

FACE OF THE ARTIST

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
NORMA HOLT

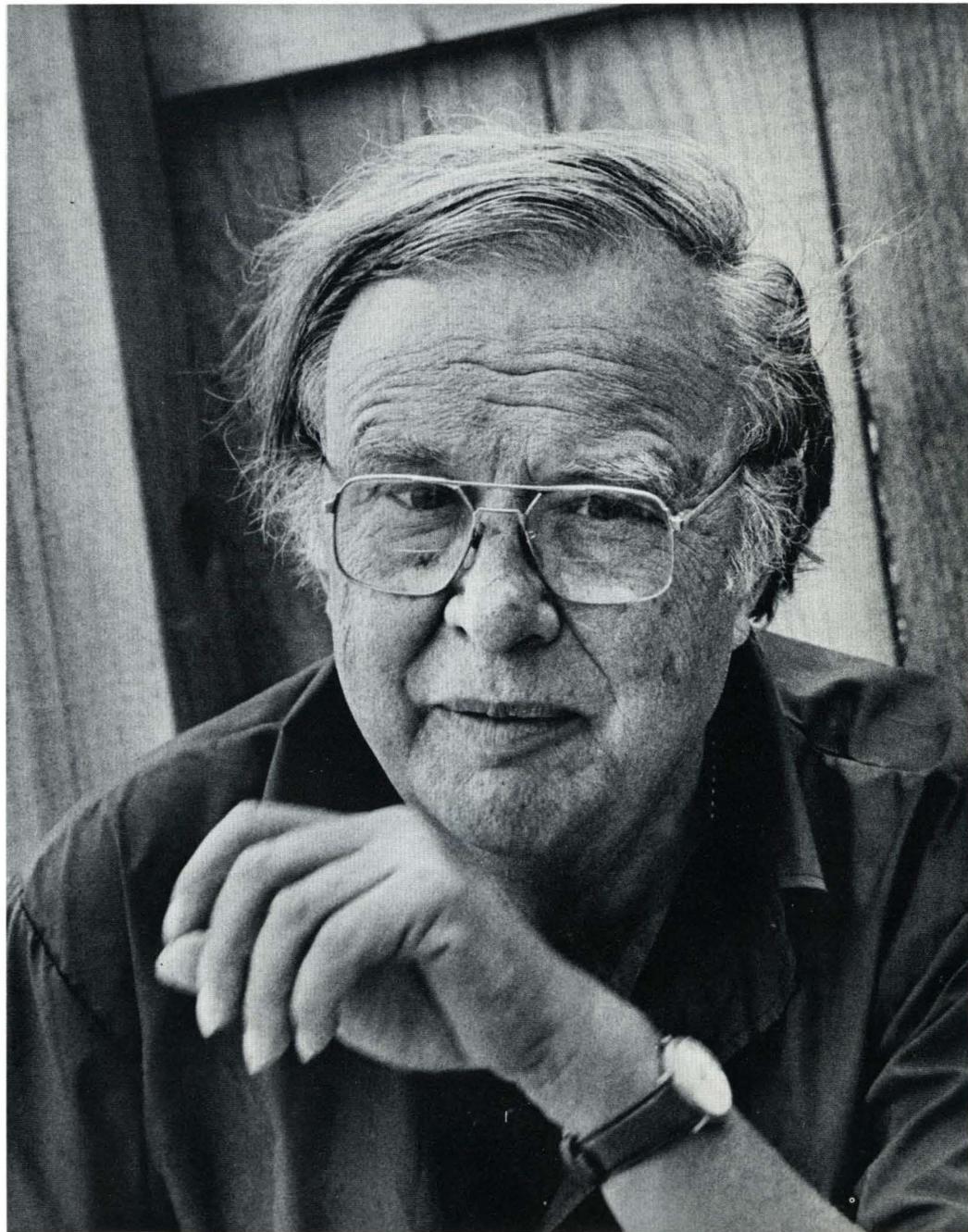
I first encountered Norma Holt more than twenty years ago in Provincetown, commissioning her that summer to photograph my very small daughters Jeannie and Lise. Those photographs remain among my favorite treasures, though I have a relentless eye. Norma Holt "sees" people as I see them — it is after one has been photographed a great deal by different photographers that one realizes how "subjective" portrait photography is. Of the persons in this book (nearly all creative persons) I know about a third well, another third casually, and the last third slightly or not at all. Of those I know well, I can tell that she has unfailingly caught a characteristic expression. We forget, in thinking about photography, that most photographs of people, even though they are in a literal sense obviously of such-and-such a person, most often are not a likeness of the person in depth. Norma Holt's are. Moreover, beyond that elusive inner likeness, many of them are photographically works of art. Recently, in a talk with her, she said something revealing. I had remarked that I had known her mainly as a specialist in the photography of children, and had not been aware of how many artists and poets she had done. She replied that for decades she had done only children because it was possible only with children to be "truthful." And when one thinks of it, only children do not look at their own portraits mainly concerned with vanity. Grown-ups look at their portraits rarely otherwise. Looking at Norma Holt's portraits of persons who have spent their lives devoted to the arts, one cannot help but be struck with how individualistic these faces are, deeply different from those of, say, businessmen, politicians, tourists, students, or even the working class, though most of her creative people have lived on an economic level equal to or less than that of minimal comfort. The faces here are more naked, less masked, less optimistic, and, for the most part, with that indescribable look, partly sad, partly suffering, partly free, partly contemplative that comes from having looked for something beyond. "Beyond the horizon," as Eugene O'Neill wrote. In these faces the human price is poignantly visible. But so is the compensation: these are the faces of real human beings, the face of what, in both New York City and Provincetown, we call a "mensch." This kind of person deliberately chooses Provincetown over a more comfortable or conventional "humanscape." Norma Holt herself is such a person, as is self-evident in her work.

But something that saddens me in looking at the lines in these extraordinary faces and their implied sacrifices in everyday life in order to devote themselves to that which is inexpressible — in fact, precisely to the task of trying to make the inexpressible expressible — is how many who have clearly paid drastic dues in human terms have often in artistic terms risked less.

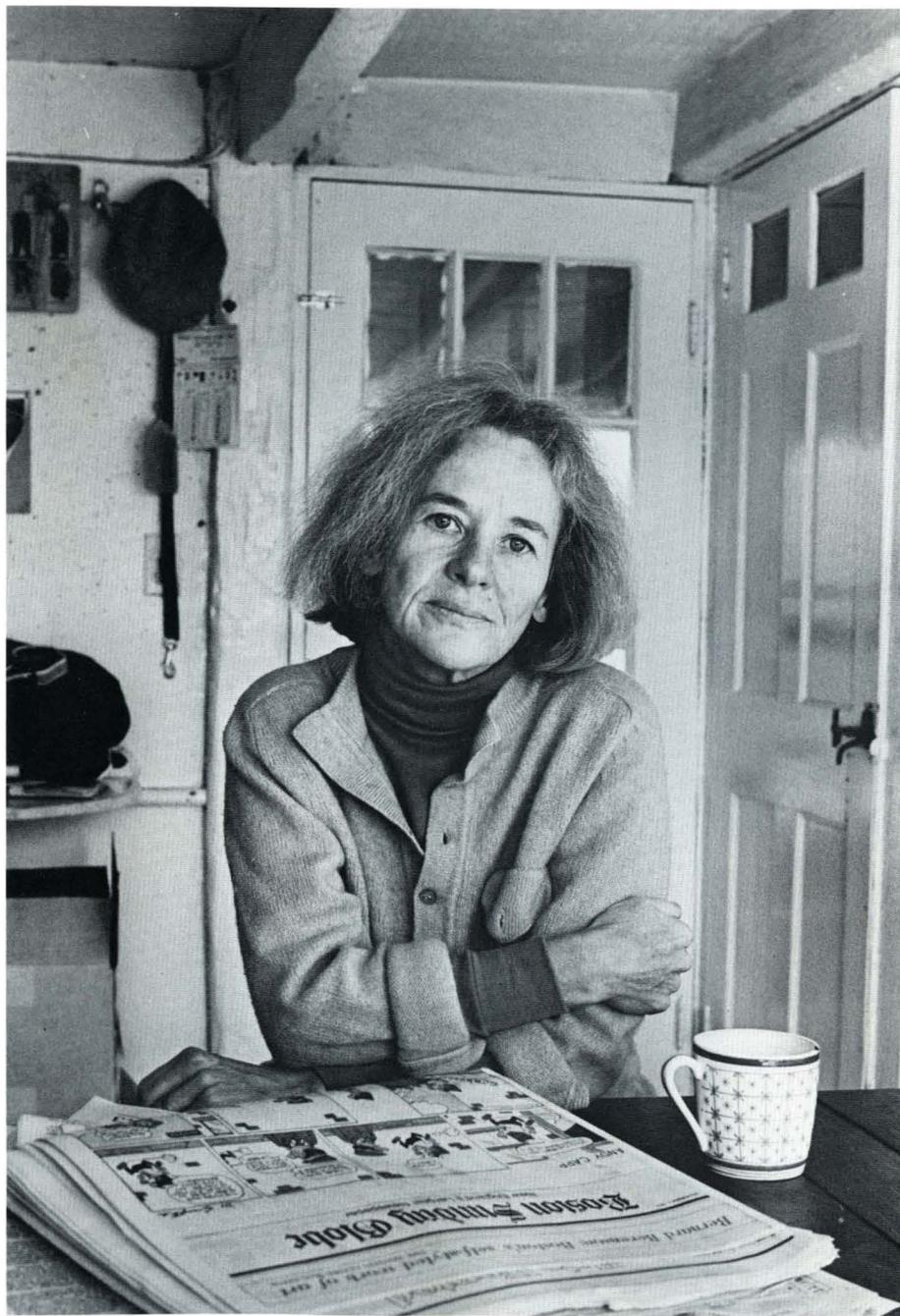
But that is not Norma Holt's own problem. At her best she has succeeded, as Marcel Proust did in his last volume, in holding still a place and a moment in time for our meditation. The place is the half-hidden creative corners of Provincetown. The time is the present, which too soon will become the past, to be recaptured once again in these photographs of art as history, history as art.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Motherwell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "M".

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There have been at least two excellent publications on the outer Cape as an art colony, both exhibition catalogues with texts: Provincetown Painters, 1890s - 1970s, written by Dorothy Gees Seckler, and Cape Cod as an Art Colony, by April Kingsley with Fritz Bultman (both 1977). Little need be added to the documentation therein, that spells out what this far-flung end of a geological fishhook has meant in the lives of numberless artists both ahead of and contentedly somewhat behind the avant garde lines of advance. Both these studies however focus on the artists' work. Photographer Norma Holt's more psycho-historical than art-historical project had its own elusive but interesting goal: to capture the spirit of this end of the Cape in the faces of some of its long-time residents. She was seeking a zeitgeist such as blew over Provincetown back in the time of Hawthorne, that ruffled the collars of Edwin Dickinson and Hopper and Hans Hofmann, that dried the ink on the pages of Eugene O'Neill and Edmund Wilson and still rattles today in the wainscots of Asher and Kunitz, Edwards and Gonzalez, Shahn and Dugan, Bernays and Kaplan, and various Cohens, Franks, Holtons, Liftons, Mailers, Motherwells, Moys, Soyers, Watsons, Webbs, and Kahns — to mention only few. Indeed it's the diversity of the literary and art scenes here — the former numbering scholars, essayists and playwrights as well as poets and story-tellers; the latter, architects, sculptors, conceptualists and painters in every idiom from primitive realism to non-objective abstraction — that puts into shadow all other American summer colonies, Woodstock and the Hamptons, Taos and Carmel included. My mentioning, in the list above, several artists whose female gender is concealed in the nomenclature, brings me to another point: I think there cannot be another community on earth where so many vividly idiosyncratic, talented and mutually encouraging women are to be found, who look skeptically on conventions of either fashion or politics but actively work alongside their housemates — male, female or child — in this naturally liberated environment. No more than pines, beaches, ponds and locust trees can be wrapped in one classifying description, can the nature of this most casual of confraternities (a beautiful word, nonsexist in implication) be summed up in a phrase. All the same, one phrase leaps to my mind when I think of outer Cape Codders en masse. I think then of — bellies and wrinkles and wild hair. I think of people whose brains are poised lightly for flight but who also gravitate to the fruits of the earth and let their enjoyments show. An acceptance of those wrinkles is called for here. It's the salt and the wet grey fog that do it. And the years that go by and we're still coming back.

