

Michael Rothschild: Sculptor in Residence

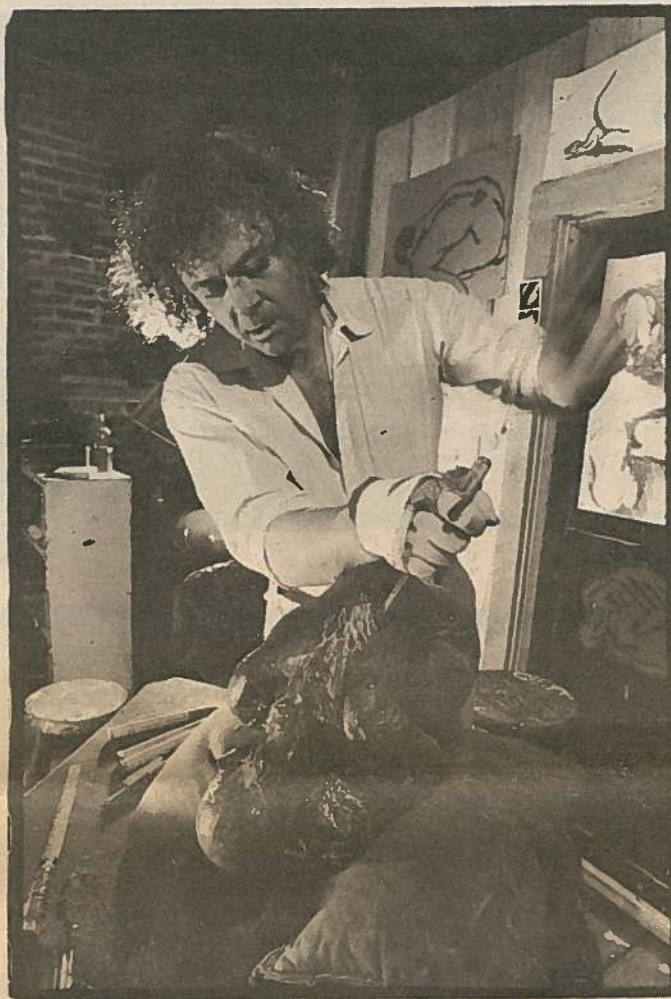
THOSE GIVEN to pondering the transmigration of souls pause when confronted with certain mirror images cast by the late sculptor, William Zorach, of Robinhood, Maine, and Michael Rothschild, sculptor-squire of a 200-year-old farm alongside a dirt road that climbs Tory Hill a few miles northwest of Strong. Looking west toward the Mahoosuc Mountains from Michael's large vegetable garden across that dirt road from the clapboarded farm house, visitors can see nothing but western Maine's unfolding, timbered hills rolling toward the New Hampshire border.

There is the same aura of isolation in a photograph of Zorach taken in his 39th year on the stone steps of his Robinhood farm. Wearing work boots, heavy wool pants and denim shirt, the sculptor is more farmer than artist, even though the intense eyes and rugged frame illustrate Zorach's first-person record of his encounters with the creative process.

Now in his 39th year, wearing work boots, soiled farm jeans and sweat-dark shirt, Michael Rothschild is all farmer as he tends a pen of high-strung turkeys fluttering at their foolish fears. Yet the rooms of his farm house are filled with his creations: carved, chiseled and cut from wood and stone and pounded from metal — so many sculptures they occupy more space than the surprising number of people and creatures who share the same roof.

Zorach's father emigrated to Maine from Russia in 1890 when the sculptor was three. Rothschild's grandfather had emigrated from Russia a few years earlier. His son, Michael's father, Norman, moved from New York City to Bangor in 1930, married Violet Capellero and was proprietor of Burdell's Clothing Store until his death at 50, the year he promised he would retire and devote his time to making woodcuts.

When he married, William Zorach moved to a farm because he found nutrients for his work in the forms of nature that surrounded him and his family. Twenty years ago, Michael Rothschild wed Catharine O'Reilly, a girl he first met at a drive-in



Michael Rothschild working on a sculpture of serpentine stone.

movie in Winslow, and bought the old farm on Tory Hill because he treasured its isolation and the intricate histories of the Yankee families who had worked the stony land since Benedict Arnold forced his starving men and sullen boats over the Dead

River boulders that still show their pale shoulders a few miles east of Strong.

