

Southwest Art

AUGUST 1990

\$4.50 U.S.
\$5.50 CANADA

Amado Pena

From Image to Icon

also featuring

Jim Daly

Bill Worrell

Monika Steinhoff

Eldridge Hardie

Louie Ewing

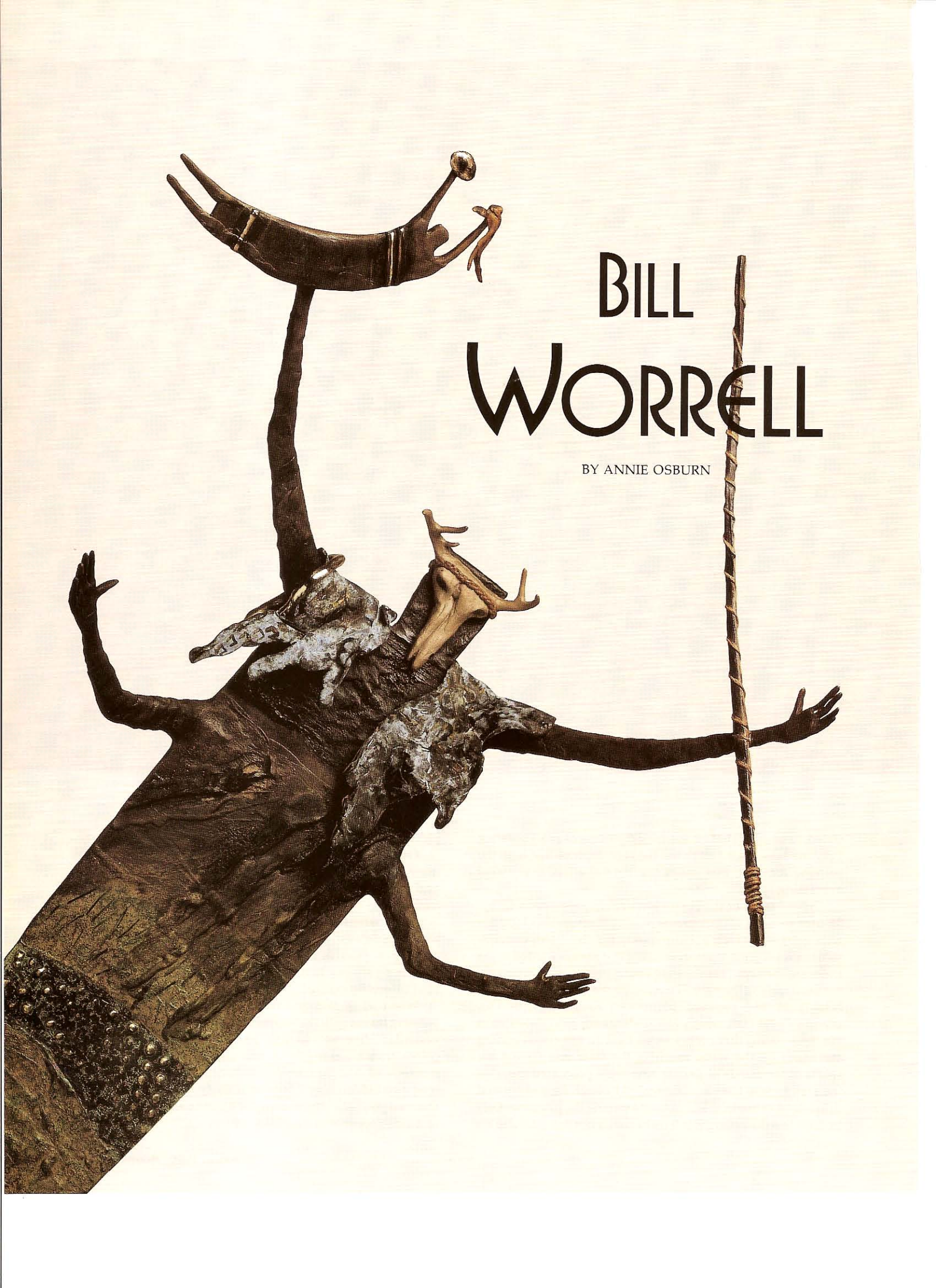
Nat Youngblood

Larry Yazzie

A Dream Takes Flight

Lincoln Fox



A large, dark, textured sculpture of a human figure with antlers, holding a staff and a crescent moon. The figure is positioned on the left side of the page, with its body angled upwards. The head is covered in antlers, and the figure holds a long staff in its right hand and a crescent moon in its left hand. The sculpture is made of a dark, textured material, possibly wood or metal, and is set against a light background.

