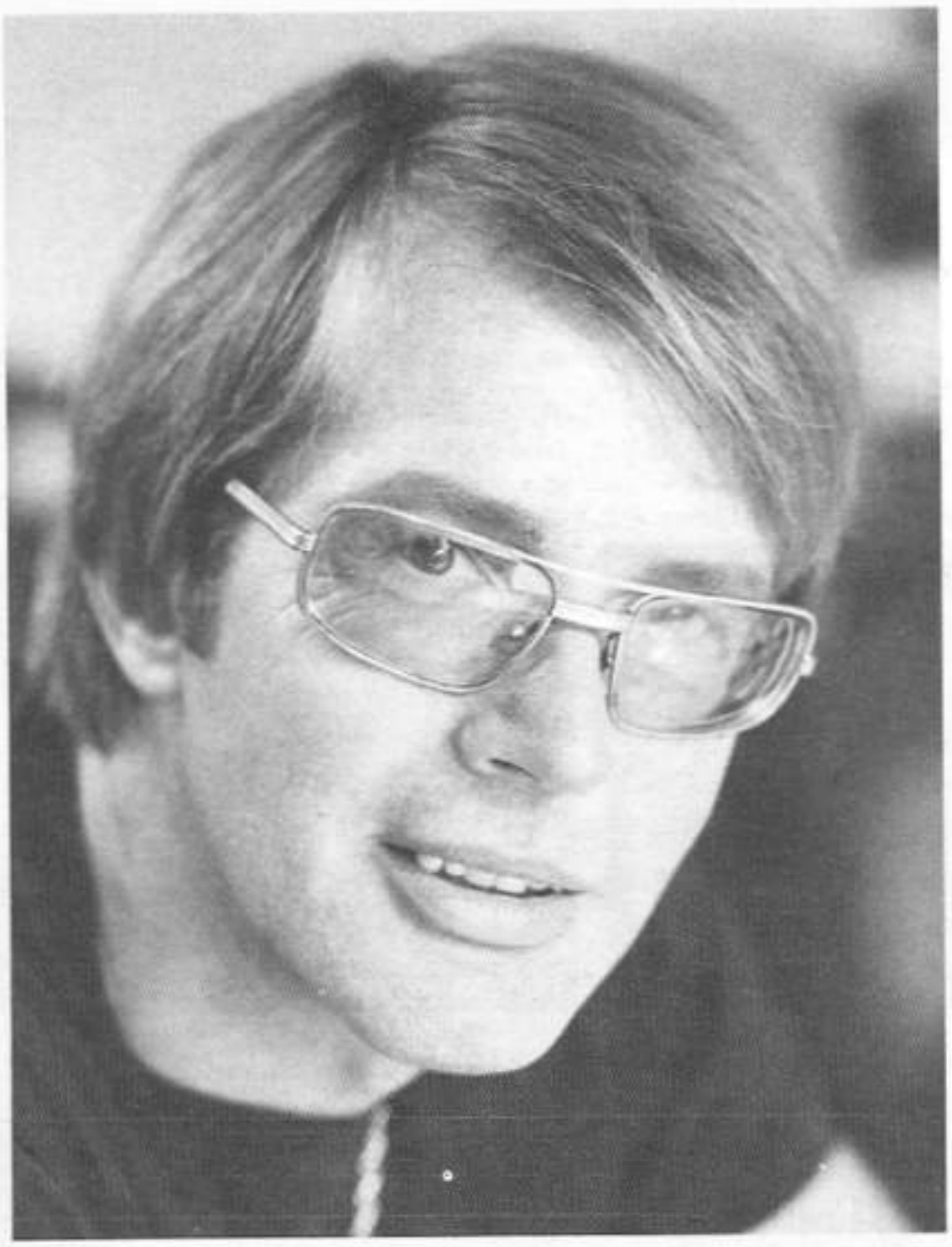


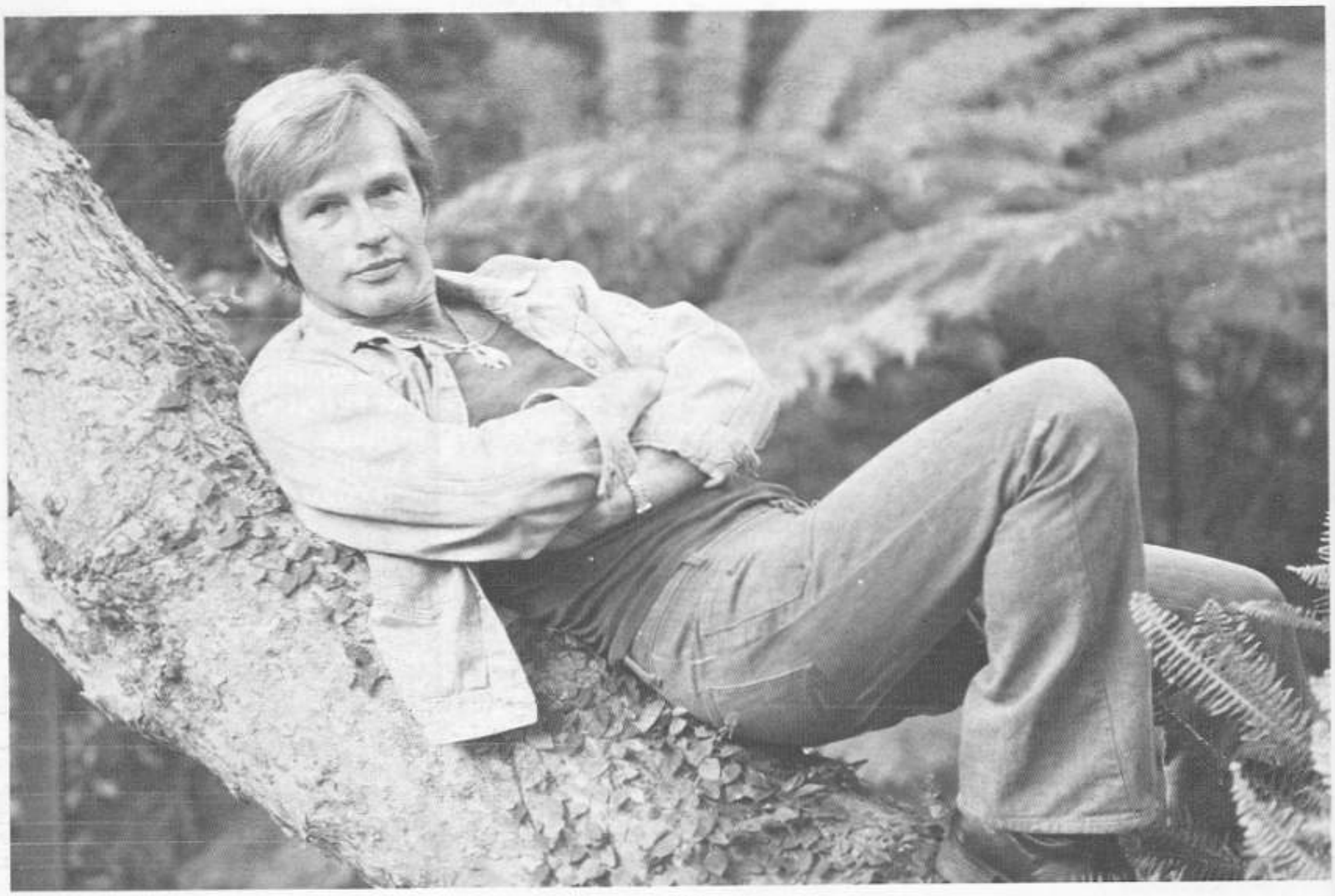
community leader

THE TATTOO COMMITMENT

By David Minton
Photographs by Hy Chase

Rick Herold has a home in Hollywood's secluded Nichols Canyon. His home sets on a hill, and to get to it you must walk up a peaceful pathway. You wind past waterfalls and strategically placed benches for meditation. By the time you reach the front door you are disarmed and completely unprepared for the array of angles and lines that greet you inside. You stand there looking about and begin to sort out the various periods of Rick's life in a display of his art works. Their arrangement is integrated into the all-over design of the home's interior.

One small room is totally different from the rest of the house. It is soft and cushioned and filled with mementoes from India. Here in this room I start out



with the usual questions but find very soon that they aren't needed. Once you get Rick started, you need do no more than sit back and listen.

In Touch: "What are your interests?"

Rick: "Just my art work and my garden. My garden is a perfect blend of New England and Hawaii. I've taken great pains to maintain that balance and I do the same with the inside of my house. I don't feel my house is cold at all. It is a rational balance of hot and cold."

In Touch: "What is your purpose?"