When William Zorach died in his eighties, his reputation as a sculptor had been nationally and internationally established, even though he had seldom left Maine during his long and productive career. Yet, in his 39th year, the year the photograph was taken, he wondered if he would ever become a success at any endeavor. "I could only keep working," he wrote, "and hope I could become a fine artist and make something of my life."

This is where the parallels part, for in his 39th year, Michael Rothschild needs few reassurances about his abilities or the worth of what he has made of his creative life.

But it is his writing that has brought Rothschild his acceptance and critical acclaim — his writing, not his sculpture. Yet it is his sculpture that crowds the farm house rooms where birch burls brace to turn back all but the strongest hands holding the hardest, sharpest steel; where six-foot slabs of lead press heavy on old floors, waiting to be pounded into flowing forms that can never reveal the violence of their transformation.

How, why does a writer leave the relative equilibrium of words and paper for the turbulence of physical struggle with nature's most obdurate matter in an effort to grace its immobile forms with the illusion of animation?

And there is no doubt that Michael Rothschild is a writer. Publication, critical acclaim, and the demand for more work: these are the criteria by which a writer is judged, and Rothschild the author surpasses each standard. His tales of rural Maine, the real and the mythic, spun with one eye on nature and another on Man and his history, have won literary awards, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, reviewers' raves, and persuasions from his publishers to produce more, more quickly.

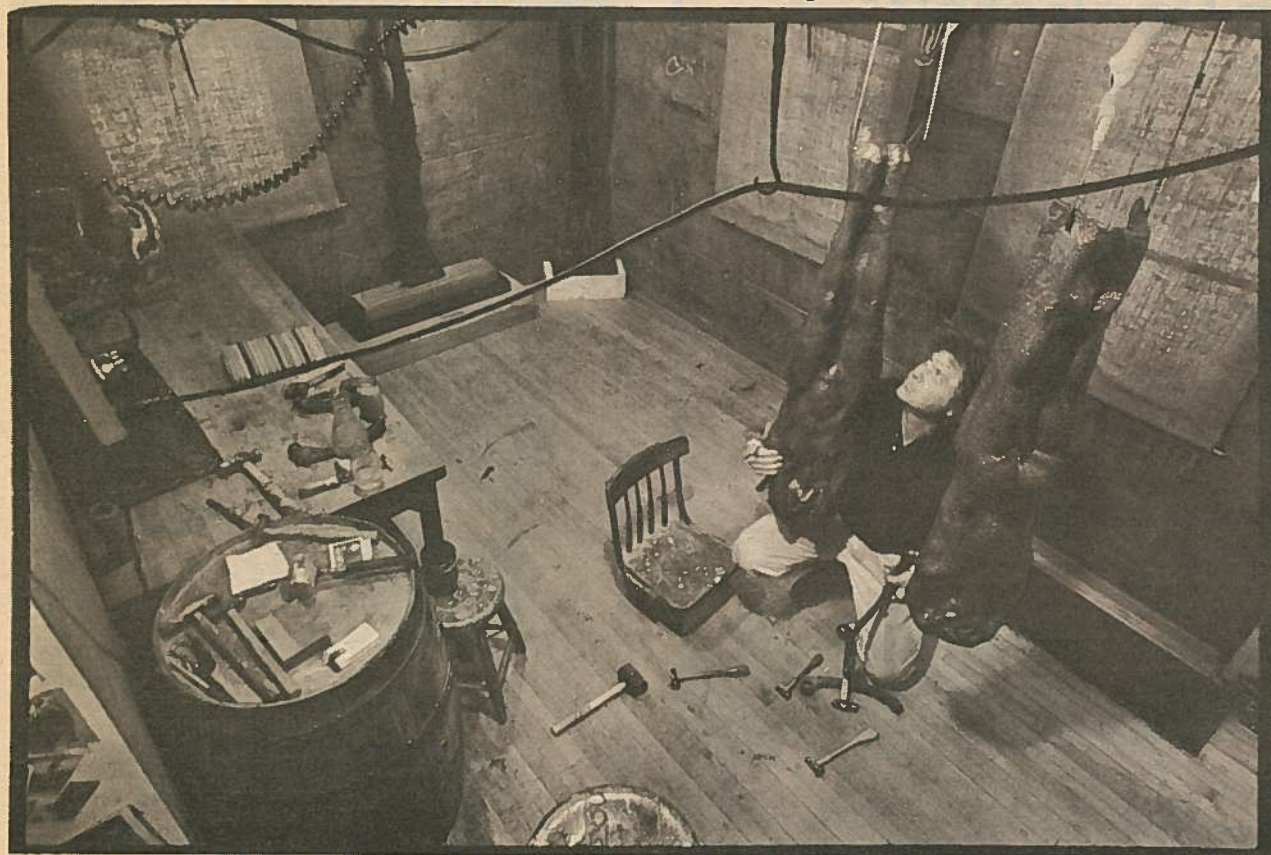
His book, *Rhapsody of a Hermit*, published by Viking in 1974, followed the earlier publication of *Austringer*, a short story written by Rothschild when he was 20, and published in the *Paris Review* alongside fragments from Hemingway and Faulkner. A later novella, *Wondermonger*, won several literary awards and was included in the anthology, *Best American Short Stories of 1976*, along with others by the likes of John Updike and Ward Just.