BILL WORRELL

BY ANNIE OSBURN

PULLING MYSELF OVER THE ROCKY ledge, the bright dry sun hit my cheek and neck with a hot, heavy hand. Texas sculptor Bill Worrell was behind me. I judged his closeness by the gentle silver sounds of the five shaman pendants hanging around his neck.

Straight from the small Texas Hill Country town of New Art, Worrell (pronounced "whirl") had joined me in New Mexico for a grand adventure. While our respective editors and gallery directors toiled away in the city, Worrell and I happily clambered about a huge mound of rocks in the town of Galisteo just south of Santa Fe. Our quest was rock art, and within moments we stood in viewing distance of sprawling Anasazi Indian "signatures" left some 500 to 700 years before Worrell and I first drew breath.

Dressed in jeans and beat-up cowboy boots, their top leather peeling in total abandon, Worrell beamed his Texas-tanned virility as brightly as the royal purple of his western shirt. A sculptor, painter and "artistic medicine man of soul," he is the creator of his own brand of shamans—sculpted interpretations of primitive rock art imagery produced in bronze, sterling silver and gold. Whether freestanding, hung on a wall or worn around the neck as a bolo, each shaman personifies the spirit of "ritual."

Sculpted with an eye to texture and earthy

patinas with high-polished accents, Worrell's freestanding sculptures often spring from native rocks and stones collected by the artist in secret places throughout New Mexico and Texas. Selecting them, he admits, can be difficult. "Stones are like fingerprints: No two are alike. My task is to match the stone to the sculpture. It's a special bond.

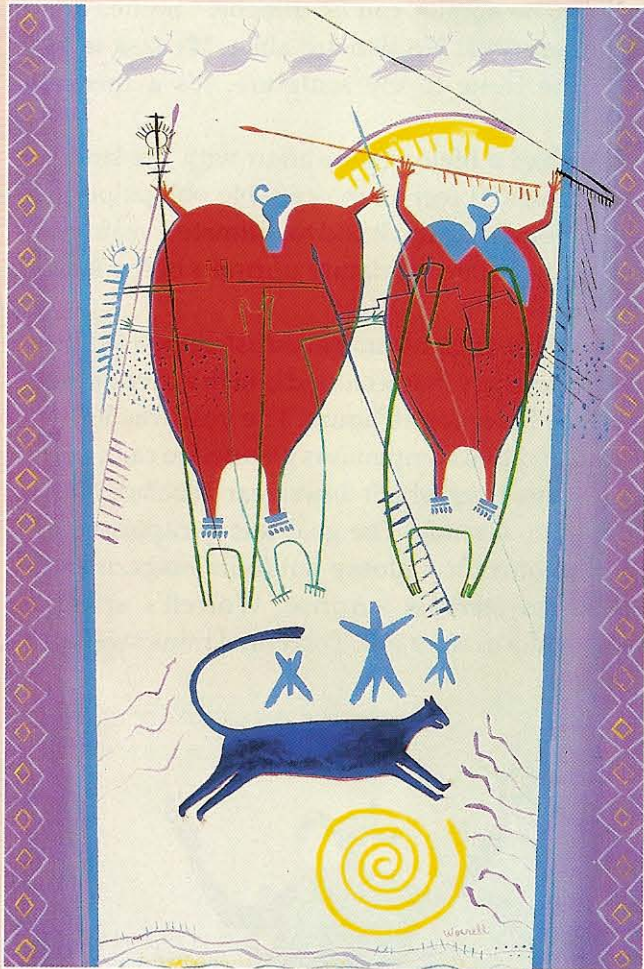
"I've had a lifelong love affair with the land," he continues. "I feel an inescapable obligation to draw it, paint it, sculpt it and to ultimately reshape its substances into miniature portraits of the land itself."