So we weather along and produce our wares as our gardens do, that are well rooted even if in sand. We feast on clam pie and corn and meld in the great floating beach picnics that are Cape summers to me, where that zeitgeist I spoke of blows up a storm and, at the evening's end, the tide rolls up and puts out the pitfires. Bellies, wrinkles and flying hair, here, as Norma Holt so graphically shows us, is an eccentocracy of friends who live on the outer reaches of their lives.

Eleanor Munnis

I first came to Provincetown in 1927. . .

I got off at the railroad station and began to walk to the home of my friends in the East End. On Commercial Street, near the Art Association, I passed two men; as I did, I heard one of them say, "Provincetown ain't what it used to be." These were the first words I heard in Provincetown.

I have told this story often. It is still apposite. Several times a year, I hear people say it. Unlike other statements, it is always true. The town is always changing. It is never what it used to be.

When I look back, I see different houses; I see different people - who wear different clothes. What I see today is an item in a series. It is never quite the same; it is never quite distinct from what has been before it. The sum of all the scenes, sum of these changes, is Provincetown itself.

Water in the bay . . . moving east and west, in, out, up, down, lifting, lowering the boats, taking different colors in the different light, borrowing reflections from the different clouds, placid, nervous, taking a texture from the different winds, butting at the seawalls, sagging back across the flats . . . Any time we look, we see a different picture. Yet, at any moment, our mind contains all of the other moments, all the other pictures. In all of its modulations, it is the same old place.

Here, in the Association, we have an exhibition: Norma Holt's portraits of people who were active in our art world in the '70s. Beyond their faces, I see the way they looked many years before. Beyond their figures, I see Hawthorne, Hofmann, all of the people who were a part of the art community. The people in these portraits are so clearly (gloriously) themselves; yet they contain within them the Provincetown that always was and that (God willing) it will always be.

Nathan Halper





A man with a leaf in his head
 with an undisciplined gull
 dropping a piece-corn on the rocks
 to break it open.
 Repent. Repent.

He is an inlander
 who loves the margins of the sea,
 and everywhere he goes he carries
 a bag of earth on his back.
 Why is he down in the tide marsh?
 Why is he gathering salt hay
 in brackish puddles crammed to his chin?

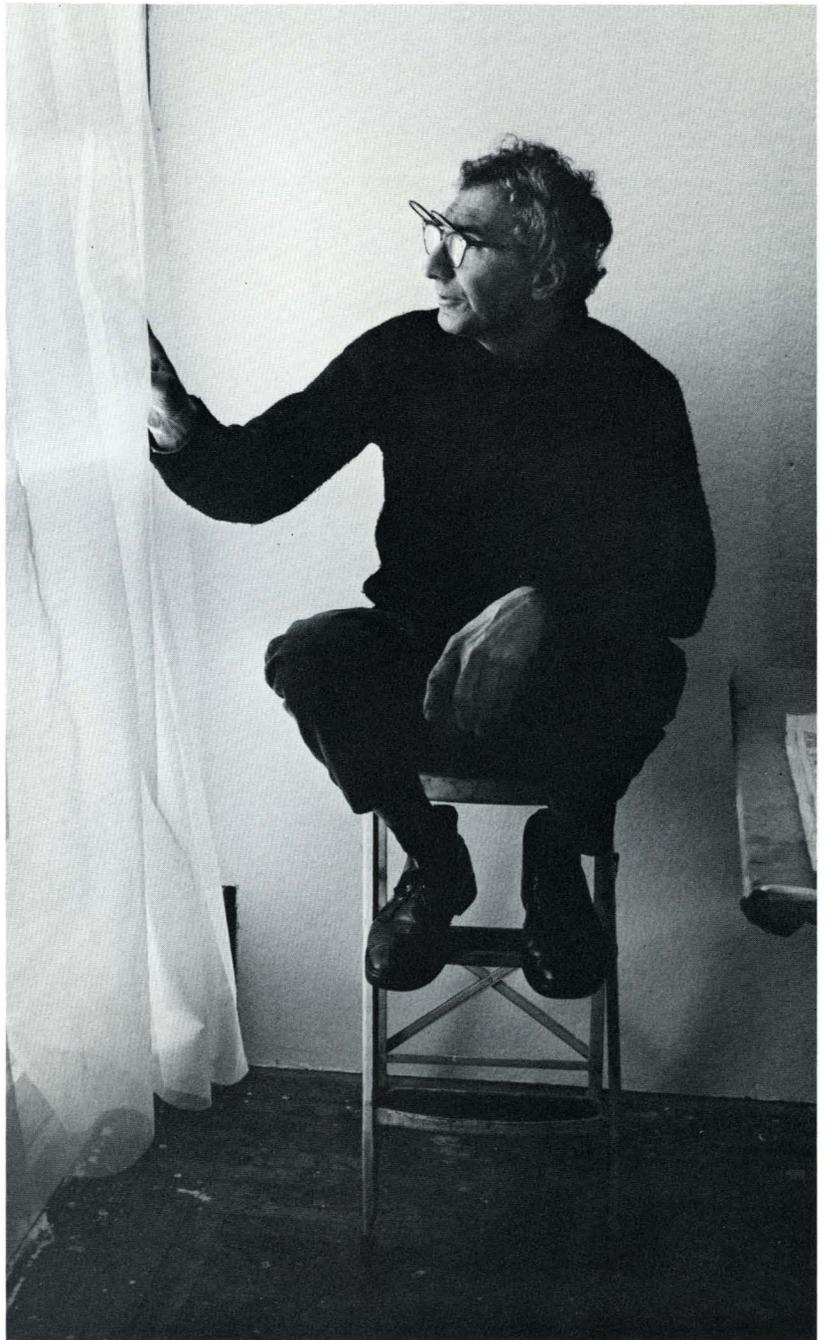
"It is a blue and northern air,"
 he says, as if the shiftings of the sky
 had taught him how to say.
 Birthdays for him are when he wakes
 and falls into the news of weather.
 "Try! Try!" clicks the beetle in his wrist,
 his heart is an educated swamp,
 and he is mindful of his garden,
 which prepares to die.

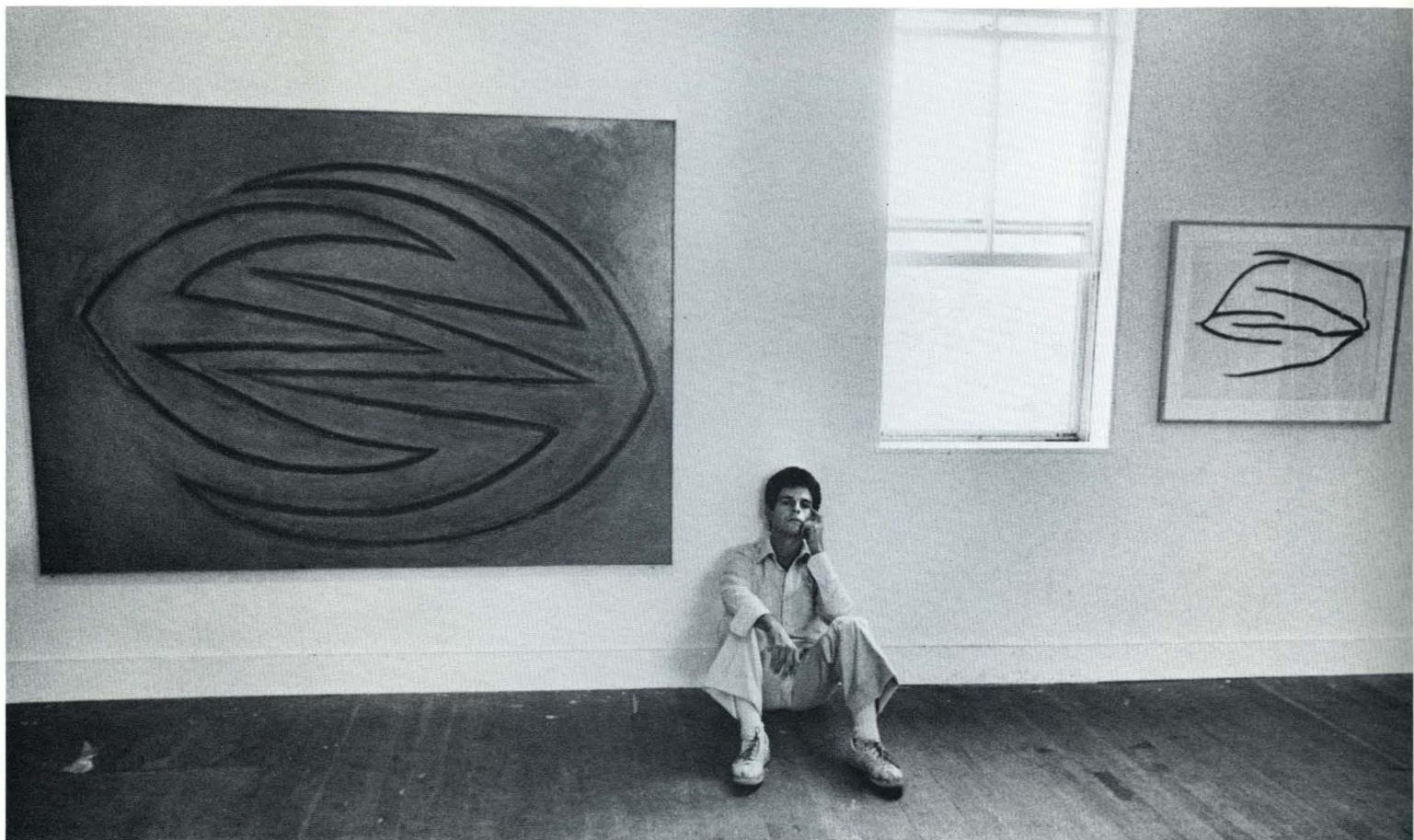
— "The Mule" — Stanley Kunitz
 April 19, 1960