Rick: "Anything I can do to make my sense of awareness and a collective awareness through art . . . to make my community more aware of itself is what I hope to achieve through my work."

In Touch: (I had watched Rick give a man a huge butterfly tattoo on his chest.) "How does tattooing fit into that purpose?"

Rick: "I feel that . . . for people, nowadays, everything is so transitory. People don't want to commit themselves to anything. They wonder: 'How am I going to feel tomorrow? What if I don't like it tomorrow?' Everything is so noncommittal. One of the reasons everything is so ugly in our society is that it takes time to build and believe in things. If people don't want to commit themselves . . . if they haven't got enough philosophy or character to know that they can *build* on something that is *consistent* . . . if they don't understand that, in so building, rather than *limiting* themselves they are *expanding* . . . then they are without the essentials of what it takes to build toward things which are permanent and beautiful . . . be it architectured cities, a way of life, or anything. To me the *tattoo* is a beginning—it is a commitment. It's small but if someone's going to do it, they know they'll have it the rest of their lives. If they have the guts or the balls to commit themselves to getting a tattoo, then they could commit themselves to do other permanent things in life.

"I always was an artist. When I was in kindergarten, teachers would ask me what I wanted to be; I wanted to be an artist then and I have never veered from that."

* * * *

Rick Herold has never had to make a choice about his career. There never seemed to be a question in his mind about it. But this certainty has not lessened the excitement of his life. Along with his involvement in art, Rick has been enmeshed in the enriching fabric of religious culture.

Rick was born in Cleveland, Ohio, where he went to school in the winter. He spent his summers in the country in Pennsylvania. This moving back and forth between hot and cold environments seems to have been a forerunner to a pattern his life has followed.

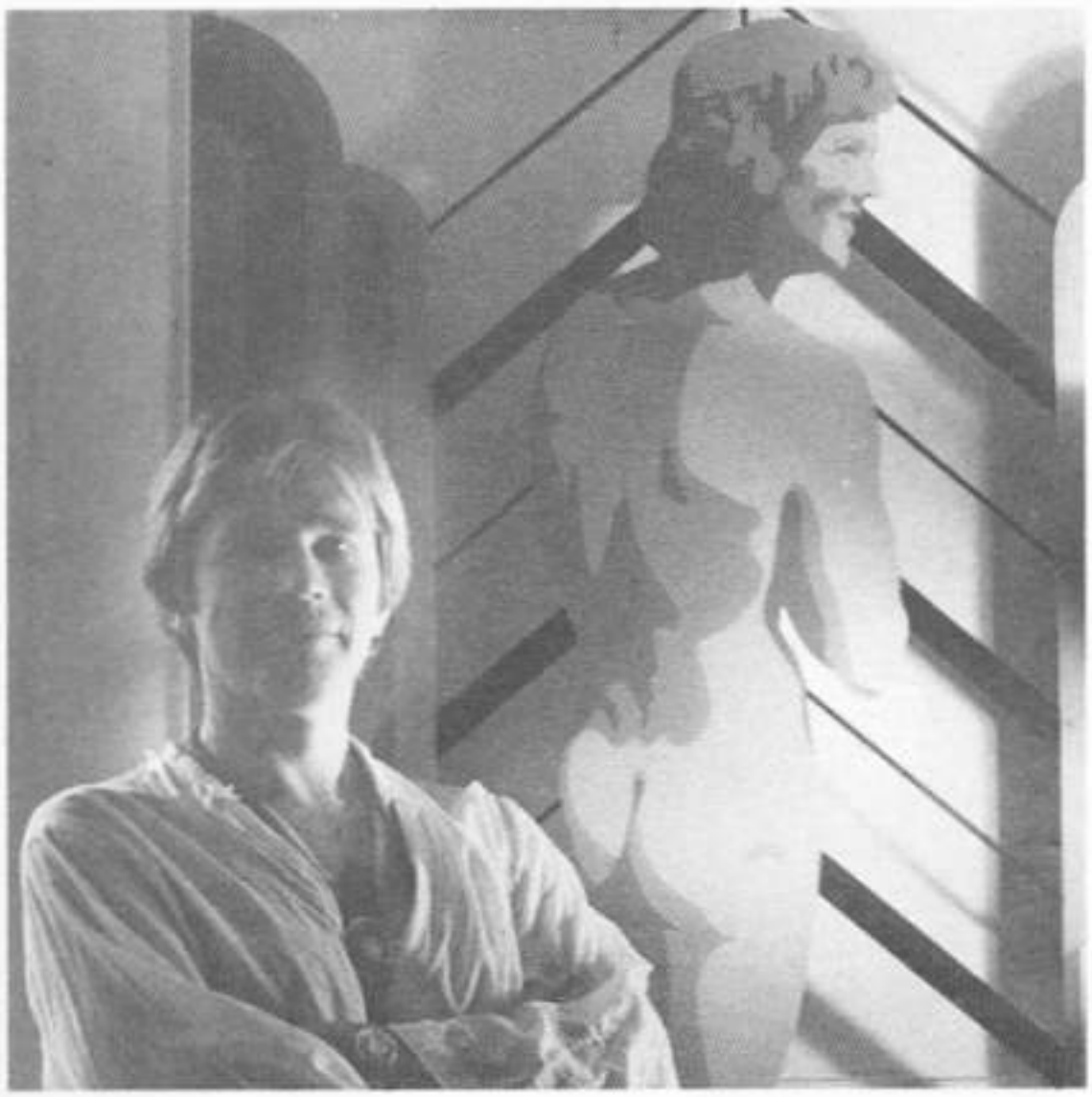
After several early years in the cloistered atmosphere of Catholic school, Rick entered a coed college. This was a jolt and he soon found himself entangled in a relationship with a guy and a girl. He recognized the absurdity of the direction his adolescence had taken, so he quit school and joined the Navy.