Worrell's ancient imagery first appeared to him on a journey that stranded him in a cave along the Pecos River for 36 hours. The year was 1979. Worrell and two companions planned to canoe 66 miles of this river which flows near Truchas, NM, into the Rio Grande. The goal was to capture the trip in photos for a glossy outdoors magazine.

With mysterious surprise, Worrell's artistic fate turned a greater gift. Torrential rains swelled

Left: detail of MASKED CAPED SHAMAN IN FULL POWER WITH MAGIC STICK, ANCESTRAL SPIRIT AND GOLDEN RING OF FOREVER, bronze, h 36, edition 50, photo by James Hart. **Right:** CAPED RAM SHAMAN WITH BREAST PLATE AND SHIELD OF POWER, bronze/stone, h 11, edition 50, photo by Marc Bennet. Photos courtesy the artist and Contemporary Southwest Galleries, Center Street Gallery and Zapotec Art.





Above: NEON SHAMANS, acrylic, 36 x 24.

Above Right: Grouping of wax shamans on the painted flooring of Worrell's house in "New Art," TX.

Below Right: Bill Worrell photographed by Annie Osburn.

the muddy waters and forced the party to seek refuge. Worrell wandered into a cave and right into one of this country's richest displays of prehistoric art. "The pictographs date to about 4,000 BC, predating the Egyptian pyramids," he recalls. "Of course, no one knows for sure how old they really are, but they were painted onto their natural rock canvases by people who inhabited the canyons of the Lower Pecos region as far back as 9,000 BC."

Although the meaning behind the cave paintings in the Pecos River region remains a mystery, anthropologists believe that rock art was created as a part of sacred ceremonials. Today, these images survive as pictorial histories, telling us about the ancient cave dwellers and showing us how they lived.

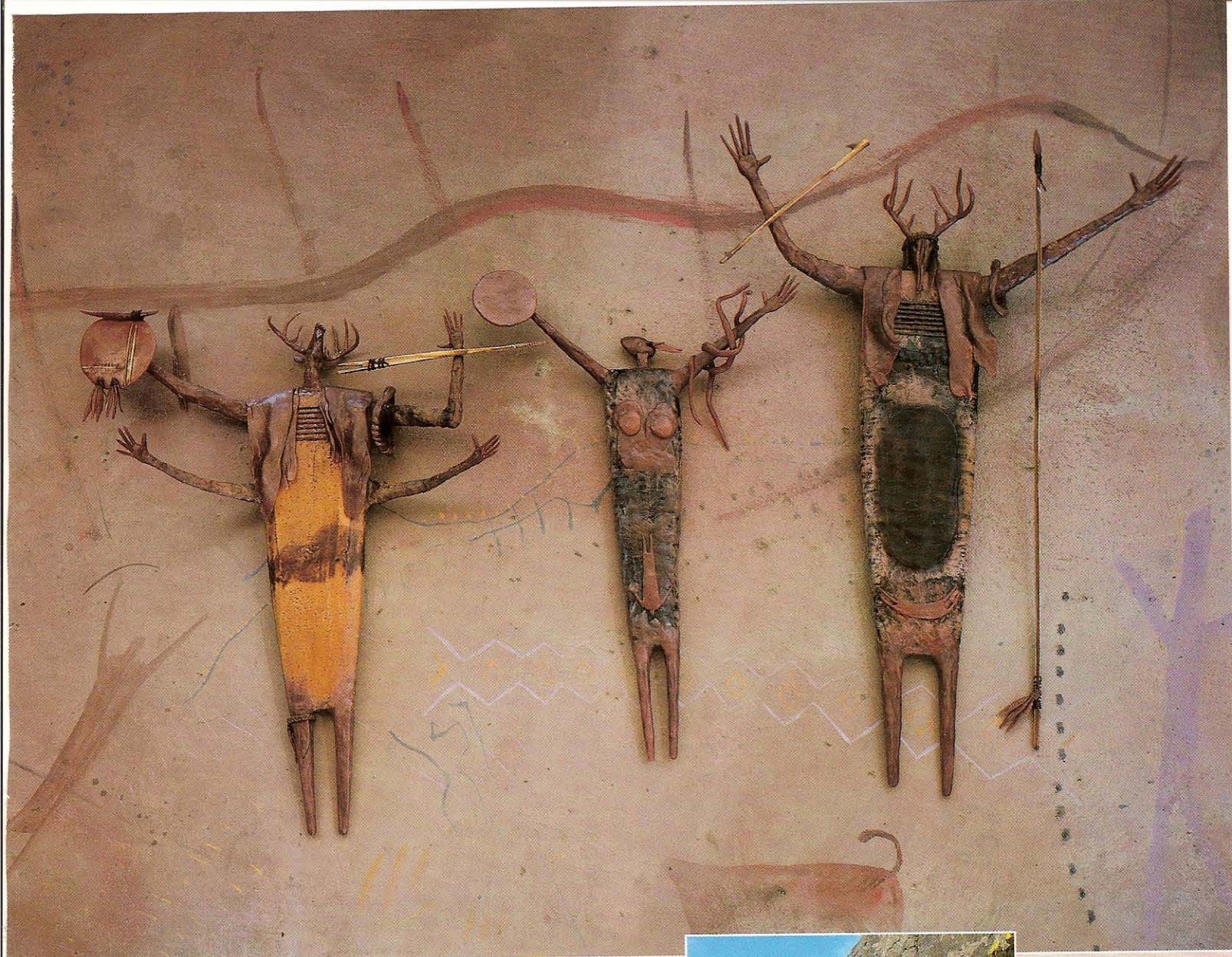
"The term 'rock art,'" Worrell explains, "refers to petroglyphs, which are drawings or symbols incised into rock surfaces, and pictographs, which are images painted with natural earth pigments onto smoother, more protected surfaces like cave walls."

