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Judy Chicago ■ Donald Woodman ■ Northern New Mexico Woodcarvers

A black and white photograph of Felipe Archuleta, a man with curly hair, resting his chin on his hand and looking towards the camera. He is standing behind a taxidermy specimen of a cougar. The cougar is mounted on a wooden stump and has a sign attached to its front legs. The background shows a wooden structure, possibly a building under construction.

ALL CREATURES

Felipe Archuleta and the Birth of a Genre - **By Christine Mather**

1982-6-31
BY-F.B.H.
COUGAR

1982-5-31
AP

Being the witness to a pure act of creation—a time when something new to the artistic world comes into existence—is not an experience many art historians are likely to have for we, as a group, are dedicated to mining the past. But I was there at the creation—or actually somewhere around day five or six, circa 1975—when according to the creation myth the creatures came into being. Felipe Archuleta (1910–91) populated this earth with all manner of creatures during an epoch of creation that had a beginning, middle, and end endured for all of twenty-five years and has spawned acts of creation up until today. Archuleta populated his world primarily with four-legged beasts: they were large and small, serious and silly, furious and calm—all crafted of logs and branches, cheap paints, sawdust, a bit of rope or PVC plastic, just stuff found around the place, or at the dump, or in an arroyo. The animals brought forth in the semi-chaotic universe of his yard near El Nido Restaurant, in Tesuque, New Mexico, were entirely his creations, unlike anything anyone had seen before. No one would mistake them for toys, or consider

them inspired by childish thoughts. No, these were adult animals that were menacing, dignified, and uproarious, never cuddly or cute (and many came with oh-so-very adult parts as well). Some of the wooden animals were more successful than others, but the struggle to bring them into being was clear: the massive creativity of their existence is stunning, and their artistic merit remains undeniable.

Being present at the creation was both a privilege and a pain because Felipe was not an easy guy. He thrashed out his worries in crushing repetitiveness, driving everyone a bit nuts. He was a rageful, comic, nervous soul whose mortality was a personal scourge. Plus, his irrepressible libidinous nature made female friendship or even observation impossible. So, I demurred, blessedly, leaving my fresh-out-of-grad-school English lit. major husband, Davis Mather, on the field to be engulfed in the reason-defying act of bearing witness to Felipe—a man living in a half-full world, who sometimes succeeded in entertaining himself and others with his art, a man full of courage and yet afraid of most things—a true, untainted, and sometimes toxic artistic personality.



Opposite: **Archuleta with Cougar**, 1982. Photograph by Davis Mather.

Left: **Felipe Archuleta**, *Sow with Piglets*, ca. 1970s, wood, fiber, paint. Courtesy of Davis and Christine Mather. Photograph by Blair Clark.

Wooden Menagerie at the Museum of International Folk Art

Wooden Menagerie: Made in New Mexico, opening at the Museum of International Folk Art, on April 6, celebrates the rich Hispano folk tradition of animal woodcarving in New Mexico and its continued influence on the national and international art scene. The exhibition highlights the historic roots of New Mexican woodcarvers, offering early twentieth-century examples of whimsical animals, including works by José Dolores López and Celso Gallegos.

During the 1930s, the traditional arts of the region gained resurgence through federal programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which trained and employed New Mexican craftsmen. In 1936 Patrociño Barela's expressionistic woodcarvings, created under the auspices of the Federal Arts Project, were shown in the important exhibition *New Horizons in American Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The woodcarving tradition continued into the 1960s, primarily for the tourist trade, with classic carvings of burros loaded with wood and oxen-drawn carts. During this time, artists started experimenting with recycled materials and using common household paint. The decade of the 1970s was a dramatic period that fostered the powerful animistic forms of Felipe Archuleta and his workshop of carvers. By the 1980s Archuleta's animal sculptures were highly sought after by collectors and curators. His menagerie of domestic and exotic animals made their way to museum exhibitions in New York, Paris, and Tokyo.

