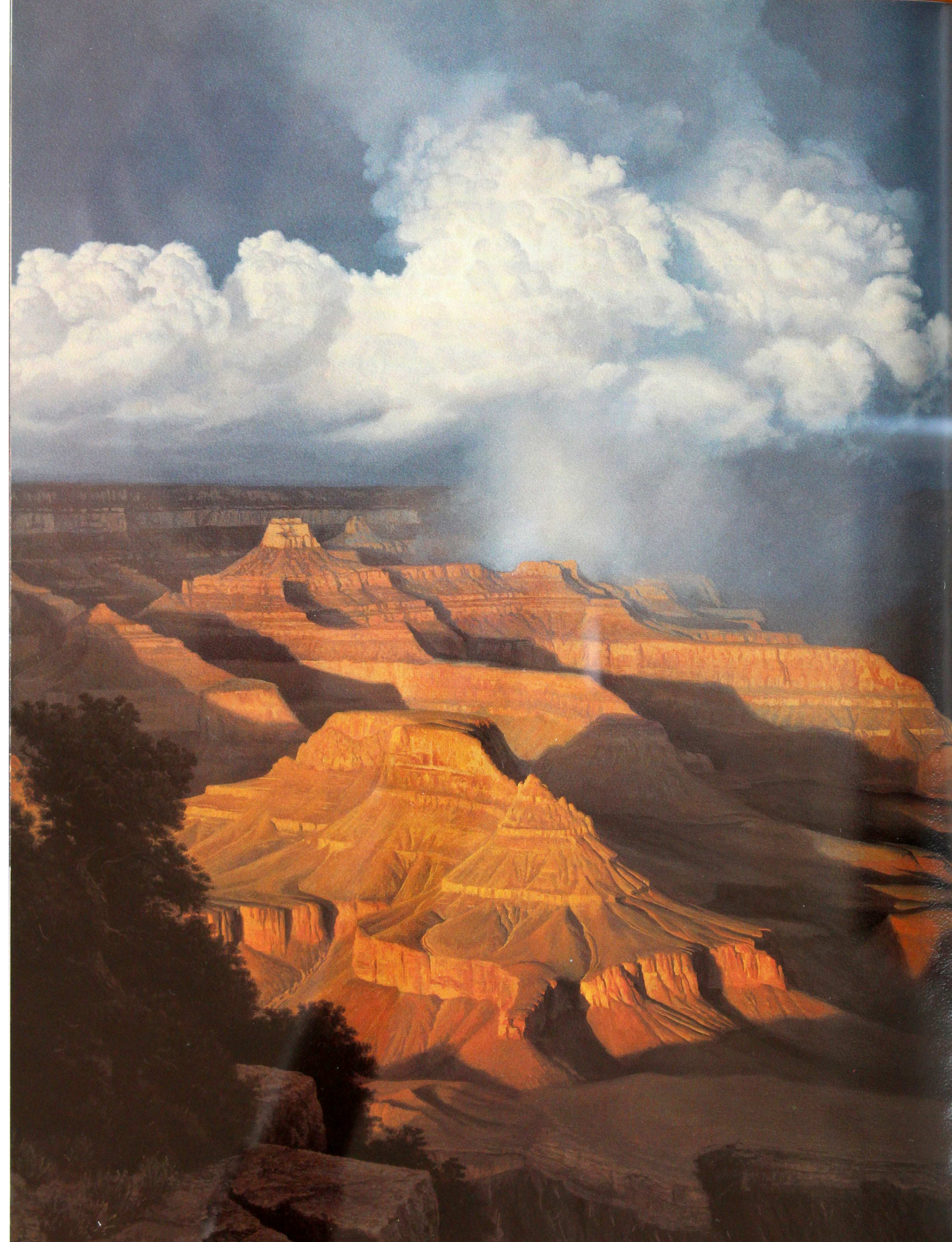
**SWA:** Let's talk about the Grand Canyon. It occurs regularly in your paintings. What's its main attraction?