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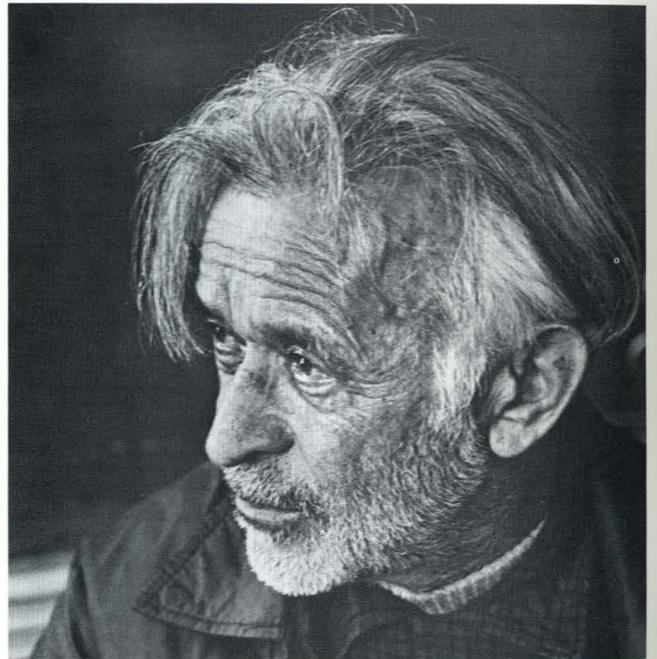
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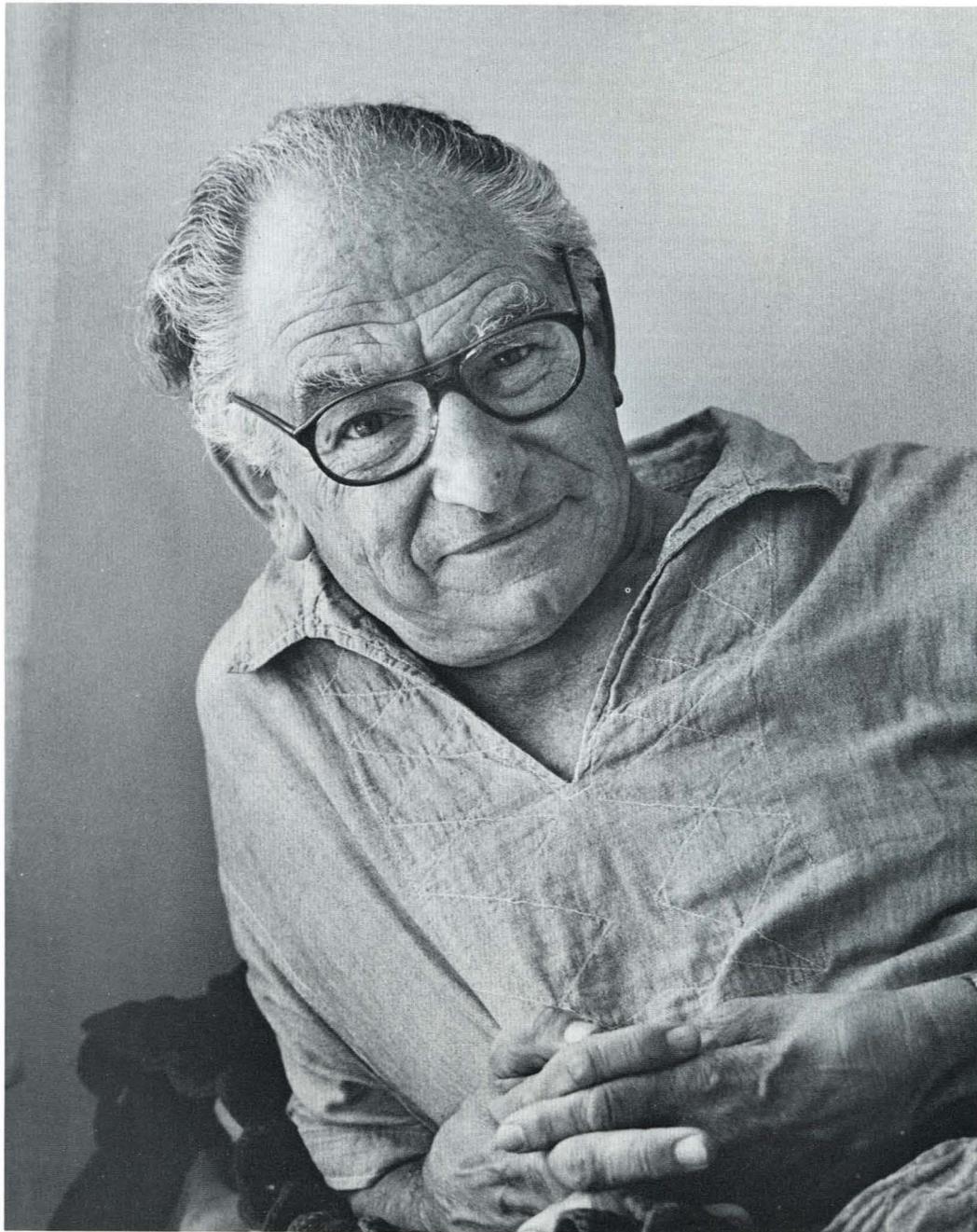
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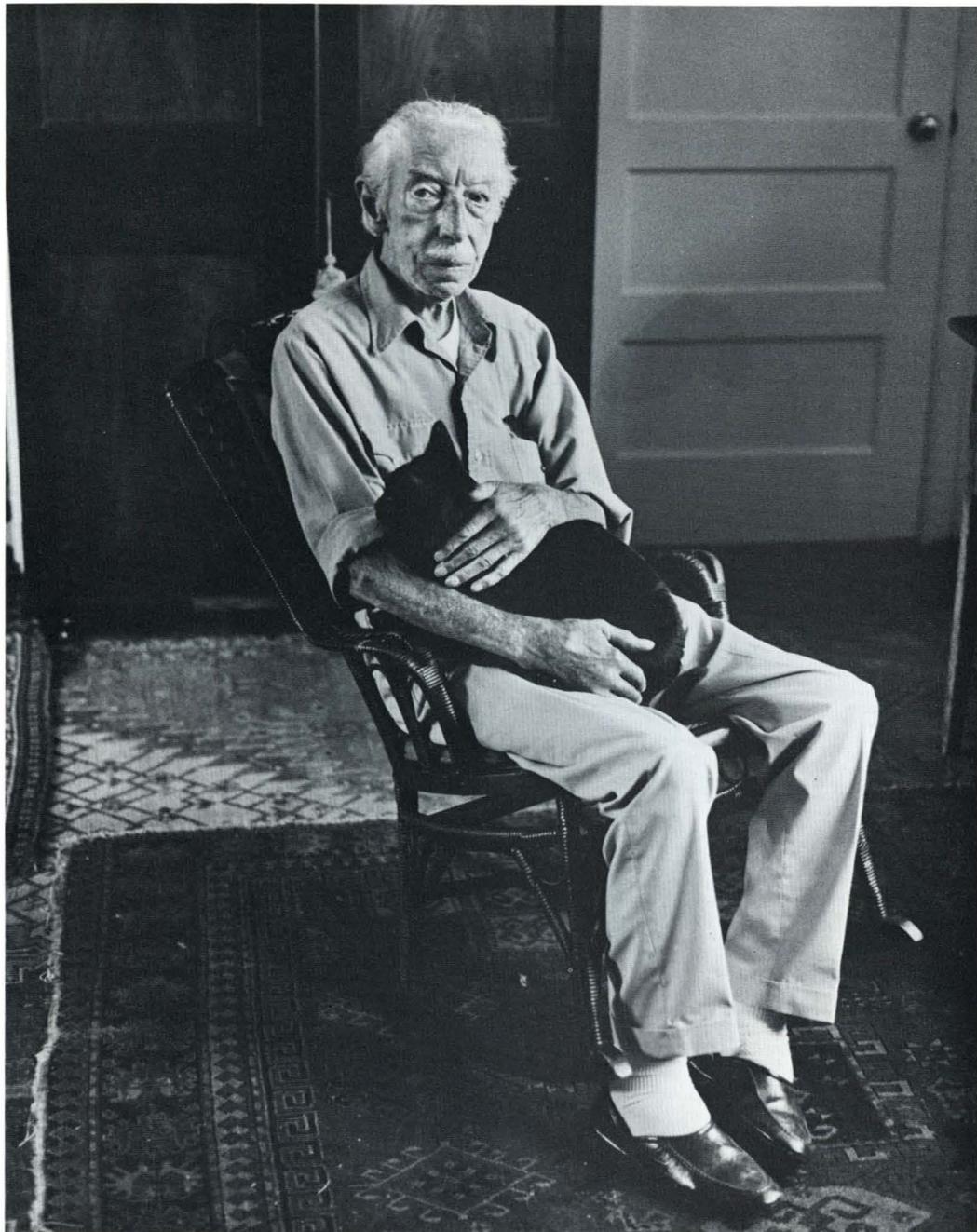