The excitement around the workshops of New Mexican animal carvers created an insatiable market that spurred on innovations by Alonzo Jiménez, Jim Davila, David Alvarez, and Leroy Archuleta. This generation of carvers fostered iconic images of friendly burros, howling coyotes, and Technicolor rattlesnakes, reaching deep into the popular culture of the southwestern United States. These animals have become emblematic of Santa Fe's cultural character.

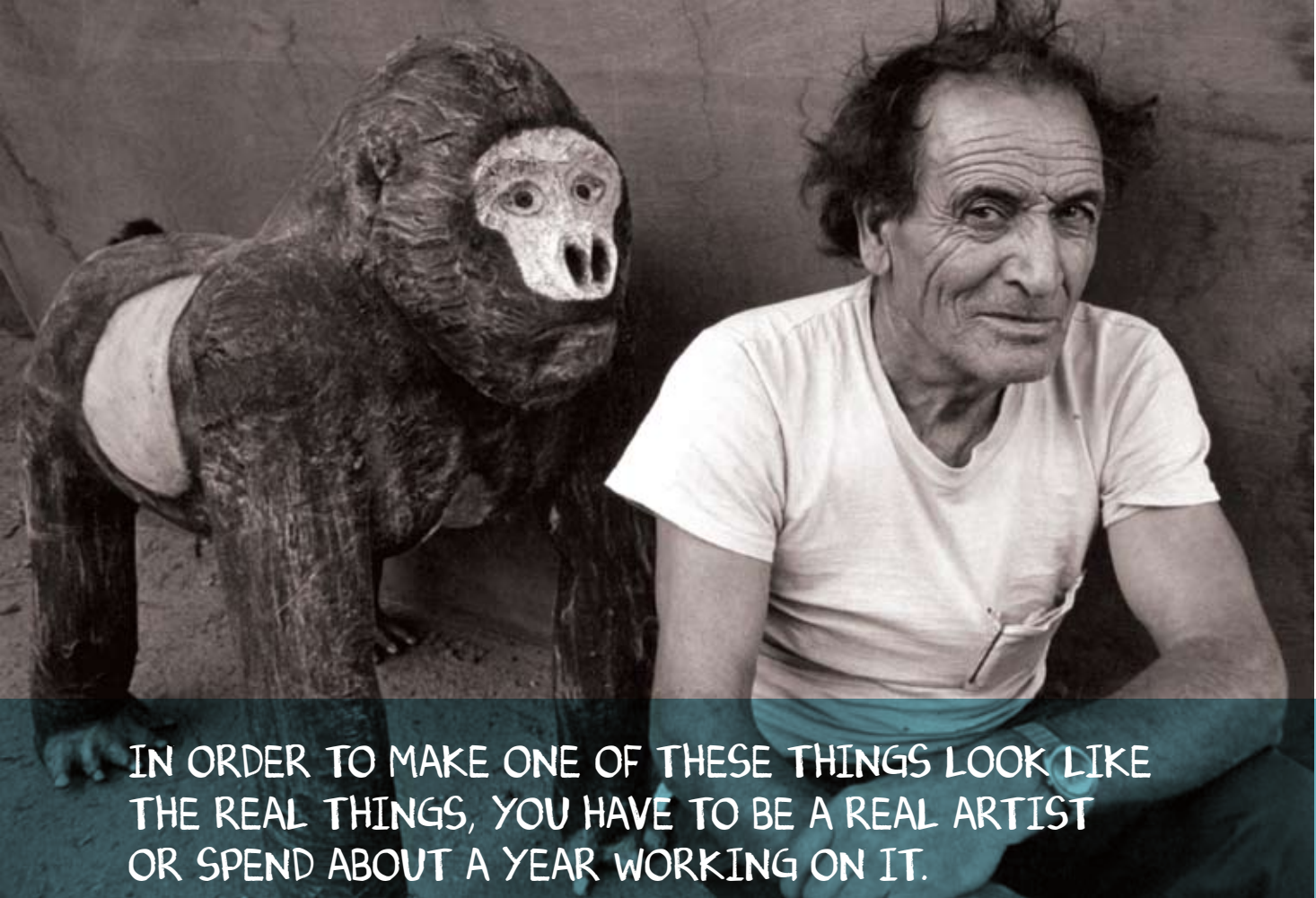
Wooden Menagerie is a celebration of the real and imagined natural world, featuring 108 unique animal sculptures, the work of twenty-nine New Mexican wood carvers. The exhibition follows the tradition from the twentieth into the twenty-first century, as contemporary artists such as Gloria López Córdova, Jim Davila, Arthur López, Joe Ortega, Ron Archuleta Rodríguez, and Luis Tapia continue the animal-carving tradition with representations that employ new methods, new materials, and new subjects.