Rothschild readers enter a Maine tapestry woven from threads of a dark and spartan history, embroidered with a restless imagination and a particular imagery. Consider this brief excerpt from a work in progress set in Maine's beginnings:

"At the close of August, Nicholas Rising was freed from the stone gaol in the port capitol and early one morning the second week of September, a clean-shaven, cropped-haired tinker strolled the causeway above the stagnant pools where the beaver pond had been and climbed the dusty cartway up the hill of Starkmont. Squat, thatched frame dwellings lined the route, great piles of cordwood stacked along their unpainted clapboard walls. Beanplants twined hanging ears of corn in the dooryards. Gourds, squash, the men and boys toiling in the mown stretch of meadow where the tinker surveyed the massive haystacks and the tawny green pumpkins — tillage readied for winter crops and, in a large enclosure on the stubbled banks of the Pogamug, grazing livestock — everywhere the Imposter gazed he was confronted by the inexorable industry of the Starkmont planters."

Editors at Viking have been waiting years for the

(Continued on the next page)



Michael Rothschild works on two sculptures made from lead sheets which are part of his headstand series.



The Rothschilds produce most of their food on their farm in Strong.

(Continued from the previous page)

completion of the work this excerpt represents, and for a second book of short stories, but the author has not released his manuscripts. "They are not finished," Rothschild says. "I work on them when I have time, mostly late at night. But there is very little time."

Even for a man who sleeps just five or six hours of every 24, the farm at Tory Hill is crowded with evidence left by time's thieves. In the fields, orchards, barns, sheds, pens and ponds, everywhere on the tilled island that surrounds his home, Michael Rothschild must tend to those in need of daily care and constant attention. The turkeys are outnumbered by sheep, milk cows, veal calves, chickens, ducks, geese, beef creatures, hounds and

hogs. There are orchards of Wealthy, Baldwin and Northern Spy apples, along with the cider press that awaits them, an evaporator for the sweet sap taken each spring from the hillside's maples, and a perfectly round, white board circle of a fence around the ring where Catharine rides her Apaloosa quarter horse in a daily ritual and reminder of the times she won cups and blue ribbons for her horsemanship in Madison Square Garden.

Inside the house, along with the squire and his wife, are four children. Harry, 17, is a red-haired giant and oldest son who has already won the New York and New England discus championships, and will enter Harvard this fall. His siblings, Julianna Faith, 11, Ida Beatrice, 9, and Nathaniel Amos, 6, are pupils at Strong Elementary. Then there is

Wendy Fleming and her young son and daughter; Wendy assists Michael with welding and the painstaking finishing work each sculpted piece requires. Keeping the families company, sprawling under the trestle table that regularly seats a minimum of nine for every meal, are two enormous English mastiffs and a coon hound who might be called sizeable if he could escape the company of his vast companions.

Awed by this evidence of perpetual responsibility, a Tory Hill visitor recalls some recent comments on sculptors and wonders to himself yet again why Michael Rothschild has chosen to hoe such a hard row.

"There is no more difficult effort in any of today's arts than sculpture," Tom Crotty observed one

How Deep Are Your Pockets?

Probably not as deep as you'd like them to be.
But we can help.

TWO DAYS ONLY
FRIDAY, JAN. 23rd, 8 to 4:30 & SATURDAY, JAN. 24th, 9 to 5

All Domestic Hardwood Lumber
25-35% OFF

If you've been waiting for an excuse
to start your winter projects
THIS IS IT!