In basic training he worked on a mural for the officers' quarters and learned none of the things he needed to know for his first assignment aboard ship.

"I came aboard on the ship and I said, 'Hello.' The officer of the deck about fainted! I didn't even know which end to salute."

Being absolutely helpless, he was assigned as the Captain's writer. After two years aboard ship he petitioned for, and surprisingly received, Embassy duty in Paris. For the next two years he roamed about Europe practically as a civilian. He lived with a wealthy person for a while but could not adjust to being kept, so when his separation from the Navy came he returned to America.

St. John's Monastery in northern Minnesota gave Rick a quiet contrast to Europe for the next three years. After graduating in Theology, Rick came to Los Angeles on scholarship to the Otis Art Institute



for graduate work in contemporary church art. He was commissioned by Bob Hope to do a piece for a Cleveland church, and received another commission from Cardinal McIntyre. But Rick was disillusioned by these experiences, considering them downbeat and negative. So he turned away from the negative and did a series of American heroes, pop-art paintings of cowboys, female pin-ups, and surfers, which, to Rick, were upbeat and positive.

While doing the hero series, he experimented with aluminum paint, and then switched to painting on aluminum.

". . . and this immediately produced a series . . . my first large completely coherent series of work: male and female nudes. The idea of working with the figure seemed very, *very* corny at that period of abstract expressionism in art. I did it as a series of erotic, heterosexual, male and female lovemakings."

Rick took the series to all the galleries and finally

on *one* day he persuaded *four* places to take a few paintings each. The very next day, Art Seidenbaum of the *L.A. Times* was making the rounds of the galleries to formulate an idea for a segment of his television show. After noticing Rick's work in four different galleries, he decided to do an entire program around him.

". . . he had a panel including psychiatrists, anthropologists, an art critic and one gallery owner who eventually became my dealer. It became a very interesting program with a lot of comment. . . . In fact, it had a few replays."

During the program, Eva Marie Saint called the station and bought one of the paintings and that began a sale of Rick's work right on the air. Rick had his first one-man show at a gallery the next week. He stayed with that gallery until it closed. Then his direction changed from aluminum to plastic.

His next show was in plastic, a concept in voyeurism using the reflection of the observer in the composition of the erotic work.

"They would see their reflection and they would see the two people having sex, but they become involved in a sense of discovering it—a sense of voyeurism in that they would find themselves peering at them."

