

# larger than life

## the art of Wilson Hurley

Everything about Wilson Hurley's art is big. His studio, compared with most artists', is enormous: 40 feet long by 24 feet wide, with a 16-foot ceiling. The vast landscapes he paints of the Southwest are not small, either—usually more than six feet wide. The works for which he is best known, five panoramic murals he completed in 1996 for the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, are 18 feet tall and 46 feet wide—*each*.

Hurley himself, at six feet six inches, is an imposing figure. With his red turtleneck, hunter-green plaid button-down shirt, cable-knit sweater with leather patches at the elbows, and silver hair, he looks like a college professor. But the paint-splattered denim chaps that his wife, Rosalyn, sews for him to wear over his jeans give the artist away. Hurley gestures gracefully with large hands as he talks about his life and work; his conversation is punctuated by a youthful giggle that belies his 80 years.

But then, much about Hurley is not what you'd expect. His passion for painting came not from art school but from the military. His grandfather commanded the Atlantic fleet. His father served as secretary of war under Hoover, and later as ambassador to numerous countries under FDR. The young Wilson Hurley went to West Point, where, in three years, he earned an engineering degree, his commission, and his pilot's wings. And he learned to draw. "They would show us an ordnance map and say, 'You are here—now draw a picture for your commander of what you see,'" he recalls.

Hurley's experiences as a pilot also inform his painting. He flew fighters throughout the 1950s and '60s in the New Mexico Air National Guard, and flew again when he was recalled to military service during the Vietnam War. Seeing the landscape from the air, and experiencing the earth's atmosphere from within, offered an artistic education no earthbound artist can achieve.

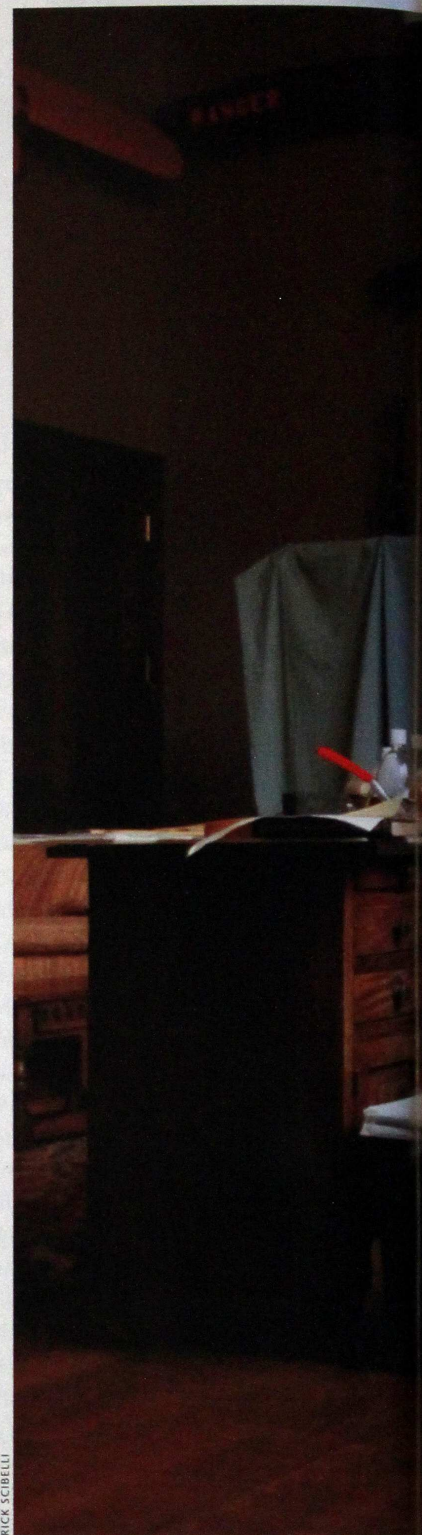
Outside of his military service, Hurley, like his father, earned a law degree and became a practicing attorney. But he gave up courts for canvases when he was 45, after he returned from Vietnam. Quitting his law practice alienated many people in his life; family and friends thought he had lost his mind. But Hurley found art more challenging than the law had ever been. "It takes more intelligence to do a field study than to try a lawsuit," he says. The gamble paid off; it wasn't long before commercial success justified his choice. Today, Hurley's work is in many private and public collections,

including the Utah Museum of Fine Art and the Albuquerque Sunport. And in the 1990s, at the request of Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma, Hurley created murals for the second floor of the rotunda of the Oklahoma Capitol. (His first show in 15 years opens at Nedra Matteucci Galleries in Santa Fe on June 26 and runs until July 17.)