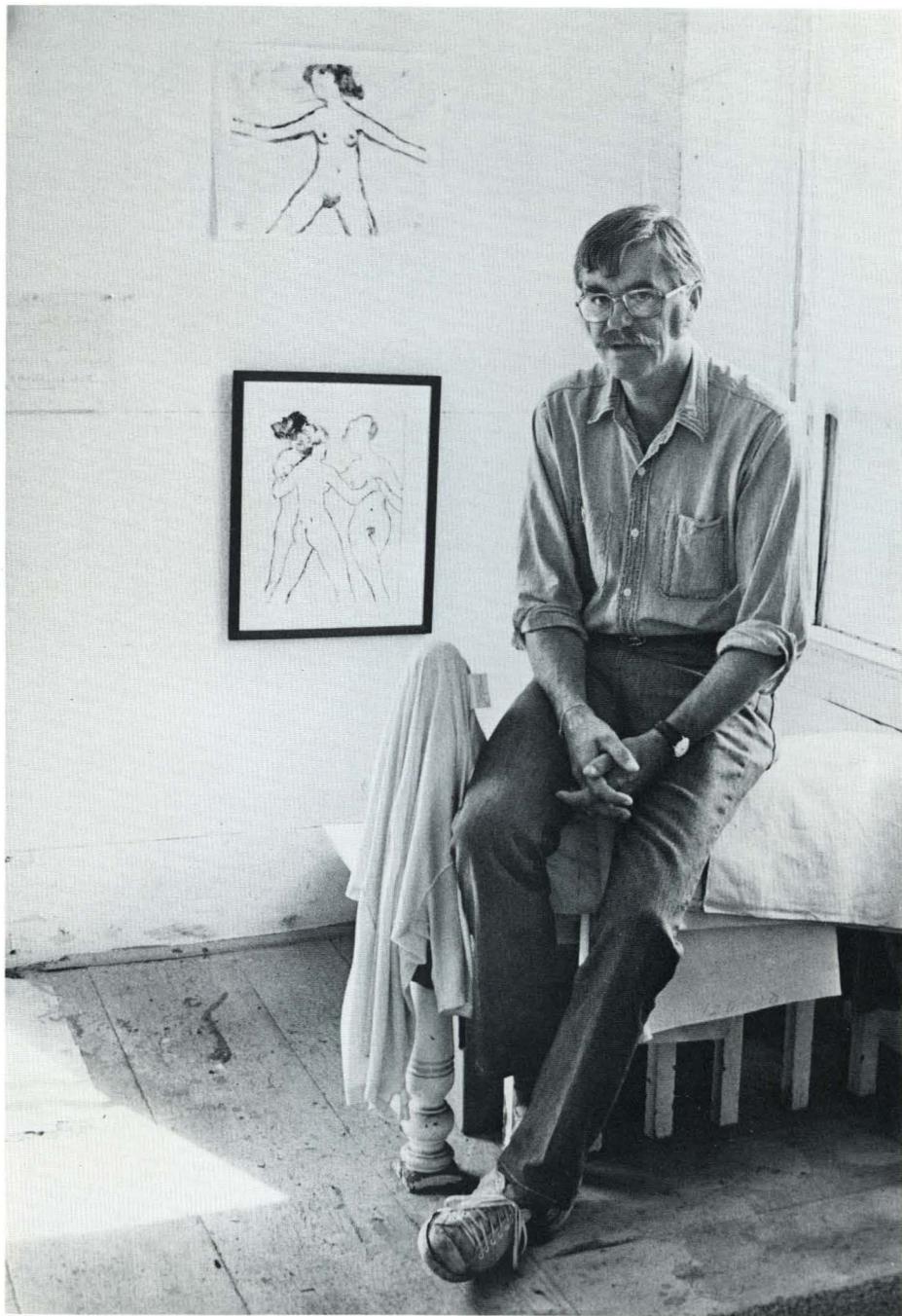
109 Roger Skillings

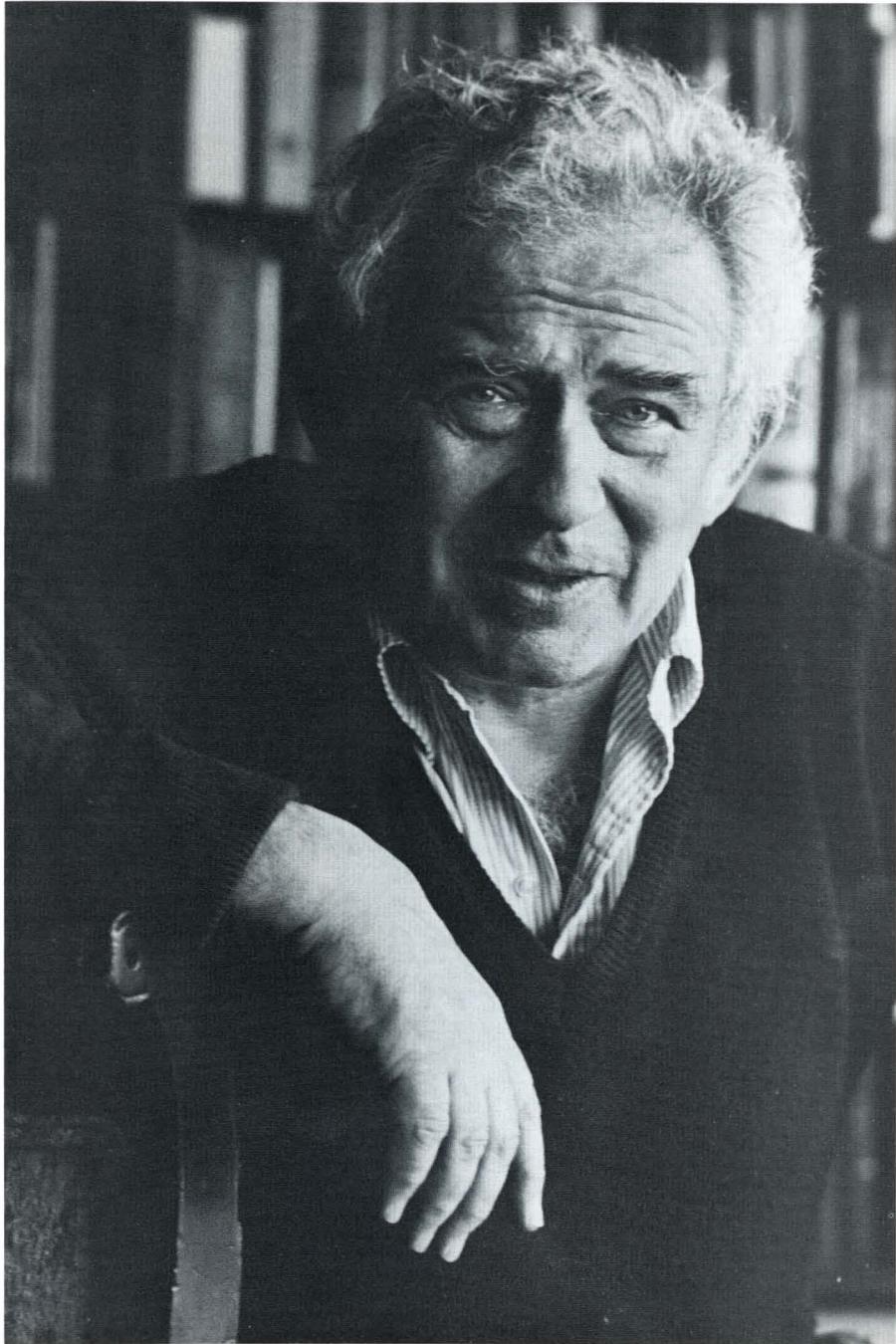
15 Charles Cohen (Karlis)