**Hurley:** Have you been there?

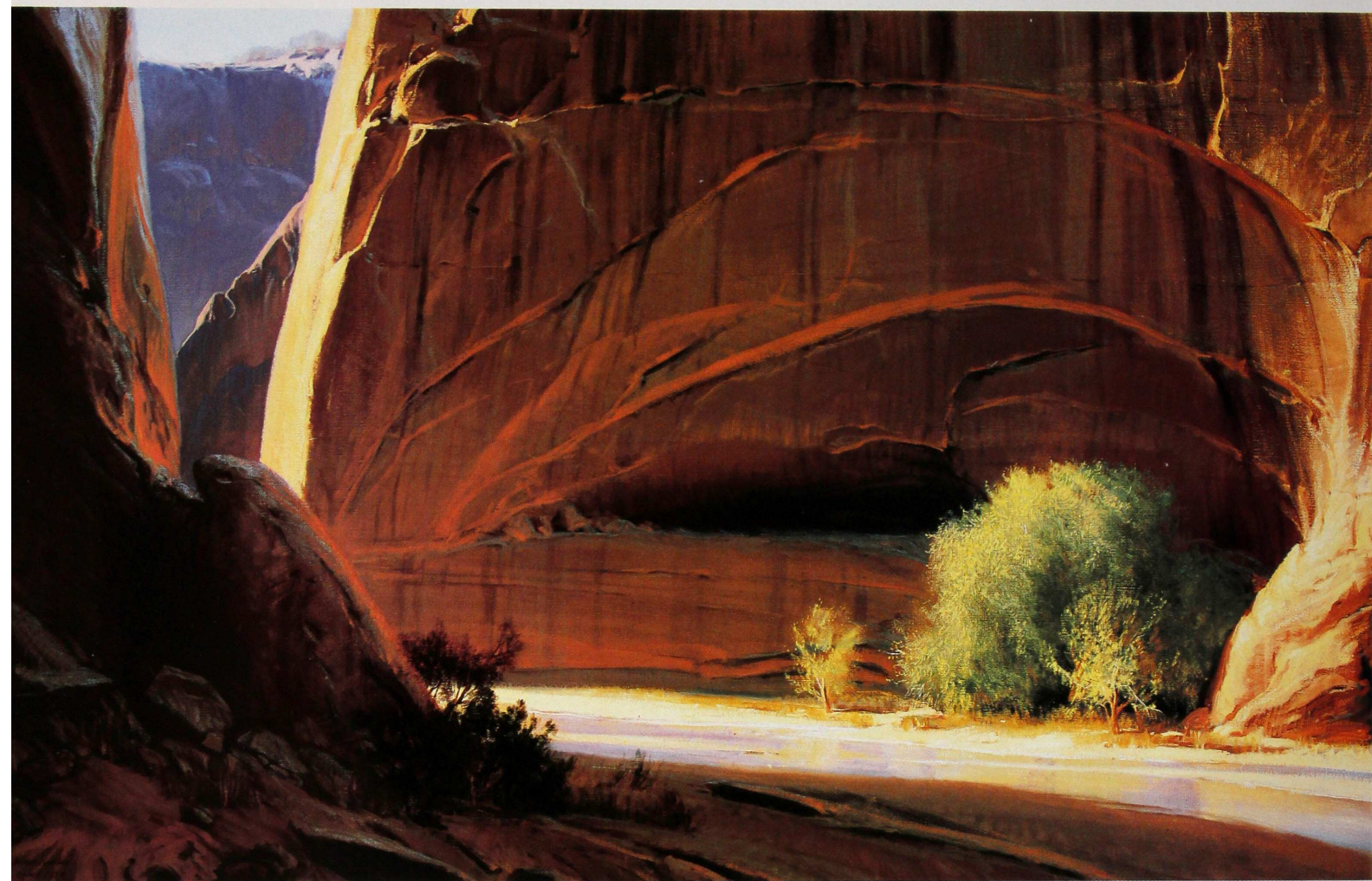
**SWA:** Yes, but I'm embarrassed to say only once and then I did it as a typical tourist.

**Hurley:** Hmmmmmm.... Well, it's so vast and such a beautiful expression of the construction and fabric of our earth. And its interaction with the atmosphere and light—the changes are so beautiful that, I don't know, I guess it just takes my heart away. (And, yet, I think for pure elegance of line, Canyon de Chelly is probably the Grand Canyon's master, although it is not nearly so vast.) I don't know what it is about the Canyon, but it demands a large canvas; it demands that you present enough









could make sense of the photographs and not make the mistakes photographs make. I can imagine standing there and facing it—it would be like dying and going to heaven.

**SWA:** *Going back to the interview again, you mentioned that artists pursue visual truth. Do you actually believe there is a truth out there? What is visual truth? Do we all have the same truth?*

**Hurley:** I think so. I think that there is a real universe and it is truth. Since the time you and I were polliwogs, we have developed sensory organs to perceive it and to work in it and live in it. It exists and we exist. It is one of the terrific things about creation. And of course, understanding the real world and how it works, and then communicating that knowledge is an endless challenge. There's a bottomless pit of information out there and to be bored by it or to turn up your nose at reality is kind of being an ostrich.

**SWA:** *You seldom include human beings in your work. Why?*

**Hurley:** Well, it is really a matter of scale. When I want to talk about a mountainside or a cloud or a river, if I put figures in there, they will dominate the compositions. The psychology of

life is so interesting and of such interest to us that it invariably becomes the psychological center of interest in the painting. So if your goal is to take your mind away from man and into the environment, it is almost fatal to your intent to put a man contemplating the landscape or going on a picnic in it. I've noticed this same phenomenon in American and European landscape painting. Every time Corot added little figures to his paintings, he had compositional problems—they defeated the resolution of the painting. It is not an anti-human part of me (I've painted many figurative works) but a question of attention.

**SWA:** *If you had to pick a word—a verb, say—to describe what your paintings state about nature, what would you pick?*

**Hurley:** In a word or less? Oh, I can't. But what I try to do is communicate. I try to take my feelings—my perceptions—about the world and let you feel them, *make* you feel them. If I can take the joy that I feel and impart it to you, then I have enriched your life and mine.

**SWA:** *Since your accident and recent operation, how's your health?*

**Hurley:** Good. It's good. My production is back up to where it was ten years ago.

**SWA:** *Wonderful!*

**Hurley:** Yes, they hammered away on me a lot, but they have me back in shape.

**SWA:** *Let me close by saying that I admire your work a great deal and, frankly, I've developed a new respect for Mother Earth on account of it.*

**Hurley:** Well, thank you!

**SWA**

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Wilson Hurley, *LE CHELLY* (1974), oil/canvas, 30 x 48