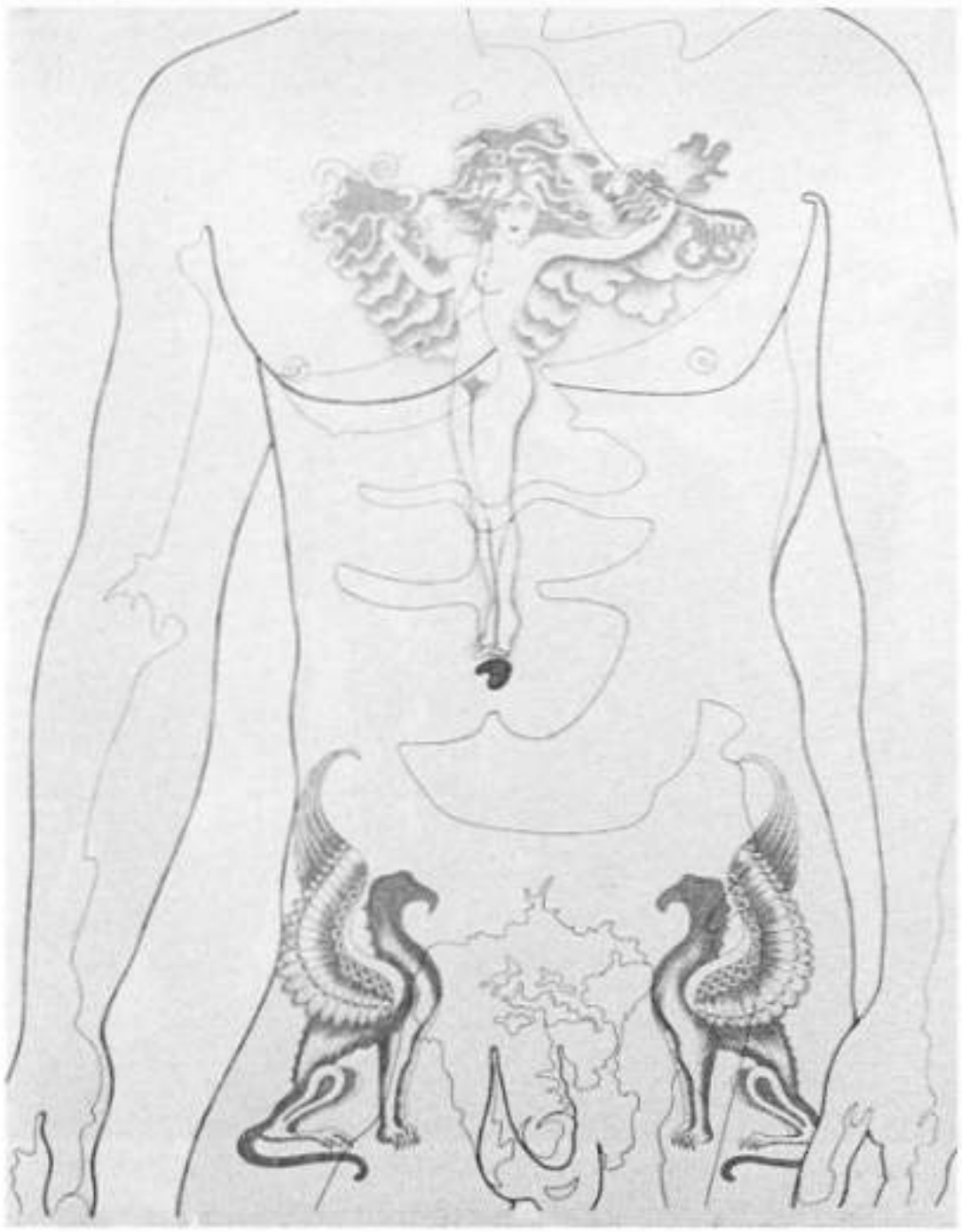
Rick had gone to Expo in Montreal and was very impressed by the use of plastics and photo processes. He did the penis and breasts photographically on sheets of hanging plastic and a vinyl tapestry thirty feet long. The motif repeated a breast hundreds of times.