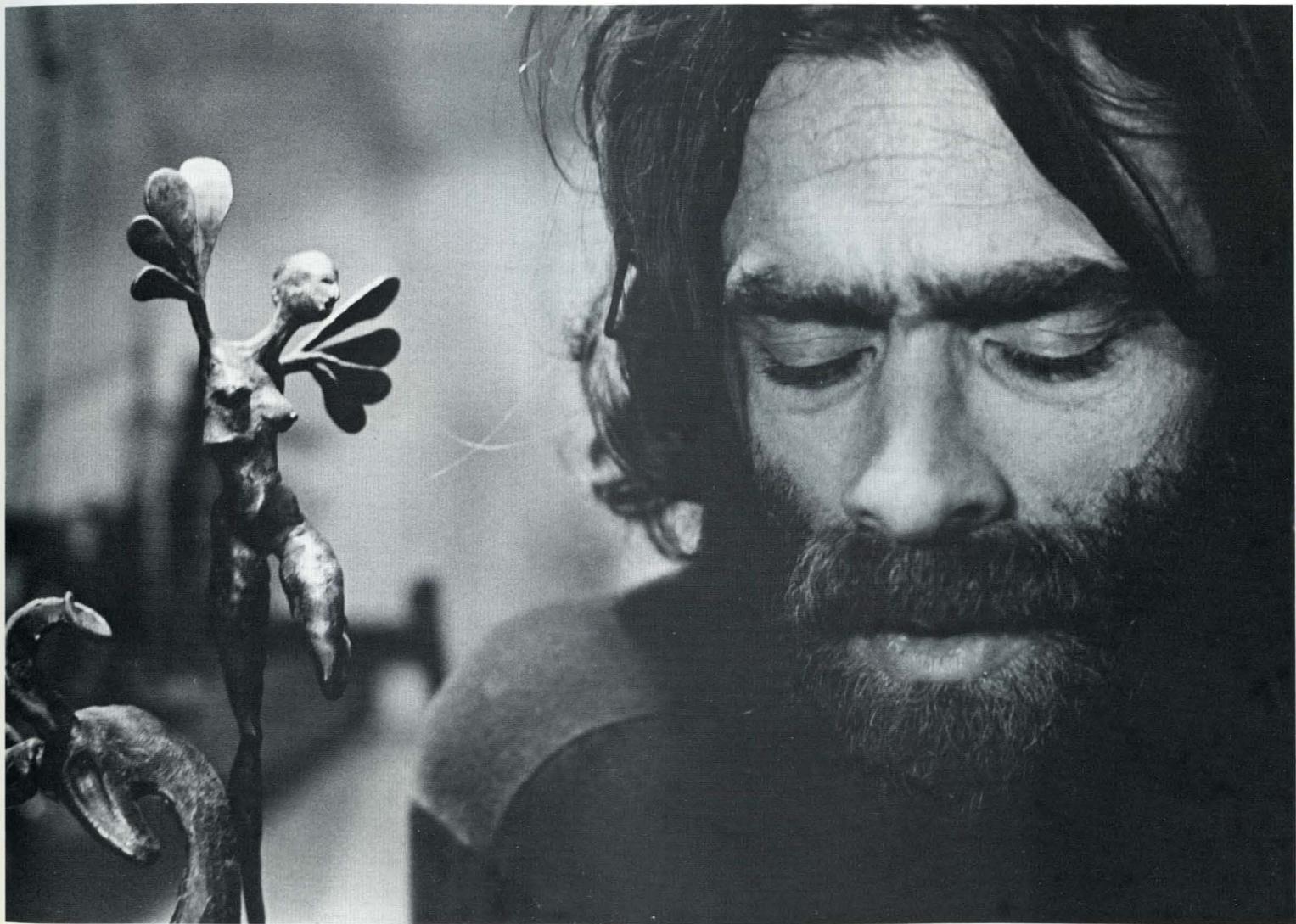










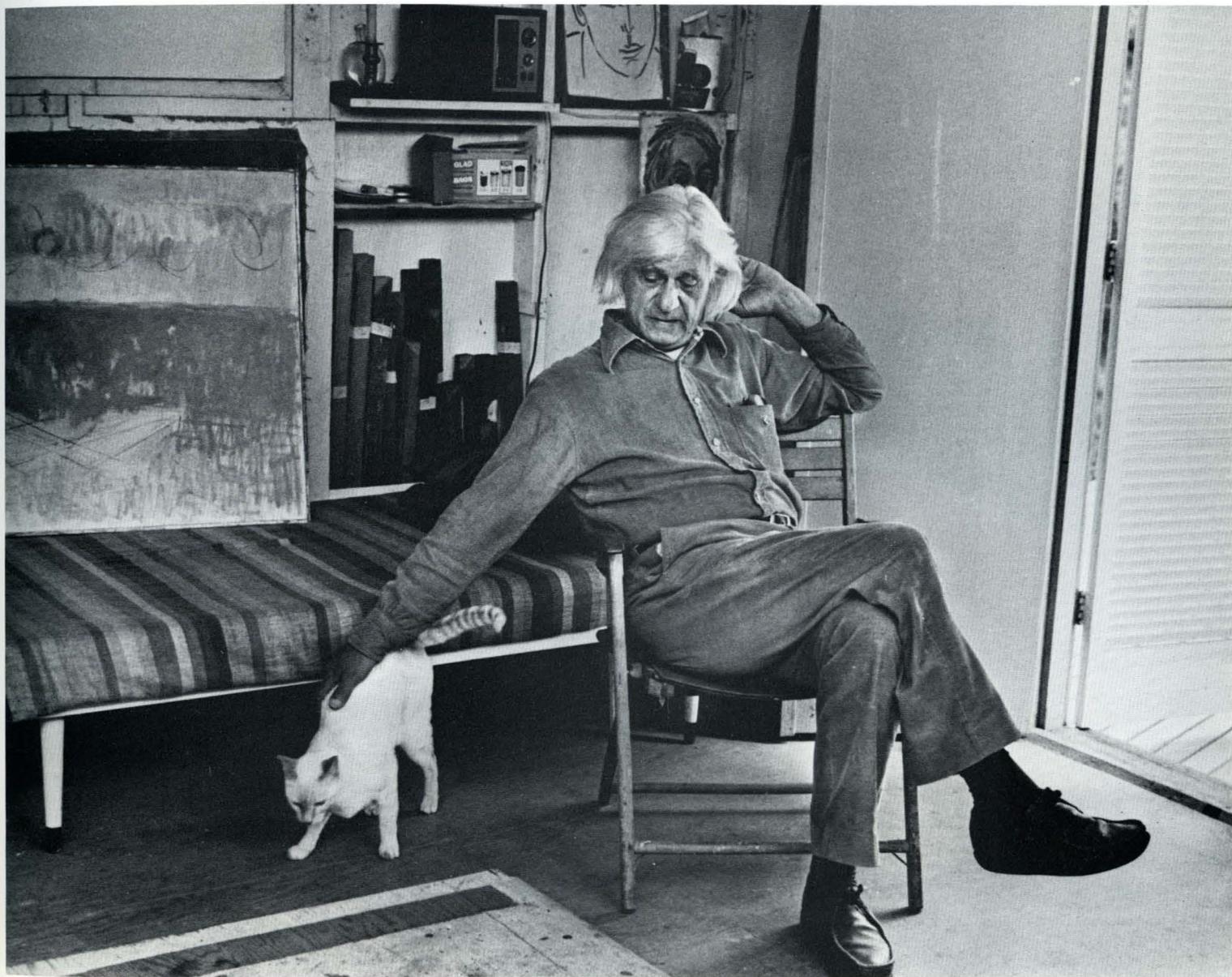




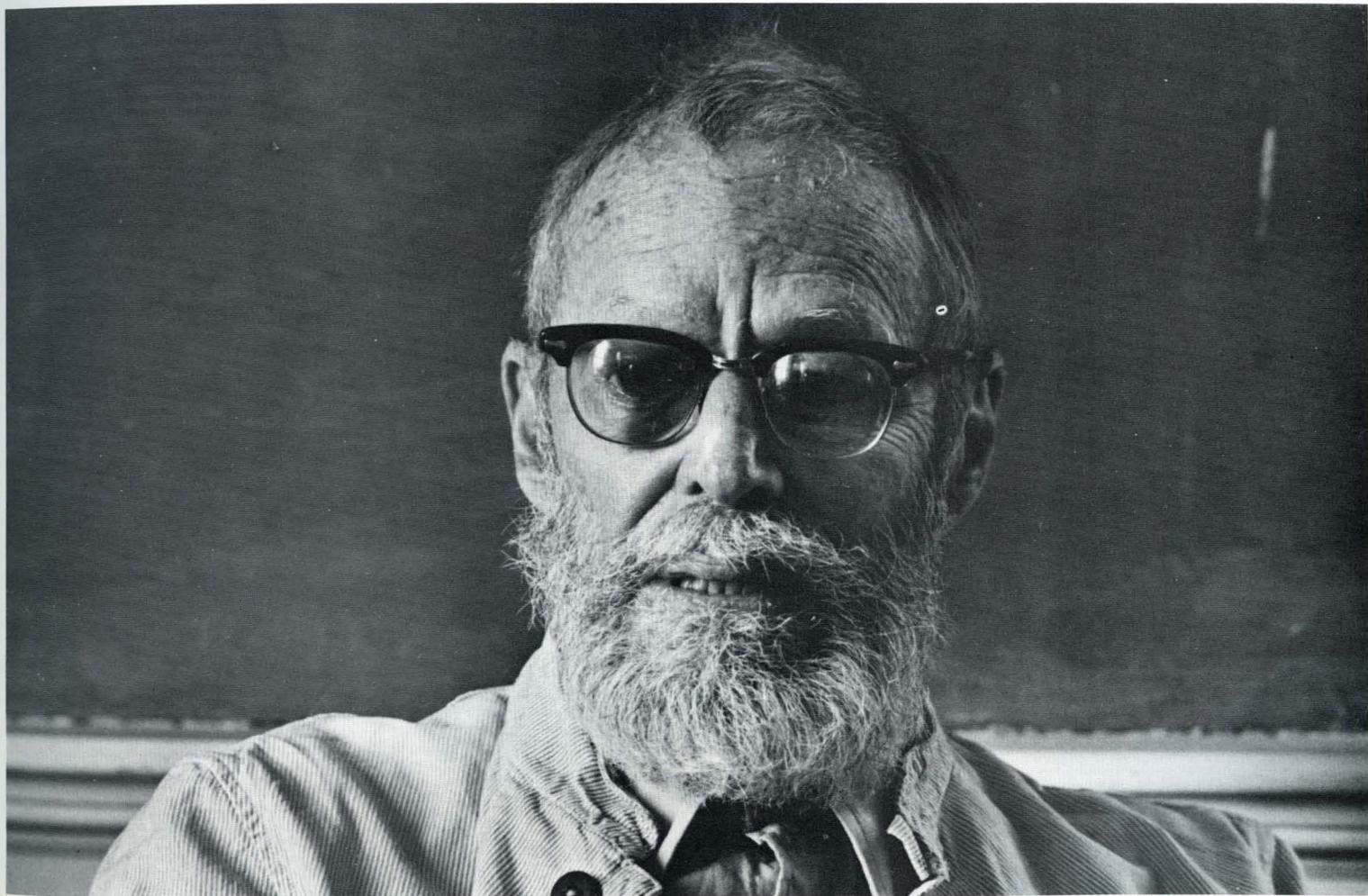
44 Mary Hackett



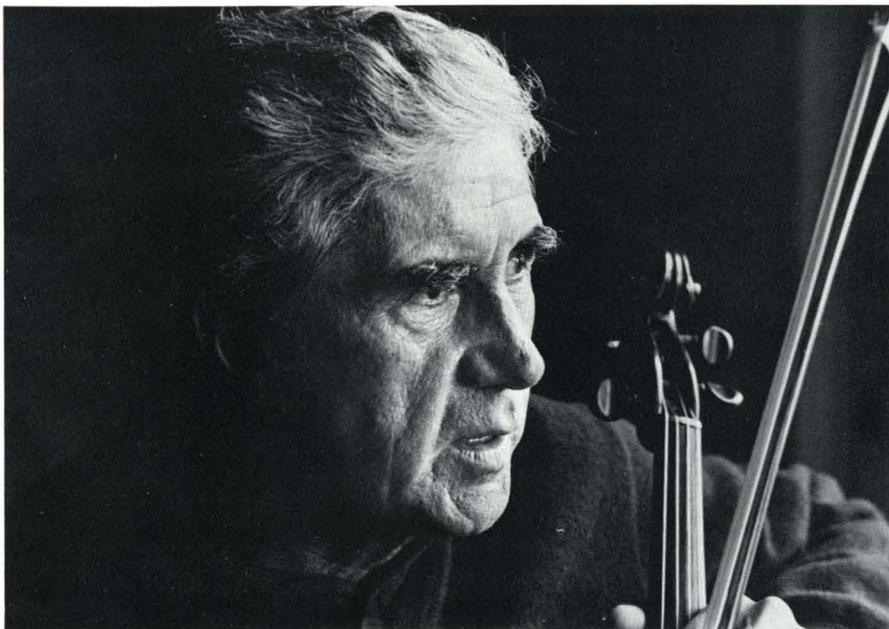
112 Anthony Souza







21 Edwin Dickinson



47 Joe Hawthorne

32 John Frank







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Norma Holt has been known for years as a sensitive photographer of children, and some of her photographs have been used to illustrate children's books. But for the last two years she has been involved in a project to photograph the artists, writers and musicians who come to Provincetown every summer, as well as those who live there all year round.

This exhibition at the Provincetown Art Association is the culmination of her work on this project. I must say how moved I was by the very beautiful portrait of the late Joe Kaplan and by the portrait of an aging person in the perceptive print of the pianist Paula Hondius, which reveals the courage and the patience for which she is known.

I must mention several other portraits: the clear, strong portrait of Jack Tworkov in his studio; the striking one of Mervin Jules and the handsome photograph of the late Richard Florsheim.

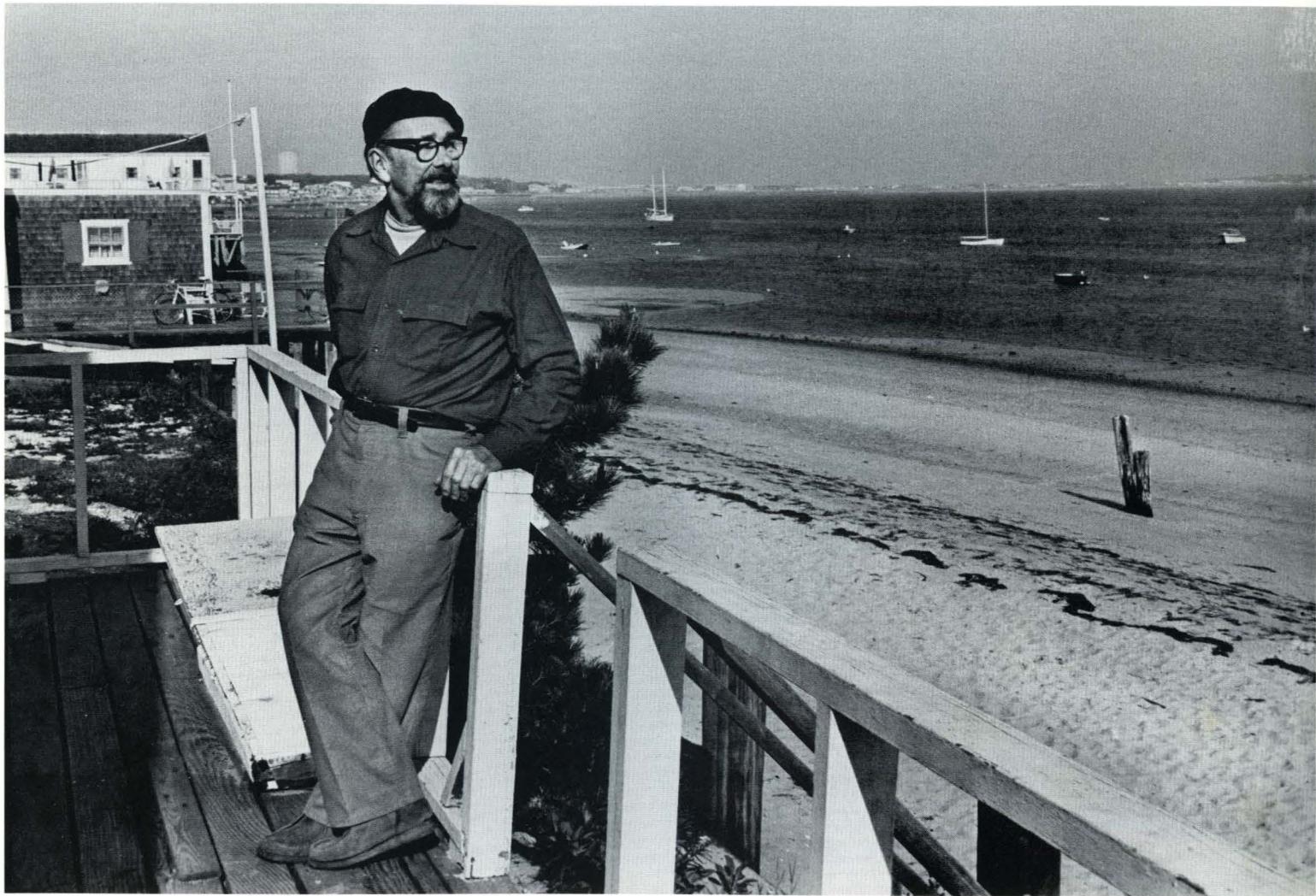
This fine exhibition should establish Norma Holt's reputation as the photographer of Provincetown personalities.