At Black Mountain we're trying
to make hardwood more affordable.



Black Mountain Hardwoods

corner Kennebec & Preble Streets
(across from Maine Bedding)

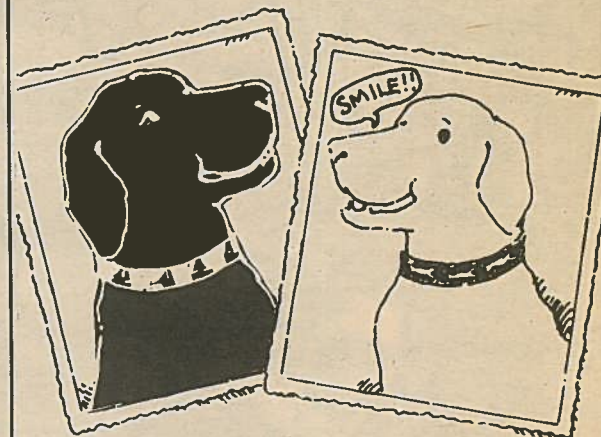
Portland 772-3332
M-F 8:00-4:30, Sat. 9:00-3:00

We're not easy to find, but we're worth the adventure.

ENTER NOW

Submit your favorite pet photo
in our record breaking
Pet Photo Contest.

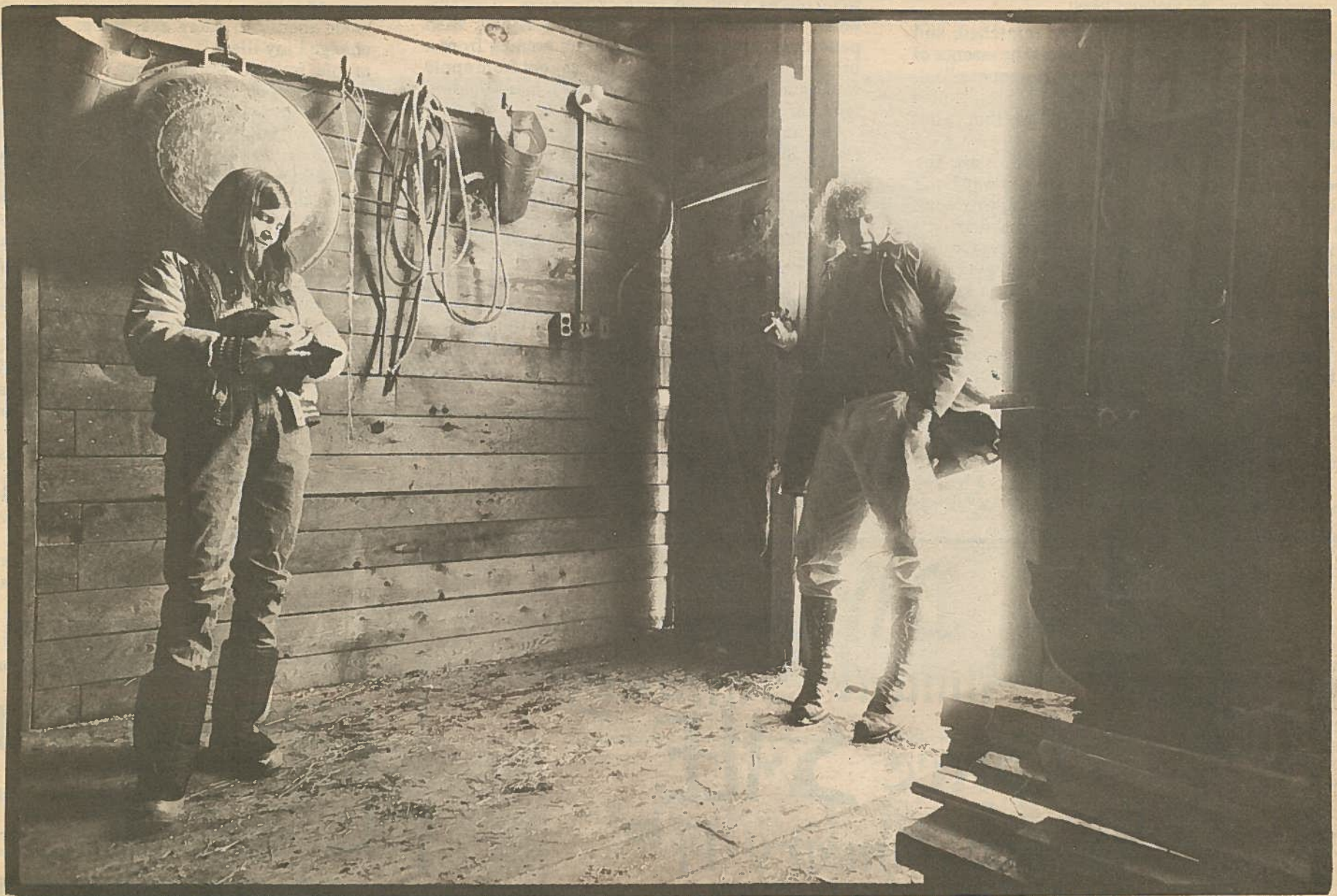
All entries must be in by
Ground Hog's Day, 1987.