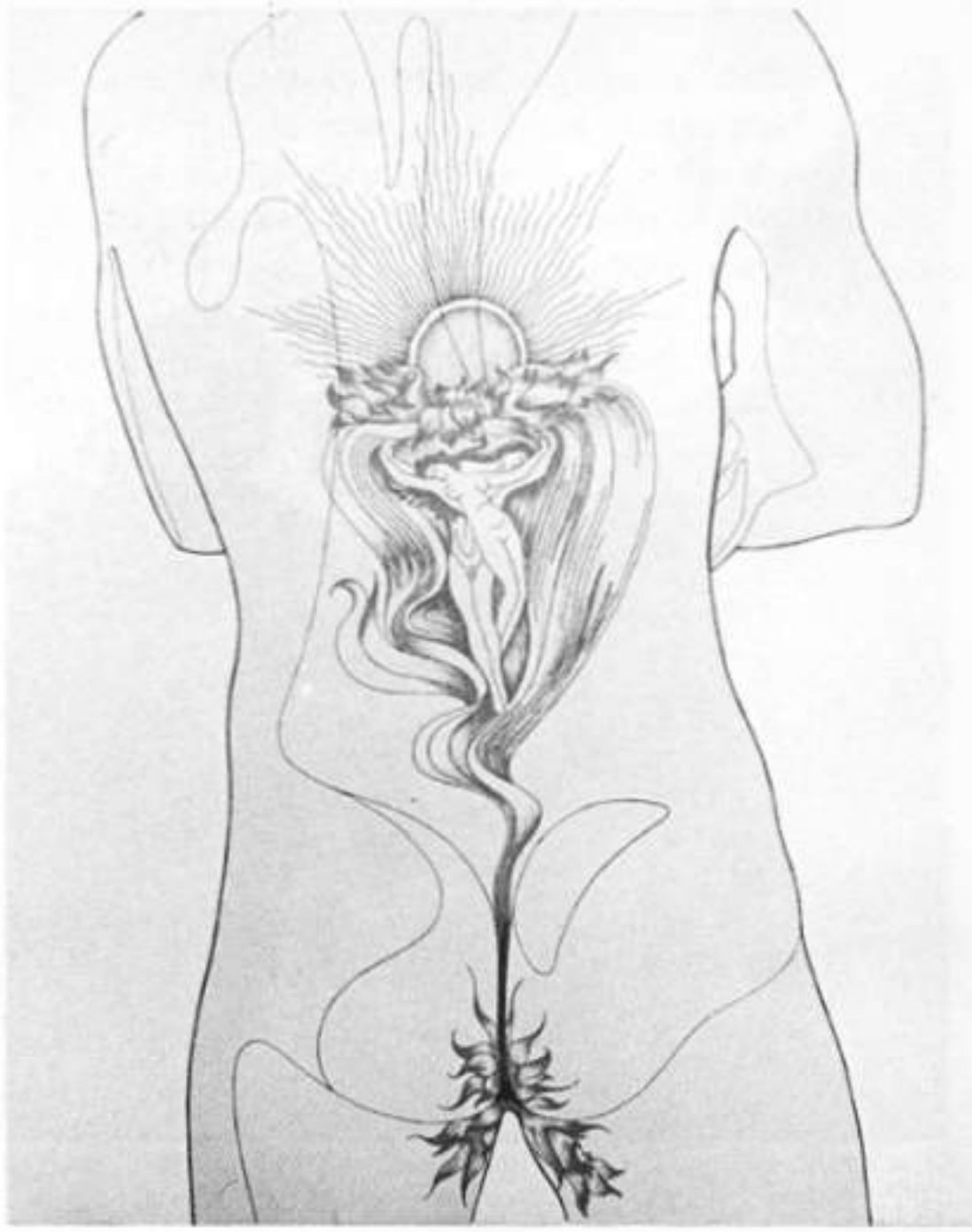
He then went further into the abstract with an entire show of variations of buttocks and penetrations. But soon the pop-art scene began to die and the Molly Barnes Gallery, where Rick had been, closed. Rick moved for a while to the Orlando Gallery, but then decided to go to the Orient where he became heavily influenced by the tantric concept of art.