—Andrew John Cecil, curator, *Wooden Menagerie: Made in New Mexico*

And, God Said, “Carve”

The back story to all of this makes the rage somewhat understandable, but the artistic genius probably came forth very unbidden into this world, much as had Felipe Archuleta. He was born, eldest of many, to an unknown father and a mother who was never to enjoy any type of stability, in a small adobe on the northern side of the Santa Cruz Church—a structure that loomed over the house, giving it shelter and a wee bit of security. Knowing only work and struggle from an early age, Felipe maintained that despite all this deprivation God was at work for him: “God made me do it, I am just a dummy guy.” His first efforts—a batch of small ox carts (*carretas*)—were made as a direct result of Felipe asking God what to do and being told, with no explanation, to do woodcarvings. It is safe to say that God did not specify wooden *carretas* with wee oxen, small furry sheep, or cunning burros loaded with tiny tools. God just said “carve” and left the rest to Felipe. The strong suggestion came to Felipe because he asked, and it came only after many years of both existence and making do; it came to him as a result of a personal crisis, a crossroads about what to do next in a life that had meandered along. Along the way, Felipe had worked as a stoop laborer, drummer, short order cook, and rough carpenter; he had married Isabel Herrera; he had produced and supported seven children; he had built a small adobe home right near the road in Tesuque and he had fiddled around with this and that: nervously entertaining with unpredictable things like fart machines, reconstituted but empty cigarette packs—anything for a joke—like his animal imitations. When the call came to carve he was ready, but there was nothing in his past that made what came forth in any way expected.





IN ORDER TO MAKE ONE OF THESE THINGS LOOK LIKE THE REAL THINGS, YOU HAVE TO BE A REAL ARTIST OR SPEND ABOUT A YEAR WORKING ON IT.

— Felipe Archuleta, on working at his art

Bigger Really is Better

Starting small, Felipe made a giant leap, in the mid-1960s, in creating almost life-size animals, as a result of being propelled to do so by Dr. Rudy Kieve, a psychiatrist who had a gallery on Canyon Road. The result was an unforeseeable explosion into a new world that perfectly suited the athletic and volatile Archuleta. Like the call to carve, the suggestion to make larger works resulted in an unprecedented creative breakout: Felipe went from miniature to full-size works overnight, and with the volume came plenty of attitude. Although he continued to make small pieces throughout his life, in bigger-sized works he found his *métier*. The big animals also found an audience—at first a small but influential audience who sensed, among other things, that these highly charged creatures were not to go gently along but were poised to rocket off, as they did.

Audience played no small part in the trajectory of

Felipe's career, as well as in the way he settled into his life as an artist. When Davis Mather published an article about Archuleta in the Museum of American Folk Art's magazine, *The Clarion*, in 1977, the lines began to form. Soon thereafter, the anxiety of the orders and the list and the cars parked at his gate were to plague the touchy artist. Tacked to his porch wall, the written demands piled up; they conspired to erode what little well-being he had, for each new work came at a personal cost. How to begin?—a cliff he faced over and over. For Felipe this was never a casual endeavor: the animals, the “carve” command, were something that he took wretchedly seriously, so that each new order loomed as an artistic conundrum. But, when he succeeded in answering the myriad demands that dogged him, when the piece came out in a self-proclaimed state of perfection, Felipe was as elated and as full of himself as he had been miserable and tortured before.