The General Store for

PETS

Falmouth Shopping Center 781-4960
9-6 Mon., Tues., Wed./9-8 Thurs., Fri./9-5 Sat.



Catherine and Michael Rothschild in their barn.

quiet afternoon as he surveyed the spacious floor of his Frost Gully Gallery on Portland's Forest Avenue. "If I tried to make a living selling sculpture or having special sculpture shows or creating my own works, I would go broke in a hurry."

"Where is the market for this?" he asks, his arm swinging toward several wood figures on pedestals along one gallery wall. "Since the days of vain patrons who wanted their likenesses cast in bronze, or the institutions searching for massive works to fill the monumental spaces, there has been no market for sculpture, none that an artist can rely on to feed him and his family. Only a few statues are commissioned in any given year, and even less are sold from gallery floors, not here in Portland, certainly. And not anywhere in this country that I know of."

"These days, any artist who insists on trying to make a living as a sculptor is attempting the impossible."

Yet here is Michael Rothschild presiding at the head of a table of nine mouths to feed and he has dedicated most of his waking hours for the past decade to his sculpture. Why?

Aware of his broad shoulders, his rugged frame, and noting the intensity of his gaze, a visitor hesitates to ask, and is reminded instead of a comment to Michelangelo from his friend Sebastiano del Piombo who said to the sculptor in 1520, "You frighten everybody, even the Popes."

And about Michael Rothschild there is an awesome, and at times frightening, intensity. The unmistakable stigmata of compulsion hover about the man. He is a driven artist, one of the few who can not alter course even if he tries, so great are the forces that propel him to his daily contests with his own creativity versus stubborn slabs of lead and massive bolts of black walnut.

"The world of art," we are told by the French philosopher Andre Malraux, "is another world . . .

fantastic, in the sense that its elements are not those of reality."

The observation is recalled as Rothschild tries to articulate a meaning for two nearly lifesize figure studies that hang head down, suspended from a ceiling beam in a curtained corner room. Female torsos beaten from lead, they gleam silver, lustrous in the half-light, their satin skins an alchemy wrought from the base metal, their arms akimbo about their hanging heads.

"I call them 'Headstand-Front' and 'Headstand-Back,' " the sculptor explains. "They weigh about 150 pounds apiece and are more than four feet tall."

"Starting with solid sheets of lead, I beat them into their present shape with prosthetic molybdenum femur ball joints salvaged from a crematorium."

"Why beat lead? Lead is lovely, leaden, deathly

(Continued on the next page)

PORTLAND STRING QUARTET



"a model of experienced ensemble playing"
— THE NEW YORK TIMES

8pm January 24

Jewett Hall

University of Maine at Augusta

FORUM
A

Tickets \$8.00
622-7131, ext. 271
or at the door

SELECT

We select the best stories, photography and art for our readers.
Be selective and subscribe to *Maine Times* today.

☐ Please start my subscription to *Maine Times* today to ensure I receive 51 weeks of Maine news and issues.

☐ Bill me \$22.50

☐ Payment enclosed

☐ Charge my credit card

MC/Visa number _____

Exp. date _____

Name _____

Address _____

(Continued from the previous page)

toxic, brilliant as aluminum when scratched; and dark, cyanotic. Yet the female form is the essence of life. One could point to a contrast, I suppose."

He winds down for the moment. The sculptures are also mute, yet endowed with a grace that belies the trauma of their creation.

