

TRISH CARNEY

Wave and Gull, 2011
archival photographic print, 24 x 16 in.



courtesy: the artist

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY

Sierra Inspired

Joining Art and Writing in a
Landmark Victory for Nature

In 1960, during the presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the Sierra Club published its first large-format book—*This Is the American Earth* by Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall. The book featured the art of thirty-three nature photographers. Adams had gotten to know Newhall, an impressionistic nature writer, in his dealings with her husband, Beaumont Newhall (a photography curator of the New York Museum of Modern Art). They shared a commitment to saving wild places. As an artist Newhall wrote paeonic verse reminiscent of Carl Sandburg or Vachel Lindsay, only her subject matter was Mother Earth. Adams was perhaps the greatest outdoors photographer America had ever produced. The book's goal was to showcase treasured landscapes of wild America. To Adams, nature was the very symbol of God's all-encompassing ageless spirit (what the poet Robinson Jeffers rhapsodized as "the wild God of the world").

The genesis of *This Is the American Earth* was in 1950. Deeply influenced by the poetry of Robert Frost, Newhall published the handsome book *Time in New England* (with accompanying photography by

Paul Strand). Newhall's objective was to create a new genre intertwining prose with photography. Adams—who embraced *Time in New England* as the prototype for *This Is the American Earth*—enthusiastically dubbed this hybrid approach "synaesthetic." While the book's photographers leaned heavily on monumentalism—Yosemite Valley (snowy winter) or the Tetons (thunderstorm summer)—many of the black-and-white compositions were subtler. The cover of *This Is the American Earth*, for example, was Adams's quaking aspens in New Mexico, the quiet grove shaking off the shackles of winter. Besides *Time in New England*, Newhall—a demure photography critic who never searched for the spotlight—had curated many photographic exhibits with tender loving care. Always a promoter of American landscape photography, Newhall became Adams's most trusted friend.

Nancy Newhall had a knack, Adams said, for illuminating "profound thoughts" with "explicit and miraculous words and phrases." He deemed her elegiac prose in *This Is the American Earth*—a long-form psalm—as nothing short of biblical-infused prophecy; somehow he didn't think the writing was overwrought. Gleefully he contributed photos of a frozen lake in Sequoia National Park and Stehekin River in the North Cascades to accompany her text. Newhall spoke for Kennedy's New Frontier when she wrote in *This Is the American Earth* that to "plunder the planet's crust" was a sin against God. In order to illuminate the splendors of Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains or the austerity of Nevada's Great Basin, Newhall needed Adamesque landscape photographs that overwhelmed the reader's senses, honorable portraits that celebrated the wilderness enchantment.

Throughout 1954 Newhall collaborated with Adams on collecting the right photos for the *This Is the American Earth* exhibition. Their aim was to save America from environmental degradation. For more than a year Adams and Newhall carefully mounted photographs for the show, with 103 of them chosen for the book, ones that carefully coincided with Newhall's