Opposite: **Felipe Archuleta**, *Ewe*, 1975, and *Lamb*, ca. 1965, wood, fiber, paint. Courtesy of Davis and Christine Mather. Photograph by Blair Clark.

Above: **Archuleta with Gorilla**, 1977. Photograph by Davis Mather.





A Community of Carvers

For the high volume of new orders, as well as the unendurable constant rebuke of the unfilled old ones, Felipe eventually found a solution that was as strange and as natural as might be expected: he enlisted the help of a man he picked up hitchhiking. Alonzo Jiménez (1949–2005) shared with Felipe a number of attributes: an unstable life, athleticism, a special affinity for wood born of a childhood of carving, the ability to work hard, egotism masked by hardship, unmistakable intelligence, and creativity. He had a wealth of fundamental flaws as well—they were just different from Felipe’s. In no time, Alonzo was swept into the Archuleta vortex. It was a short-term fix that managed to muddle the creations that came forth, but not always in a bad way because Alonzo, almost forty years Felipe’s junior, was able to perform the physically demanding task of “standing” large wooden animals—as they called the process of inserting legs, heads, and necks into the log that formed the body of these challenging beasts—a task that Felipe was happy to relinquish.

From that point, the elder artist might complete the work—as in a workshop or mentoring relationship—or he might just as happily walk away from the entire enterprise, leaving the apprentice to work it out on his own, but popping in to apply his own signature. Thus: *buyers beware!* The art world of commerce and evaluation loathed this

particular outcome, as the art world traded in cultivating authenticity, originality, and other money-inducing factors that were of no particular concern to the aging folk artist. Besides, while many of the collaborative pieces were brilliant, and those of the newly-minted folk artist Alonzo Jiménez were very, very good in their own right, none of them could quite match the unadulterated creations of the master.

So successful was Felipe’s not-so-secret strategy that he quickly developed a pattern of foisting the ever-lengthening list of orders upon others. Among them was David Alvarez (1953–2010), an acquaintance of Alonzo’s who shared a similarly troubled youth, and felt like the luckiest man alive when he was left to his own devices in the yard at Archuleta’s. Unlike the more sensitively volatile Jiménez, Alvarez respectfully accepted the occasional furies of Archuleta that might include trashing his work and insisting he do it over. Compared to life on the streets in Oakland, or living in a car in Tesuque, the pot of ever-cooking beans on the stove at Archuleta’s and the demands of his boss were a blessed structure and security for David. Generations of porkers, raccoons, zebras, porcupines, and other animals were to emerge from the hand of Alvarez who, like Alonzo, eventually went on to work on his own.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: **Archuleta and Alonzo Jiménez with Lion**, 1977. **David Alvarez with Armadillo and Pig**, ca. 1977. **Leroy Archuleta with Bear**, 1982. Photographs by Davis Mather.

Above, left to right: **Felipe Archuleta, Rainbow Trout**, 1982, wood, paint. Gift of Gil Hitchcock, MOIFA A.1995.70.1. **Felipe Archuleta, Trout**, 1976, wood, paint. Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, MOIFA A.1976.50.1.

Below, left to right: **Felipe Archuleta**, *Coyote*, 1984, wood, marbles, paint.

Gift of Karen and Walter Forbes, MOIFA A.1997.52.2.

Leroy Ortega, *Sitting Coyote*, 1984, wood, fiber, paint. Gift of Ann Pollock, MOIFA, IFAF Collection 2012.92.02.

Alonzo Jiménez, *Coyote*, 1987, wood, paint. Courtesy of Davis and Christine Mather.

Leroy Ortega, *Coyote*, 1984, wood, paint. Gift of Ann Pollock, MOIFA, IFAF Collection 2013.17.2.