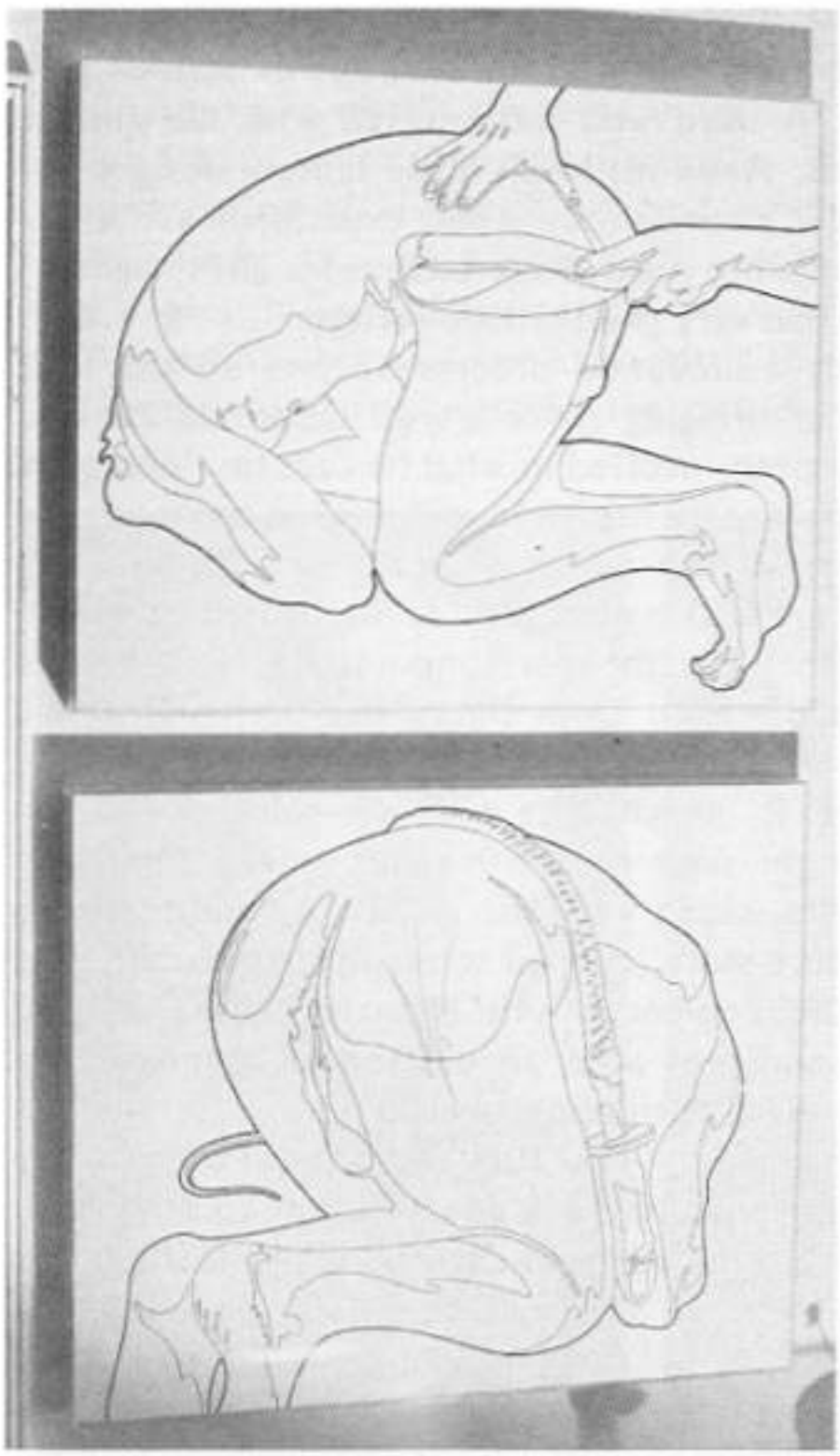
Rick's evolution had begun with religious art, passed through overt depiction of sexuality and gradually became increasingly abstract, leading to his first tantric show of abstractions in circles and ovals. These were Hindu symbols involved in primordial concepts of sex in terms of religious significance.

Following Rick's tantric show, he became disenchanted with the gallery scene. He didn't blame anyone for his disenchantment, but it was simply that art buyers were made dizzy by the rapid pace of the art scene as set by New York, and it was only natural for them to want the security of buying art that promised a return on their investment. Rick was not interested in creating investments.

"This put me on a very negative attitude toward the art consumer and the reason people buy art. That's when one morning I was drinking coffee and I







read about tattooing. It just seemed to fit. I thought, 'Wow! What a perfect art form.' "

Rick liked the idea of the art and the client becoming one, and the product remaining free from estimates of financial investment.

Becoming a licensed tattoo artist, however, takes some determination and, in Rick's case, some luck. Apprenticeships are not very often open. On his first attempt he was discouraged and sent away. He returned the following Tuesday to meet the boss, the *Master,* only because he had no other alternative—no other way to learn. He was hired on the spot. It seems the Master's previous assistant had just lost both arms in an automobile accident that weekend.

"I figured that was a pretty good sign—for me, at any rate."

Rick very quickly picked up the necessary skills, but found the downtown Main Street environment very distasteful. He didn't consider himself a professional because he, from time to time, would refuse to do certain designs which he particularly disliked.