Raphael
Soyer





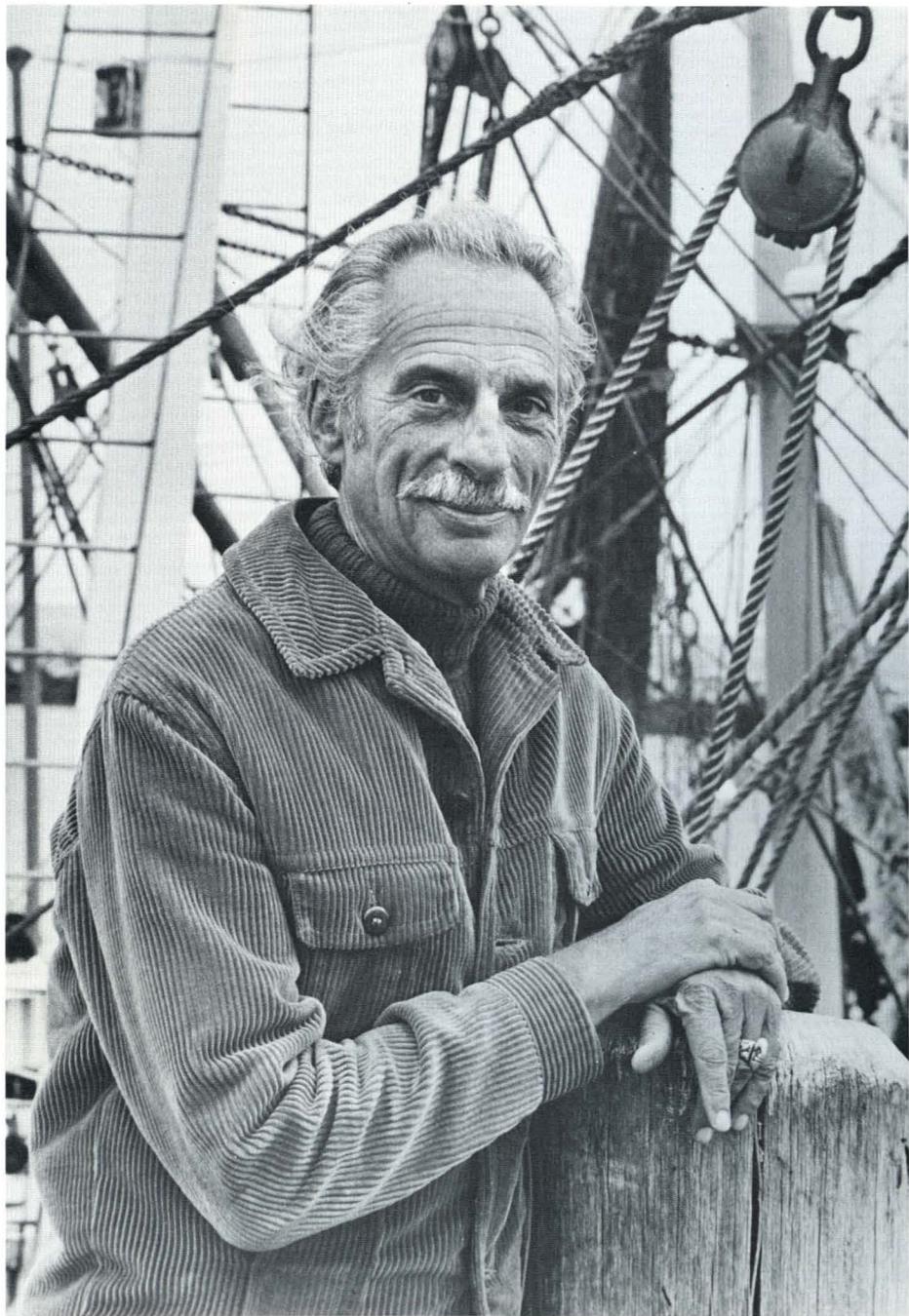


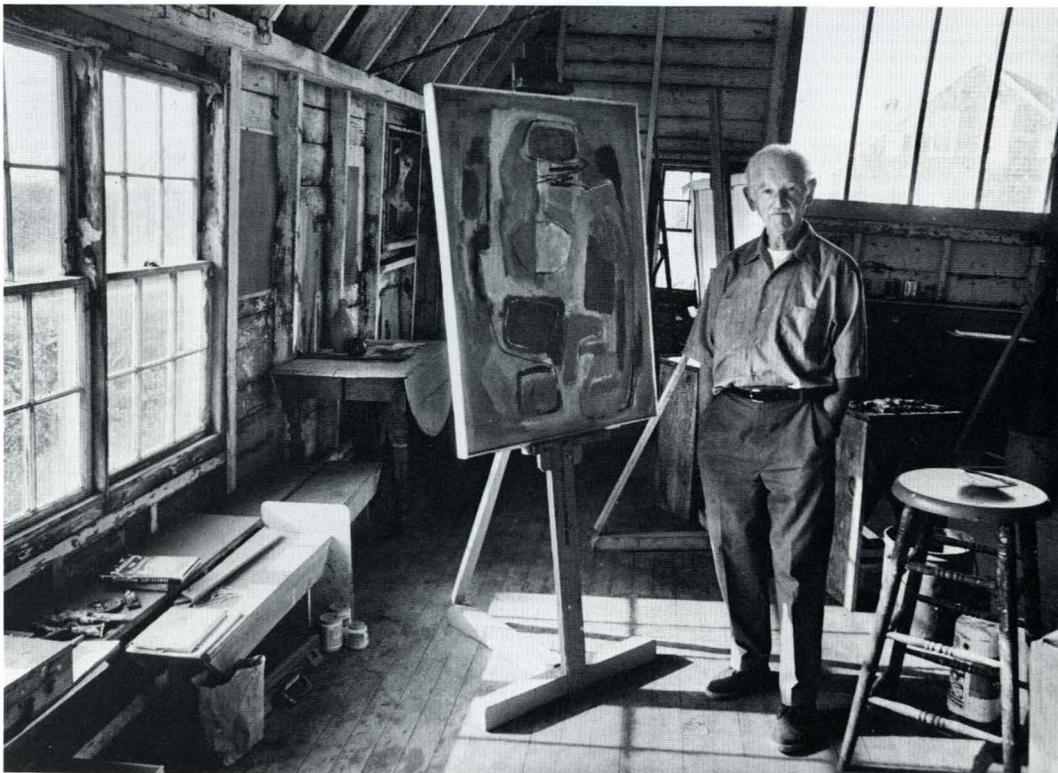
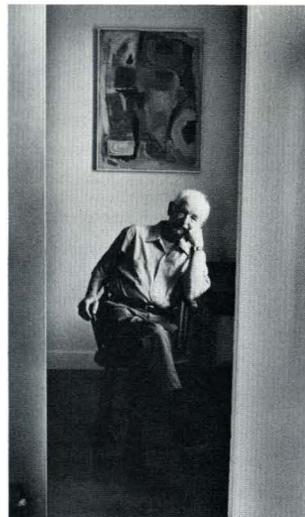
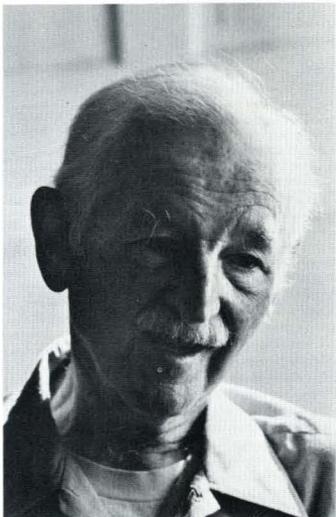