Rory Alvarez, *Coyote*, 1986, wood fiber, paint. MOIFA, IFAF Collection FA.2010.89.1. Photograph by Blair Clark.

Opposite, top to bottom:

Alex Sandoval with Cattle, ca. 1979. Photograph by Davis Mather. **Archuleta and Davis Mather with Turtle and Pig**, 1977.

Photograph courtesy of Davis Mather.

Even those who placed orders were not exempt from the equal-opportunity workforce that Archuleta attempted to recruit. If you wanted something, he suggested that you make it yourself. “I’m not a machine gun,” he reasoned. All those who came were subjected not only to Felipe’s outbursts but also to his hilarity. As creative in this realm as in others—he liked gags and was a veritable quote machine in both Spanish and English—the latter being preserved thanks to Davis Mather. Dave, who spent years as the prodder, chronicler, gopher, butt of all jokes in Spanish, as well as the photographer and main aficionado of all things Archuleta, saved up all he could of Felipe’s work and acted as a go-between for those who wanted an animal. By 1978 Mather had opened his modest Santa Fe gallery, Davis Mather Regional Folk Art (now Davis Mather Folk Art Gallery), that over the years came to include folk art from areas beyond New Mexico, as his boundaries expanded.

Other young men were swept into the Archuleta universe as well, treated to a taste of meaningful, safe, and satisfying work, whereas their previous experiences had been anything but.

Family members were also enlisted if possible. Although the elder sons made their exits from the home, Leroy Archuleta (1949–2002), Felipe’s youngest son, came back home to work, though he was hardly anointed as the favorite. With his father’s death in 1991, Leroy was able to carve out his own spot in the history of New Mexican wooden animals. Like Jiménez and Alvarez, Leroy would develop his own path; the Archuleta name would prove golden, giving the son a boost with some collectors.

Besides the Archuleta recruits, there were a variety of other woodcarvers that sprung up in the wake of the success of the master. Among them was Leroy Ortega, who made large creatures that seemed to be directly inspired by works coming forth from the Archuleta yard. He had occasion to stop by and catch up with his friends and relatives there—as with most New Mexicans, there was a complex mesh of interrelationships between families. For years, Ortega’s works dominated Santa Fe’s pioneering Southwest fusion restaurant Coyote Cafe. Another young woodcarver, Mike Rodríguez, came up with a style of both large and small animals—creatures that seemed



IT'S PERFECT, NO?
COULDN'T BE ANY
BETTER. IT IS
SUPPOSED TO BE GOOD.
I'LL BET YOU COULD
SELL THAT COYOTE
FOR \$145 MAYBE \$150.
MUCH MORE THAN THAT
I CAN'T SAY. I DON'T
WANT TO CHARGE TOO
MUCH BECAUSE PEOPLE
WILL GET MAD AT ME.

—Felipe Archuleta, about the art business





to have emerged from a large drain somewhere in the desert. Whimsically threatening, they were also stylistically distinctive.

Not just the young got caught up in this new animal woodcarving phenomenon. Alex Sandoval took up carving when he was in his eighties, at the urging of his neighbor Frank Brito. Sandoval's saint figures are wonderfully direct and charming. Each of his animals has the same beatific aura, but they are far from being merely sweet; rather, they are sturdy and quite rough and funky, but completely without menace. Ben Ortega, Archuleta's friend and neighbor, carved an occasional unpainted animal, besides an otherwise relentless series of wooden figures of St. Francis. Of Ben's sons, Joe was to take up carving and painting wooden animals, sometimes working nearby, or with his brother-in-law, David Alvarez, and sister, Luisa Ortega Alvarez, or with Alonzo Jiménez.