Women are everywhere in Rothschild's art: the female form addresses visitors from every wall hung with drawings or studies for future sculpting done in bold, acid dyes. Yet women are not the artist's only favorites; he is also captivated by the natural creatures of Maine.

From one corner, a hawk takes flight, a kestrel carved from cherry, yet as weightless as the bird itself. Close by, a larger falcon rests on a ledge, its talons gripping its prey, head bowed to the feast. On a table, an ebony snapping turtle, inverted, its neck stretched in the ultimate effort to restore its equilibrium, its clawed, extended feet still scratching for the purchase that can end its terrifying vulnerability.

A carved porcupine, a fox, a sheep and a turkey in progress keep company with one of the largest

wood pieces, a bull moose "rocking horse," a toy this father sculpted for his children, complete with pendulous moose nose and antlers arching from a broad moose head, the whole fantasy cut from apple wood and rock maple by an artist's hand holding hammer, chisel and blade.

But menace, elegance, and wariness are each caught in one of the few Rothschild works officially "sold" — a life-size great blue heron carved from oak atop a jet-black slate base and bought by author Stephen King, for a price Tom Crotty suggests may be the largest ever paid in Maine for a single piece of sculpture.

But sales, says Rothschild, are not the purpose of his work. "None of my sculptures was ever made to sell," he says, underscoring the word with a kind of scorn. "I do not show." Then he sighs. "But soon I must. I can not support this place or my family unless I do."

"Why then," he is asked, "did you set aside your successful writing career to become a sculptor, especially when you must have known something of the rocky road ahead?"

"I haven't really set my writing that far aside, and

I never asked to be a sculptor," he replies testily. "But about ten years ago, things happened that changed my life." It was then that he found a set of his father's woodcutting tools, and a set of sculpting tools he'd won in a Bangor Junior High art contest. At age 11, he was awarded a scholarship, a prize writer Michael Rothschild scarcely recalled for almost 20 years. Then, shortly after the death of William Zorach, he found those sculpting tools and began living with the creative compulsions that drive him to this day.

Only a few bits of wall space in the rooms where Michael Rothschild works are not occupied by drawings, sketches and sculptures. Among the exceptions is an eight-by-ten photograph of Jimmy Piersall, the decidedly eccentric player for the Boston Red Sox. Smiling from beneath his baseball cap, Piersall has inscribed the portrait: "To Mike — Keep Plugging." Which is precisely the creed that dominates the artist's entire life, whether or not he elects its adoption.

Historically, Maine has been kind to its artists and free spirits, which surely accounts for the state's popularity with so many of them. Still, one can not help but ponder what the ending will be to the story of Michael Rothschild.

Leaving Tory Hill, a visitor recalls Malraux once more: "All art," he wrote, "is a revolt against Man's fate."

by John N. Cole

Photography by Scott Perry

ONE DAY ONLY

La Femme Annual January

1/2 price SALE

9:00-6:00 January 17th

All Clothing Half Price

29 TOWNSEND AVE.
BOOTHBAY HARBOR
633-4025



La Femme

10 EXCHANGE ST
PORTLAND
775-2763

CASH AND CARRY • WAREHOUSE OUTLET • CONTEMPORARY



After Inventory Clearance Sale

20% - 40% OFF

MON-FRI: 10 to 5:30
SAT: 10 to 4
773-0009

DIRECTLY BEHIND J.C. PENNEY AT THE MAINE MALL

JJM Mannus

101 JOHN ROBERTS ROAD • SOUTH PORTLAND

WAREHOUSE • CASH AND CARRY • HARDWOOD FURNITURE • OUTLET • ERNUT

SHERRYMIKE

Pottery Shop And Gallery

• Stoneware • Porcelain • Weaving • Maine Handcrafts
• Paintings • Prints

19 PLEASANT STREET, HALLOWELL 622-1906

A No-Water Toilet



Yes—
and think
of what
you save!

ifo HUMUS 90 IS THE REVOLUTIONARY NO-WATER SOLUTION TO THAT "IMPOSSIBLE" WASTE-WATER PROBLEM.

- Without Plumbing
- Without Chemicals
- Odorless, Positive Venting
- Compact, Simple, Safe
- Save Water
- Save Money

Relieves pollution and septic tank problems almost anywhere. Transforms waste into garden conditioner. Join the waste-water revolution and save — over 100,000 now in use.