"Seeing the ancient 'writings' in the Pecos caves reminded me of a feeling I had had in other places associated with ancient man," he continues. "The first time I felt it was when I went into an Anasazi cave in New Mexico, and once again, on the night I got locked in the ruins at Mesa Verde. It was like hearing Richard Strauss' *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (the symphonic poem used as the soundtrack for the movie *2001 Space Odyssey*) for the first time—a feeling of 'What am I going to do with this power?'"

In the years following his discovery, Worrell dedicated himself to documenting pictographs in paintings and on the surfaces of oxide-fired clay and sculpted rocks ... until one day in 1984. While assisting a student sculptor in his capacity as associate professor of art at Houston Baptist University, Worrell inadvertently squeezed out his first wax shaman figure. Supple and soft, the tiny shape emerged through Worrell's well-weathered hands. "Some of my greatest discoveries have come from mistakes," he admits.

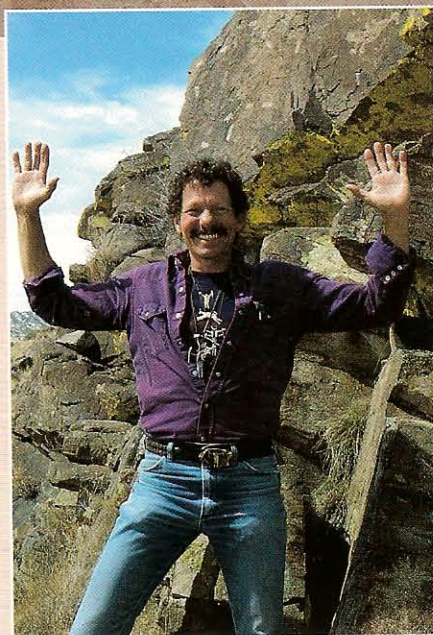
The rest is history. Worrell's work came into public focus in Santa Fe in 1986. Today, demand for his sculptures and jewelry designs have led him to enlist two foundries and 22 galleries. (Insiders say that last year Worrell sold more sculpture than any other artist showing in Santa Fe.) Robert Redford's *Sundance* catalog features his work, as well as The Nature Company, headquartered in Berkeley, CA.

While Worrell insists that his sculptures are interpretations of ancient cave art, one need only leaf through a good book on the subject to suppose otherwise. Harry Shafer's *Ancient Texans* includes dozens of images similar to the ones Worrell had found. Clearly, Worrell's sculptures render full homage to these past creators—even down to the accoutrements the shamans carry and the titles Worrell gives them. Spears, *atlatls*, corner-



tangs, knives, rings, shields, masks and antlers are added and then used in poetic concoctions for titles such as MASKED CAPED SHAMAN WITH SPEAR, ATLATL AND GOLDEN RING FOREVER. "In all the literature I read, the Pecos figures emerged as shamans or medicine men because the elaborateness of their gear was more than the average hunter would wear," says Worrell, who adds that his imagery was influenced early on by Texas geologist Forrest Kirkland, who did watercolors and pencil studies for his book *Rock Art of the Texas Indians*.