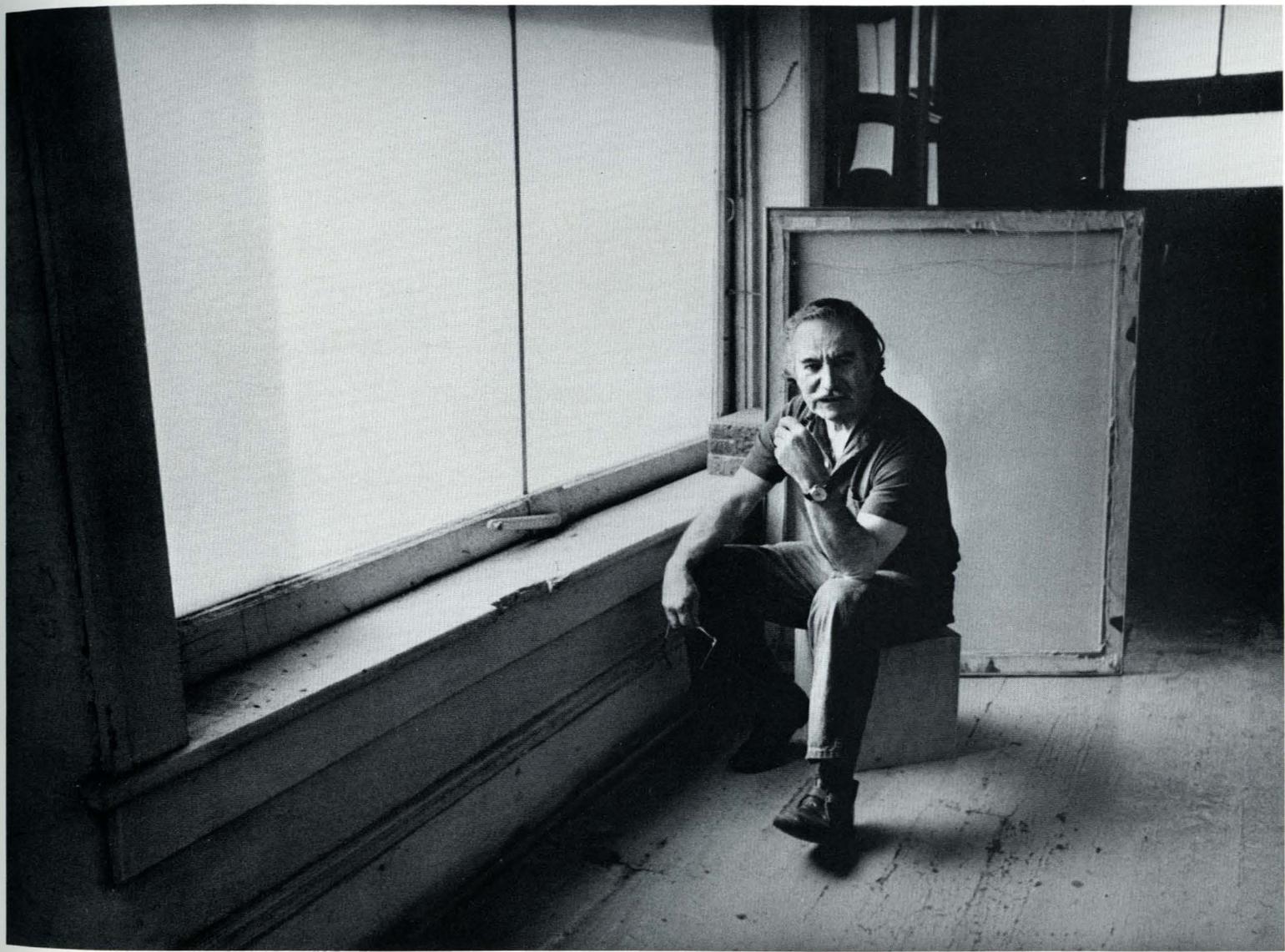


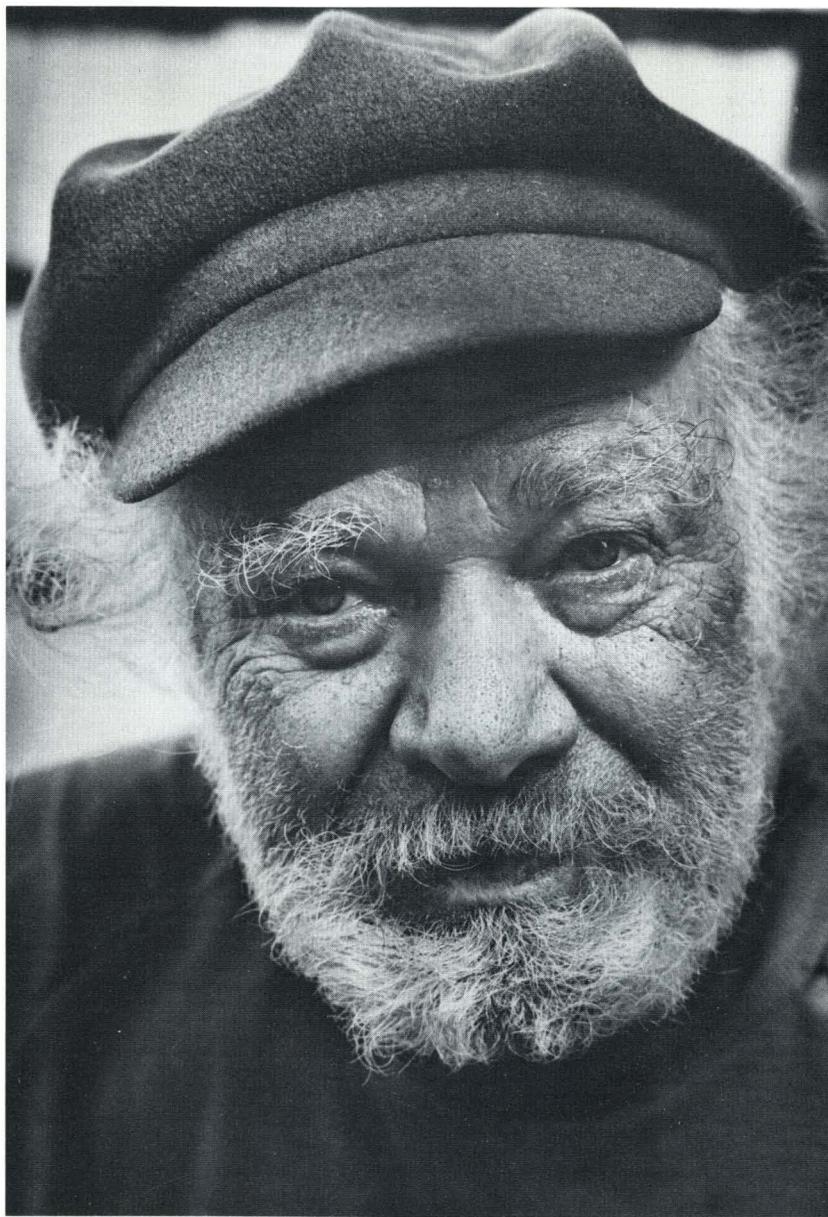
1 Elise Asher





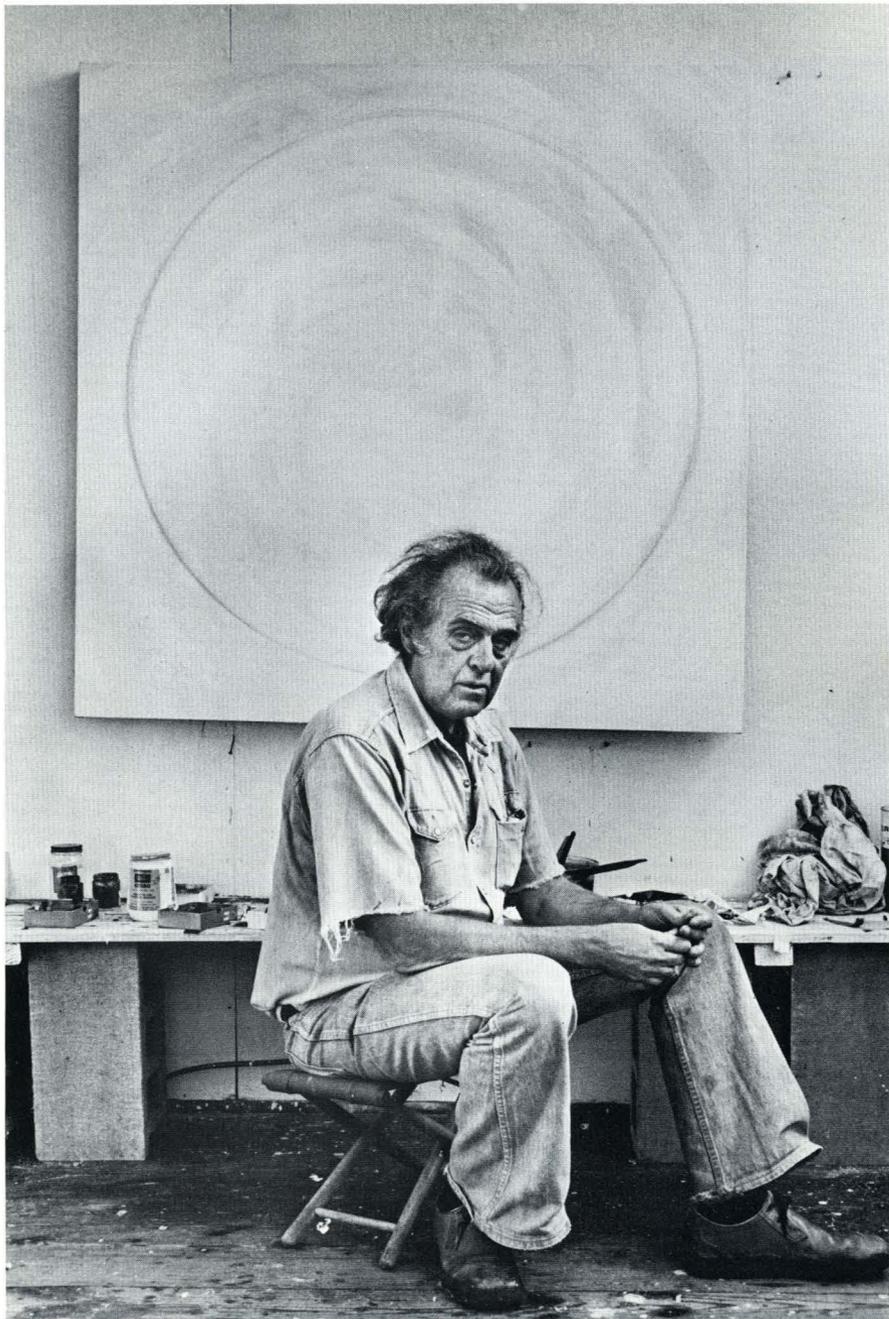






58 Joe Kaplan



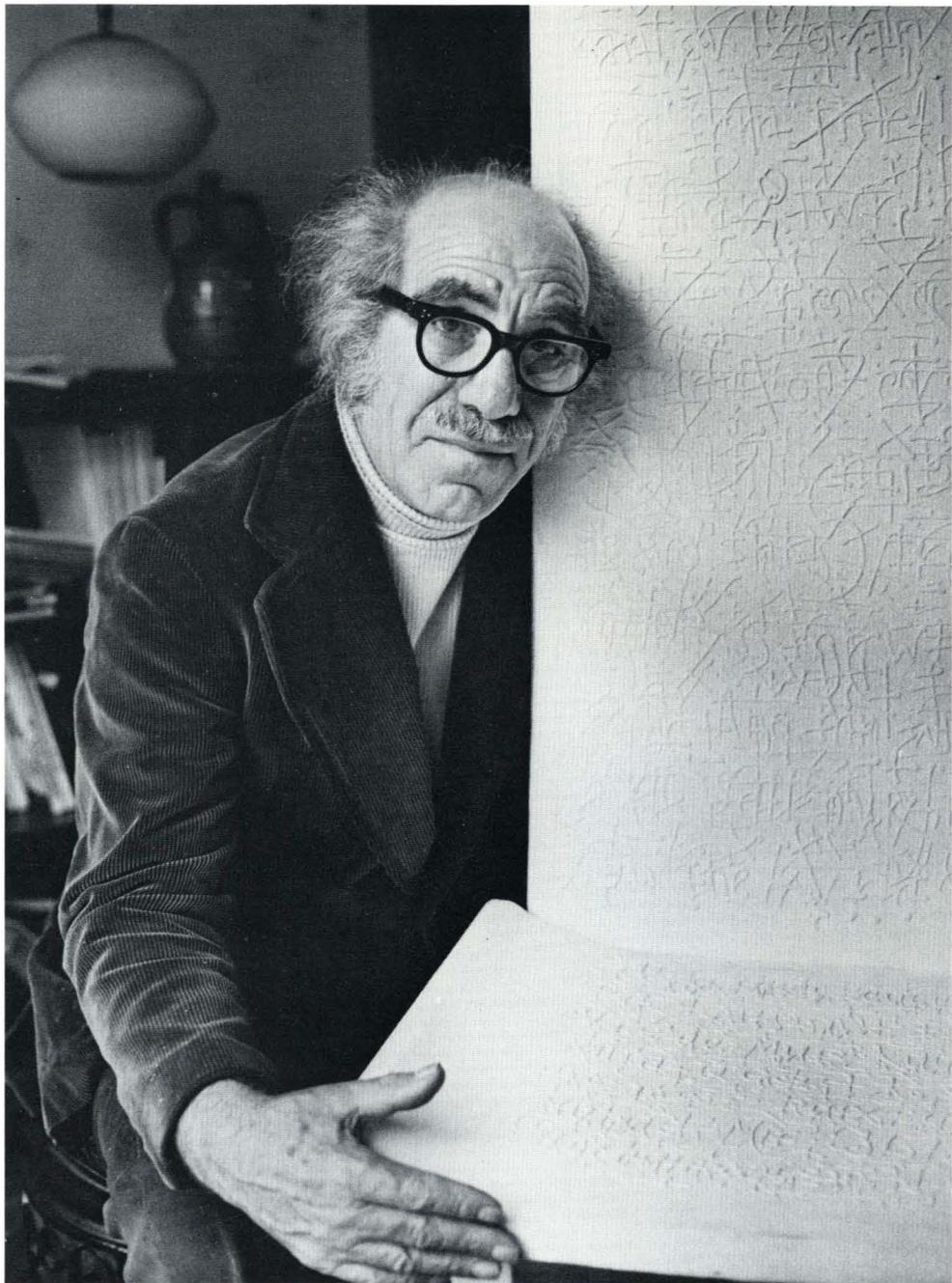


128 Ione Walker

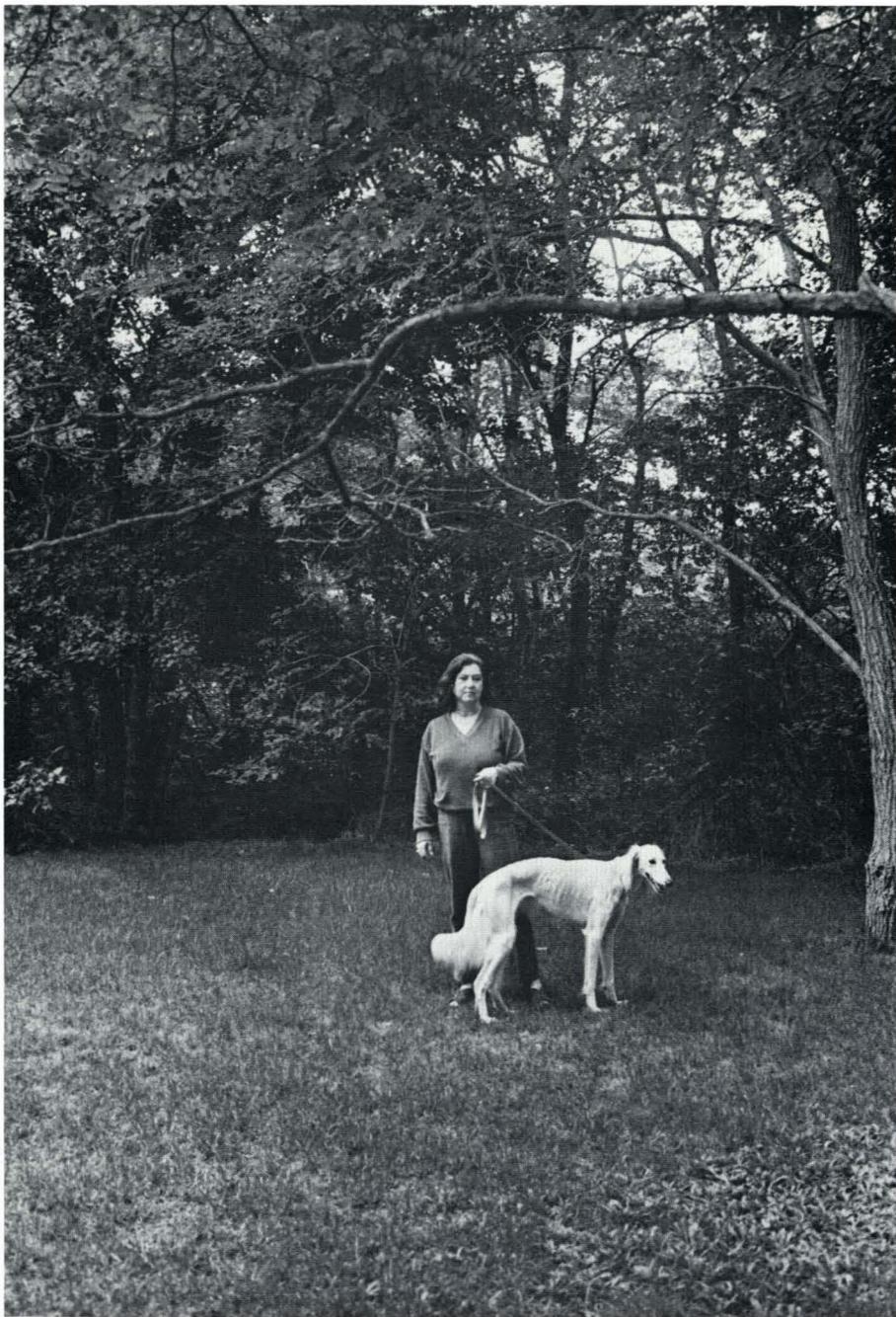


82 Jeannie Motherwell

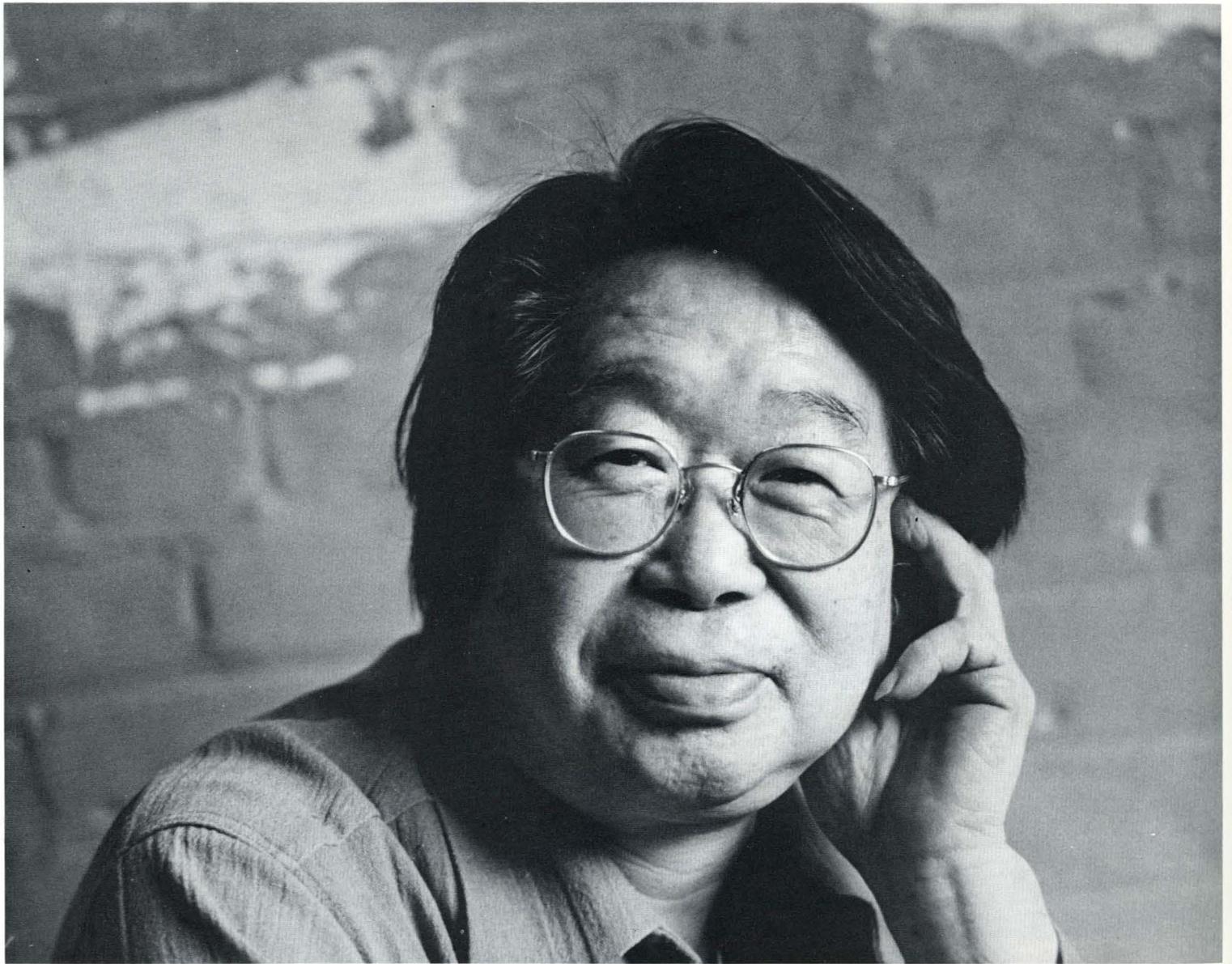


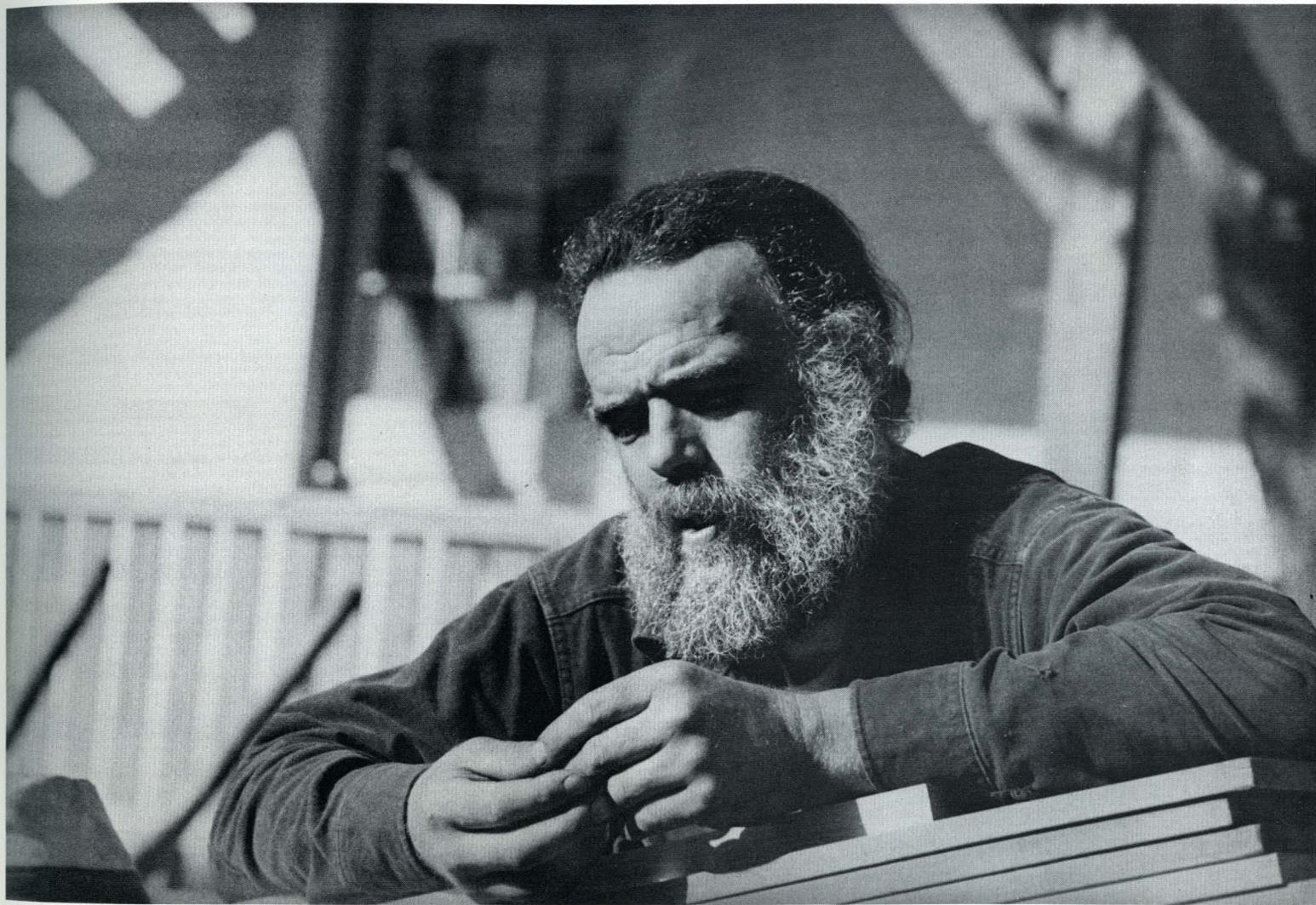


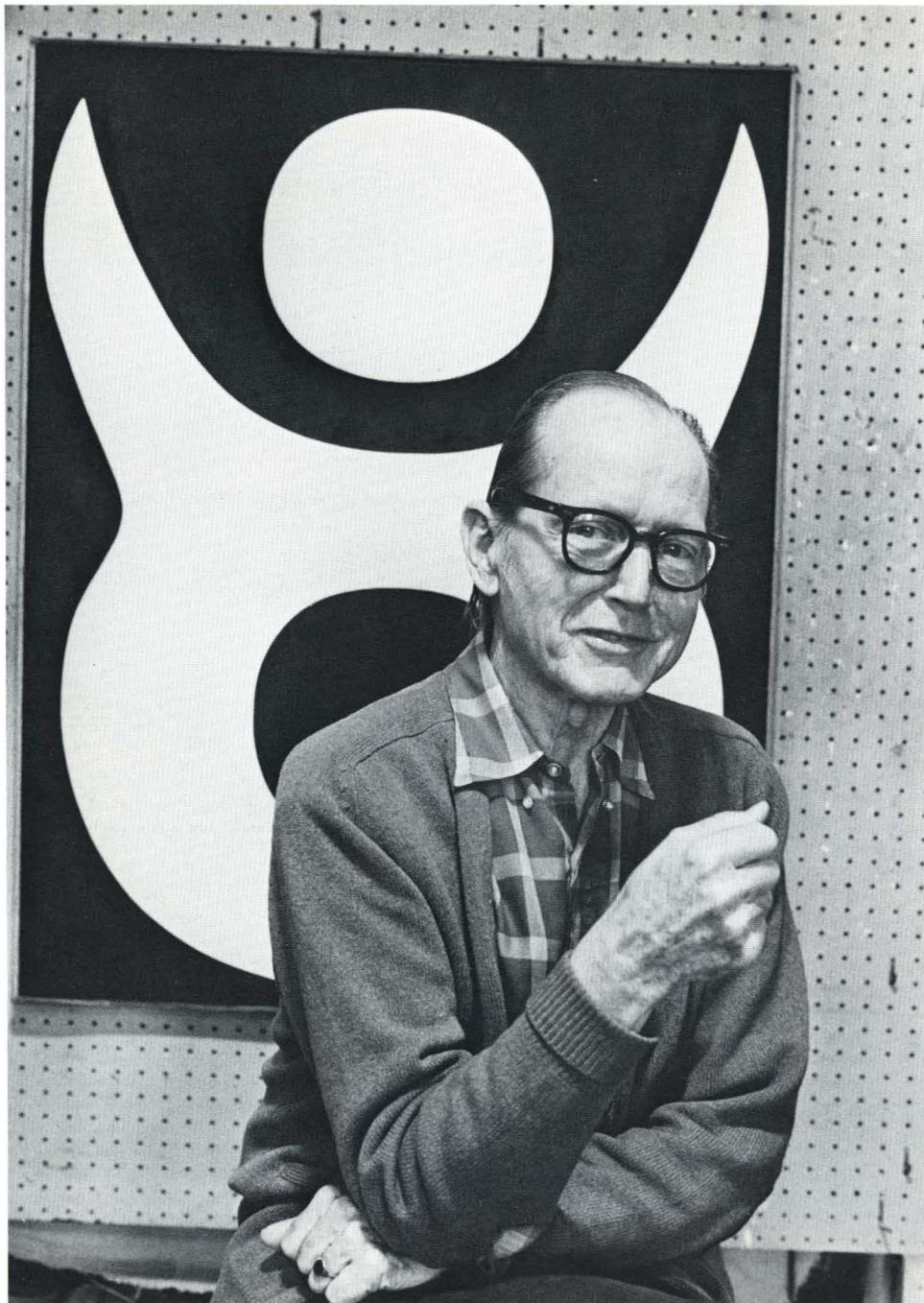
