See **ifo** Humus 90 now... at:

Water Conservation Systems, Inc.
Damonmill Square, Concord, MA 01742
(800) 343-1706 or (617) 369-3951
Call for the Maine dealer nearest you

Ultimately...

You'll come to

JONES

...our winter sale continues



FINE CLOTHING FOR WOMEN

202 U.S. ROUTE 1 FORESIDE MALL
FALMOUTH, MAINE 04105
(207) 781-4787

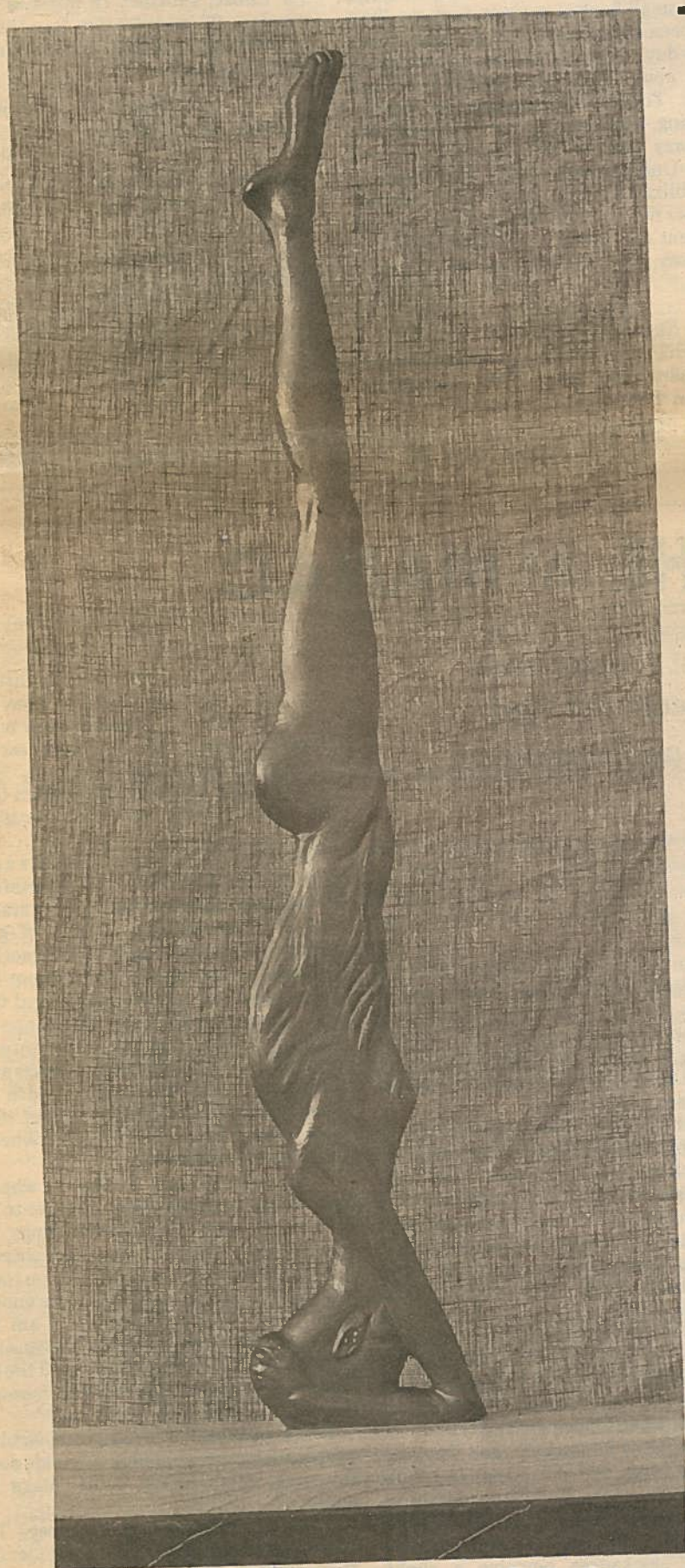
Monday - Friday 10 - 6 Saturday 10 - 5



Leaner — Mahogany

Michael Rothschild's Sculptures

Photographs by Madeleine de Sinety



Headstand — Black Slate Mahogany Serpentine



Horizontal Feeding — (detail)



Floating — Black Slate relief