During the 1980s, Alonzo Jiménez started making coyotes that were in a howling pose. They were distinctive: roughly made with a surface that ran in waves created by a masterful but scary-to-behold wielding of the chainsaw. His coyotes—painted in tans, grey, and other

colors—took on a life of their own, coinciding with a surge of interest in the Southwest, in part fueled by the publication of my 1986 book, *Santa Fe Style*, which prominently features a photo of a group of coyotes standing against a wall of wooden snakes at Davis Mather Regional Folk Art. This seemed to touch some bizarre, universal subconscious nerve, sending the coyote's popularity into an overnight upward leap. Soon bank parking lots were filled with weekend sales of hundreds of coyotes, some wearing bandanas or painted in pastel colors, made by countless carvers. Snakes were not far behind—for Jim Davila's iconic hand-carved and painted serpents sparked the same type of over-the-top interest. Snakes and coyote images could be found in the most unlikely places, from the bottom of children's sneakers to shower curtains—the use of these images became saccharine and ubiquitous, spoiling the original creations of Alonzo and Davila.



Opposite, clockwise from top: **Archuleta and Ben Ortega**, 1977. Photograph by Davis Mather. **Alonzo Jiménez and Davis Mather with a truckload of animals**, ca. 1979. Photograph courtesy of Davis Mather. **Frank Brito with Chicken**, ca. 1979. Photograph by Davis Mather.

Left: **Jim Davila**, *Snakes*, ca. 1983, wood, paint. MOIFA A.2012.42.2-4. Photograph by Blair Clark.



The Animals March On

In the late 1980s, only Leroy Archuleta and his nephew, Ron Rodríguez, remained working at the Archuleta yard with Felipe, who had long surpassed the age of his known ancestors and his own expectations by living into his eighties. Although both he and his wife Isabel suffered from arthritis, he kept at it—complaining all the while. Even with a diagnosed brain tumor and not far from the end, he still had choice words about his dying wishes—like much of what he said about women, it is hilariously off limits.

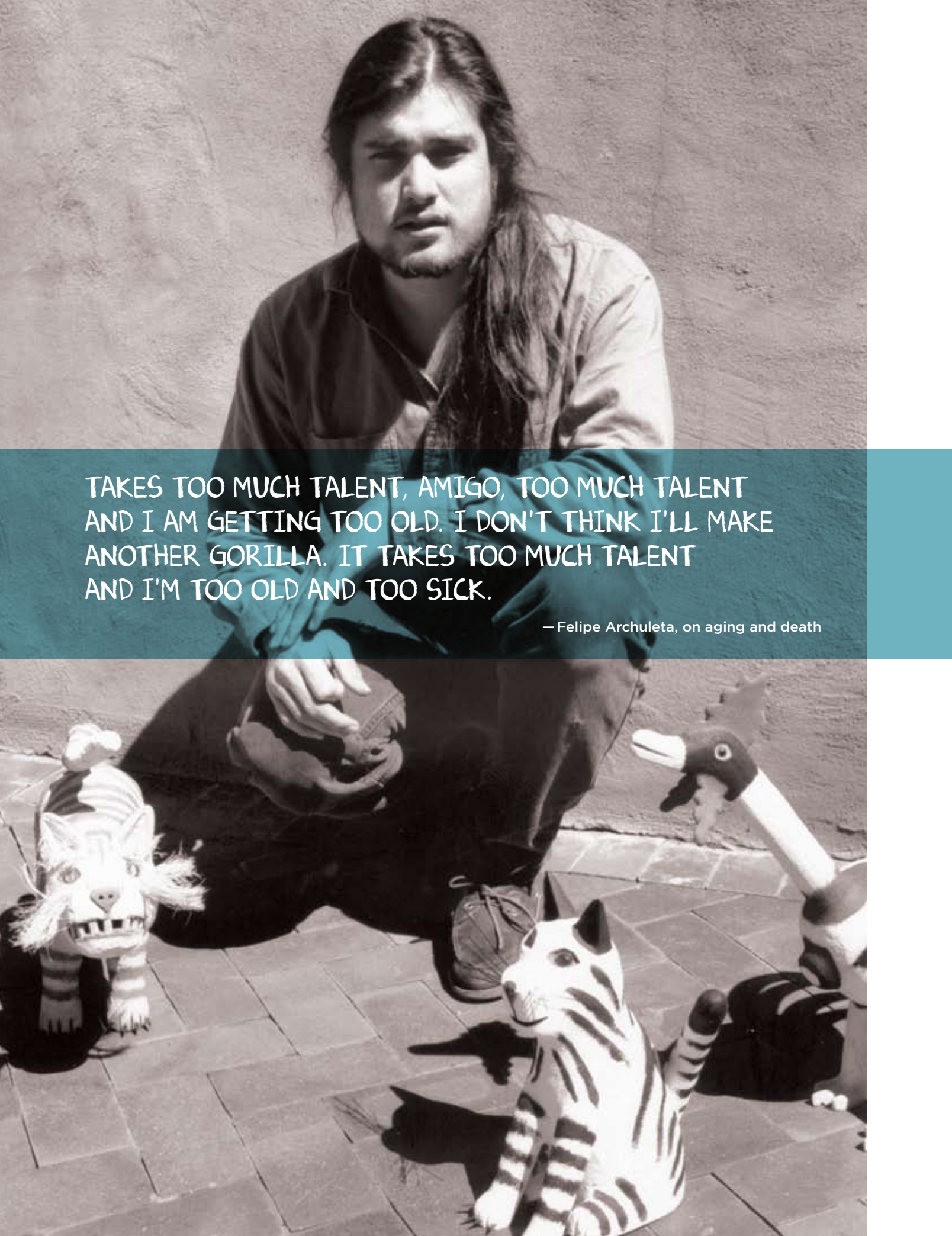
Of them all, Ron Rodríguez, Archuleta's grandson, was the one who in the end inherited the mantle of his grandfather. Put to work with the rest of them, he took it all in as a child and by adulthood he came to appreciate and understand both the gifts and the perils of life in “the yard”—including the dangers of falling to booze and drugs that caught up with those people who could not overcome their past. On his own he made smaller versions of his grandfather's iconic pieces; he also created new images, new subjects, but always with the Archuleta feel to them. Recently, he moved back into what