Working in oils, Hurley explores the beauty of nature with the precise perspective of an engineer. Often he depicts views accessible just outside his home in Albuquerque—of the Sandia Mountains and the sagebrush foothills surrounding them. Often, too, the sky is the dominant subject of his paintings, as he fearlessly paints the sky's astonishing colors, cloud shapes, and chiaroscuro. For the past 15 years, Hurley has designed, built, and flown radio-controlled airplanes, sometimes equipping them with remote-control cameras so he can further visualize



COURTESY NEDRA MATTEUCCI GALLERIES

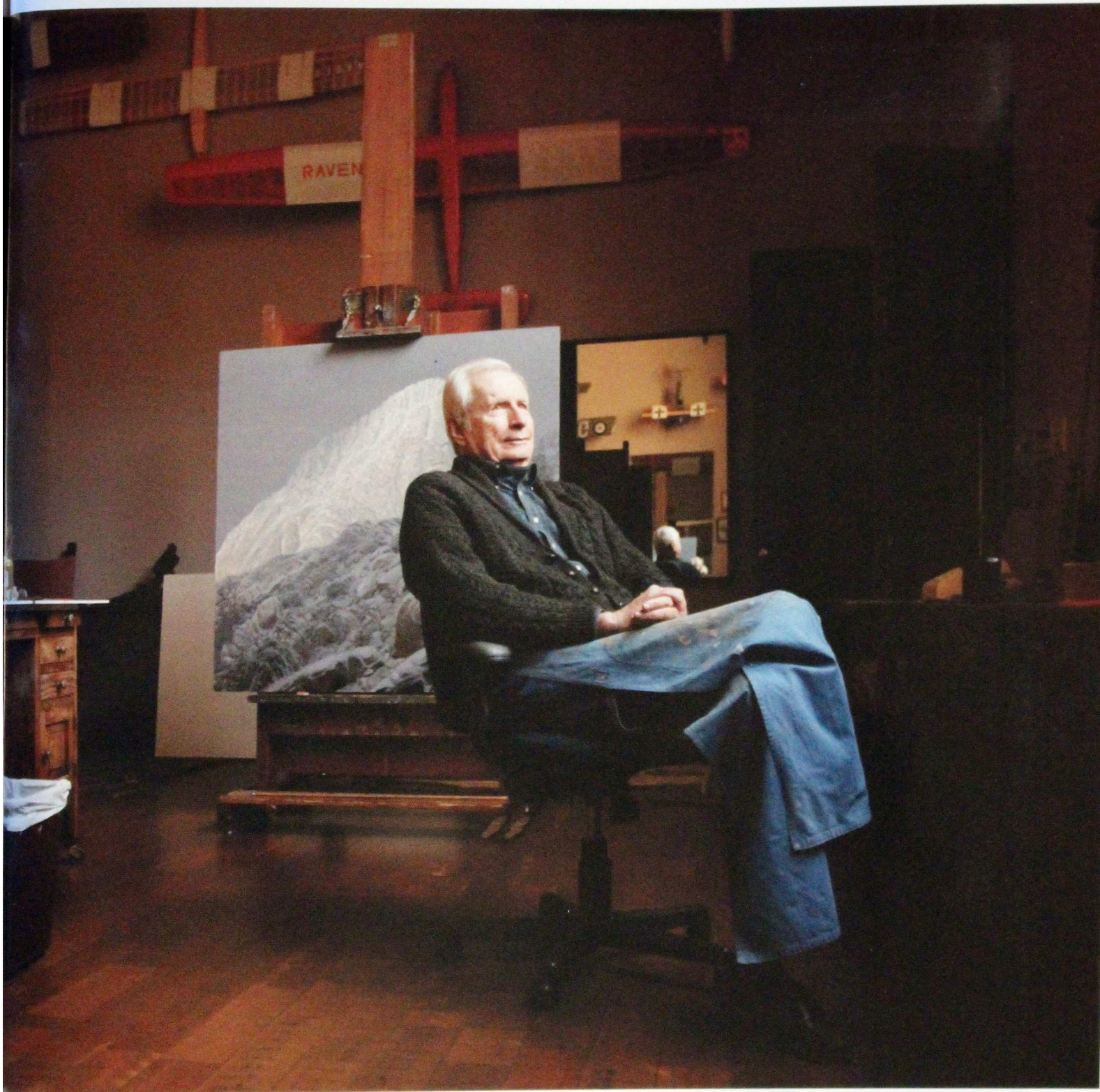


RICK SCIBELLI

Above: Wilson Hurley relaxing in his Albuquerque studio.

Left: *Distant Rain*, oil, 30 x 24".





the landscapes he wants to paint. But he does not work exclusively from photographs, preferring to paint small field studies in order to accurately capture the colors in nature. Later, in the studio, he paints the large-scale canvases he's known for.

"To be convincing, you have to understand the volume and mass of what you paint," he says earnestly. "I've seen many people paint the Grand Canyon from photos, and if they don't understand the shapes, it fails." Though Hurley quit flying years ago—believing it inappropriate for a pilot to be airborne unless he or she is totally committed to it—his memories continue to influence his art. "I remember days of just going up when we had big old thunderclouds, and the sun was setting. We'd drive our planes right up over the clouds and down, caressing their sides ... it was beautiful." **SF**

*Hollis Walker is a freelance writer and military brat who would be happy living in Wilson Hurley's studio.*