129 Feroi Warthen







93 Paul Resika

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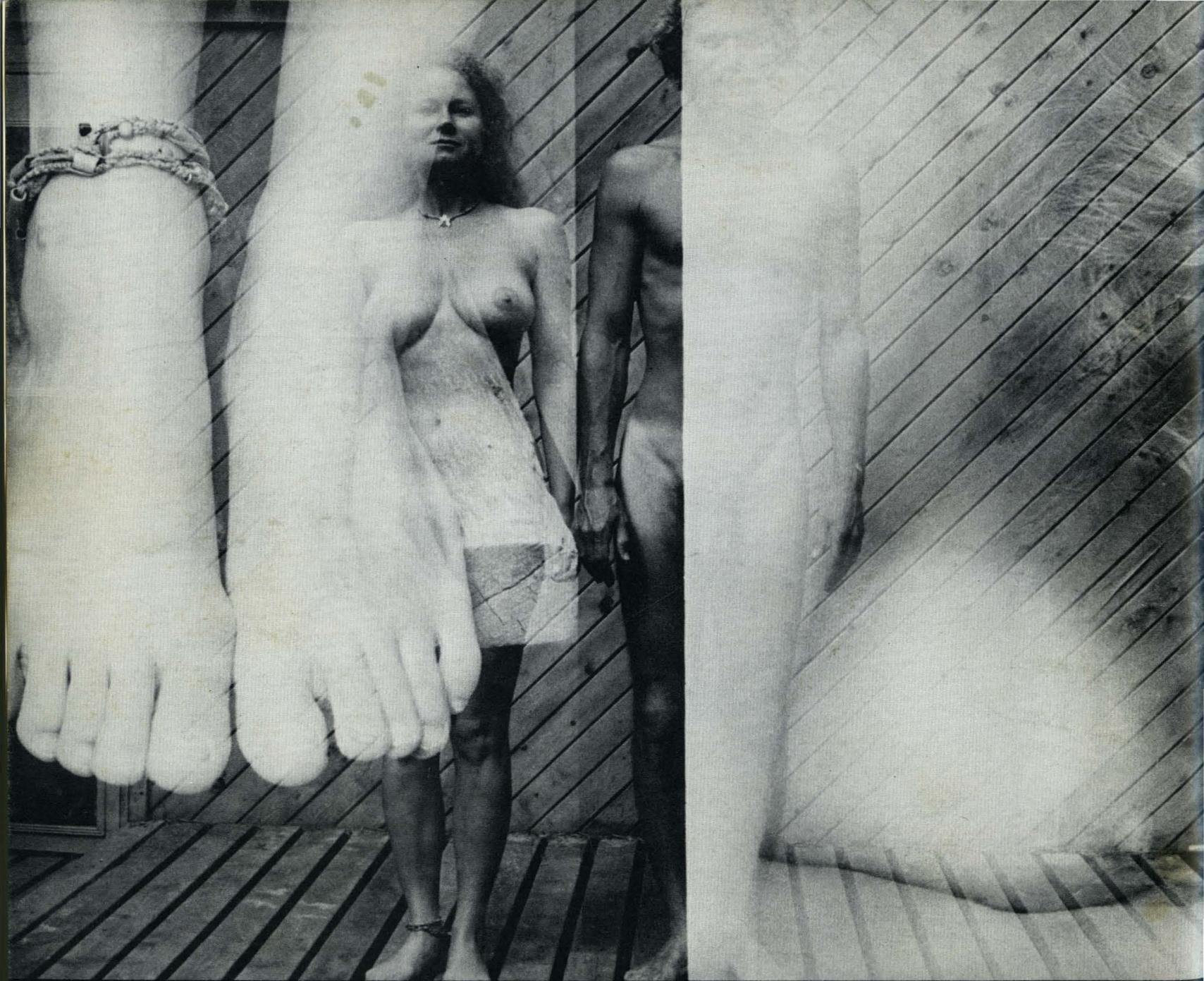
To George Martin,
Artistic Photographers,
for his beautiful prints . . .

To Steve Fitzgerald, Hell's Kitchen
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To the staff at the Art
Association for their help . . .

To Sabine Press for this catalog

(C) Color Slide



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