After leaving Main Street, Rick worked on designs at home on flesh-colored paper. These designs, ". . . ideal tattoo fantasies . . ." grew into a collection which include examples of Rick's most beautiful work. This series of "tattoo fantasies" was begun on flesh-colored paper, but soon Rick switched back to aluminum, doing tattoo design on aluminum.

A whole assimilation process began of all the various forms Rick had worked in and the result was a new show. In one corner of the gallery he set up a tattoo parlor, behind which the wall was covered with his commercial designs which he offers. Another wall was covered with photo blowups of tattoos he had done. A third wall was covered with the aluminum designs. Amid his lovely little fantasy designs were a series of *neon tattoos,* a new experiment for Rick. On the opening night, Rick tattooed a girl's vagina. The show had very good critical reviews.

This assimilation process opened up the idea to Rick of bringing art to a wider audience. He had already been involved in what he calls his "non-painterly activities." They were, at first, just a creative outlet outside of the physical confines of the gallery and away from the mentality of the gallery coterie, but then they became more important to Rick than simply a diversion from the gallery scene. In order to allow Rick to be more fluid, he and a partner created ZEPHYR, which puts his "non-painterly activities" under the same roof with an art gallery. The complex includes, along with the gallery, a theatre, a shop, a furniture store, etc., all sensually and sexually oriented. The problem with the place is that the overhead is high and this adds an element of unpredictability which Rick finds oppressive.

Regardless of how Rick resolves the overhead problem, his creativity will go on "trying to probe various directions through which one could further experiment with our sensory perceptions, on a sensual level."

One of Rick's major non-painterly activities has been his sensoriums: a series of happenings and group

encounters which he designed to open up people to themselves. The sensoriums have taken many forms: nude touching, paint fights, tearing clothes off each other and so forth, in such surroundings as caves, swimming pools, etc. The "opening up" process was based on innocence. Some people, who didn't need "opening up," kept returning and focused their attention, instead, on sex. This is fine except that it is unfair to novitiates, and besides, Rick maintained, sex could be had just about anywhere else so why intrude?

Rick described one of the sensoriums:

"We'd make them walk down this passageway, alone and nude, down the long passage going to the bowels of the earth, with electronic music. That would just scare the shit out of a lot of people. Then, after setting up tensions and fear, at the end was a cave. We had all black-light and soft tom-tom drums, and body paint. It was sort of like a love-in thing; so that, after the alienation going through this tunnel, people were all together and move together. It was very nice."

The sensoriums had a combination of psychological elements, like the Esslin approach, but Rick's involvement was that of an artist. "The sensoriums were all aesthetically designed for movement, for color and things like this . . . also, the sensuality of it.

"The tattoo sort of fills the same thing. It's a tactile thing I have with other people's bodies. Tattoos are a combination of aesthetics, art, and the immediacy of the flesh. Also, it's a little more sophisticated in that it gets into a sadomasochism on a soft-core level. You definitely have to be masochistic to submit to a discomforting irritation like the tattoo needle. It's like going to the dentist without novacaine."

Until very recently, Rick had always *given* the tattoo (he enjoys giving it). Rick had never received a tattoo because, "I had high aesthetic criteria as to what they should look like. I hate the ugly, you know, tattoo-parlor look a drunken sailor gets on leave—World War II drawings." But, Rick had just met a young tattoo artist whose standards he approved.

During the course of this interview, a young filmmaker, Michael McCullock, had been making a film about Rick and his tattooing. The idea occurred to them that, for the dramatic conclusion of the film Rick should finally receive a tattoo, submitting to a new master, just as others had been doing throughout the film.

Paul, the young, straight tattoo artist, agreed to perform for the film. The tattoo filming session lasted for two days and two nights, with Rick and Paul giving each other little tattoos. Rick gave Paul a dragon that crawled down around his cock. Paul got into tattooing Rick's ass. The pain was more than Rick could bear and he passed out. Paul proceeded to tattoo Rick's ass up his asshole and out across his cheeks. It became a very heavy sexually symbolic scene. The film should be *sensational.*

The next day Rick realized what had happened to him. He had been "cleansed and purged by the experience." At first, looking into the mirror he was terribly embarrassed. But, after he accepted his actions, he felt that he had made *the* commitment to his art that he had *needed,* THE TATTOO COMMITMENT: flames emanating from his asshole forming a huge butterfly!