From two-inch pendants to eight-foot shamans in full power, Worrell's sculptural techniques borrow many of the same prehistoric traditions of ancient metalworkers. Working in wax with his far-from-dainty fingers, Worrell creates intricate patterns, tiny fingers and antlers, even the sun's rays on a shield. "There are 50,000 tools available to the sculptor, but I hardly use anything but my fingers," he smiles. To prove it, during a water break Worrell takes up my challenge to sculpt a tiny hand out of the corner of a paper napkin—a feat he pulls off with the dexterity of a surgeon. "You can look at my bronzes and see impressions of my fingerprints all over," he adds with a laugh. Additional texturing is achieved





Above: A collection of pins, bolos and earrings in sterling silver, photo by James Hart.

when Worrell coats the pieces with a patina, using brush-applied ammonias and acids, and then polishes portions of them with a high-speed dye grinder using a felt wheel and jeweler's rouge.

Experimenting with many media, Worrell has worked in clay and in paint, using watercolors, acrylics and oils. His youthful enthusiasm has been kept alive in part by two decades of working with students and by a brief stint working for the Boy Scouts. Born in El Paso, TX, in 1935, Worrell grew up—or didn't grow up—in Colorado City, TX. "I'm still a child and hope that I am forever," he says. "I am free as a human can be, and all of this is what my art is about."

He recounts with glee how, as a child, he spent hours making crude flint arrowheads, all the while singing "Don't Fence Me In." "I thought I'd turned to art late in life until I rethought my childhood," he muses. "I've always been an artist, I just didn't know it."

Like a crazed genius, Worrell is making up for any missed time by creating his sculptures in enormous numbers at his 32-acre homestead in "New Art," TX, an 8.3-mile drive south of Art, a town with the state's second smallest post office, measuring 10 by 12 feet. Worrell's home is a work of art in itself. Inspired by a monastery in Abiquiu, NM, an old Galisteo bar and the caves of the lower Pecos, the house's outside walls are sculpted to resemble canyon cliffs and are painted and/or stamped with children's drawings, handprints and Worrell's own pictographs. There's also a bath house and a studio Worrell's dubbed "Medium Cotton." "You'll find me down a dirt road on the banks of the Llano River, with a 100-yard shoot of rapids. I don't mean to brag, but I've got the most coveted piece of real estate in Texas!" he boasts. "New Art," he adds, came about when a painter friend, James Busby, suggested that Worrell follow the example of Dime Box, TX, which has a sister city called Old Dime Box, TX. "People have come to know New Art as a town," he chuckles, "but I'm the only resident."

Back on the rocks of Galisteo, Worrell is busily recording our findings with a camera and in a huge leather-bound sketchbook, filled with poetry and personal reflections. "You can see all kinds of things in these petroglyphs," he tells me. "Take the Ring of Forever that I place on my shamans. It's my interpretation of an arm band I saw on a pictograph. One day it just became the focal point of a sculpture. Now I polish it so bright and shiny that it looks like gold ... even though it's just plain ol' bronze."

"My rings have a twist of infinity about them—circles never end.... They taught me this," he says, pointing to a lichen-covered rock whose southern exposure bears a geometric petroglyph of an animal with horns.

Standing with his arms spread-eagle, Worrell describes a fanciful scene from centuries ago. "Imagine a smooth overhang. We stand, the firelight behind us casting our shadows onto the walls. The shadows form two arms, then four, then six! We appear full of power. So we paint our portraits onto the wall to keep our feeling of power for tomorrow when the big firelight shadows are gone and we are small again."

At times I imagined that I was wandering these rocks with a wise man rather than an artist, or with a prehistoric metalworker or perhaps the apparition of one. The hours passed all too quickly; our skin reddened and browned into shades of the hot New Mexico landscape. Another afternoon with Bill Worrell ... a man you can talk to forever about primitive visions tinged with twentieth-century humor. **SWA**