had become a wreck of his grandparents' adobe, pulling the weeds out of the kitchen floor, adding a gate emblazoned with his own carved version of the Sacred Heart, and working once more amid the haunting piles of old wood once gathered in the yard by his grandfather, uncle, friends, and mentors—now all gone. Once more, a head and neck-less giraffe stands in the yard. ■

Christine Mather has spent years locked up in Santa Fe basements: first as Curator of Spanish Colonial Art at the Museum of International Folk Art (1975–84) and later as Curator of Collections at the New Mexico Museum of Art (2002–11). Between these subterranean phases, she came up for air to raise two of the best daughters a mother could have and write four style books: *Santa Fe Style*, *Native America*, *True West*, and *Santa Fe Houses*. Now back with her old squeeze, Spanish Colonial art, she is a consultant at El Rancho de las Golondrinas, a living history museum devoted to Spanish life in New Mexico. Through it all she has helped her husband, Davis Mather, stockpile, rearrange, and sometimes sell folk art. He provided a roof over the family's head while promoting American folk art, including the works of Felipe Archuleta and other animal woodcarvers, as well as Navajo and Mexican folk art. His gallery is in the heart of Santa Fe and has been open for business since 1978.

Above: **Ron Archuleta Rodríguez**, *Armadillo*, 2010, wood, metal, paint. Courtesy of Robert and Kathy Horowitz. Photograph by Blair Clark.

Opposite: **Ron Archuleta Rodríguez with Tiger, Cat, and Rooster**, 1991. Photograph by Davis Mather.



TAKES TOO MUCH TALENT, AMIGO, TOO MUCH TALENT
AND I AM GETTING TOO OLD. I DON'T THINK I'LL MAKE
ANOTHER GORILLA. IT TAKES TOO MUCH TALENT
AND I'M TOO OLD AND TOO SICK.

— Felipe Archuleta, on aging and death