

## IRA UPIN

Slots, 2015  
Oil on panel, 72 x 72 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ELIZABETH MCKENZIE

# Evergreen Hero

A conversation with  
Douglas Brinkley

Slate once described Douglas Brinkley as a “neo-beatnik” based on his years taking busloads of college students to countercultural sights around the U.S. Since those days, Brinkley has written on a wide range of subjects, from the ecological impact of the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt to biographies of Rosa Parks and Walter Cronkite. His latest book, *American Moonshot: John F. Kennedy and the Great Space Race*, has gone straight to the New York Times Best Sellers list, and in March we spoke with him to discuss the origins of his abiding fascination with the space program, his environmental activism, his passion for finding lost classics in the literature of conservation and natural history, and his affection for the turbulent sixties and all that sprang forth from that period.

**ELIZABETH MCKENZIE:** It was auspicious to have you in *Catamaran*'s inaugural issue in the fall of 2012. You wrote about those iconic large-format Sierra Club books, and in particular, the Ansel Adams, Nancy Newhall book *This Is the American Earth* and how that volume helped kick off the environmental movement of the sixties. I've read you wrote your first book in 1968, at the age of eight—an encyclopedia of Americans you admired, stitched between pieces of cardboard. Do you remember who was in there?

**DOUGLAS BRINKLEY:** Well, this is actually a good segue, because when I was a boy, I grew up in Ohio, in a town called Perrysburg, and down the road was Neil Armstrong, who was from Wapakoneta. And so I was of the age where going to the moon was a big deal. I was nine years old when Armstrong walked on the moon, and I had collected memorabilia about it and bought all of those Apollo 11 souvenirs. When the moon rock traveled around the country on a train, my family took me to go see it. I was there for the opening of the Neil Armstrong museum in Wapakoneta, and just a year ago, my wife, Anne, and I took our three kids there. So, Neil Armstrong was the evergreen hero of my youth, simply because he was the first man on the moon and grew up down the road from where I grew up.

**EM:** I recognized a link between your work on historical conservationists and on the space age of the sixties—you

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drew it yourself in an article about Walter Cronkite, describing his late career ecological activism: “Disturbed by the globe’s ecological woes, he kept a framed photo over his desk, the elegiac *Earthrise* (with the moon in the foreground), taken by Apollo 8 astronaut Bill Anders in late December 1968. Earth was so lovely and fragile floating out there in the vast universe, and that symbolic picture, in which no national boundary lines could be seen, shrank all the world’s troubles down to one-world size. With something akin to a conversion experience, Cronkite committed himself to protecting the planet from nature abusers, despoilers, and polluters.”

So I think we can now conclude that Walter Cronkite is the cornerstone of your psyche.

DB: That might be true! It might tell you I was weaned on television news. I’m just really interested in the 1960s. John F. Kennedy, the president I’ve written about a lot; the era of the Vietnam War and how it divided our country; Martin Luther King and civil rights; the women’s

movement; the environmental movement. It was this great progressive wave of the 1960s marked by the war in Vietnam.

And so that’s what I tend to do, as a historian, write about that period. The way the *Earthrise* photo was received, Cronkite wasn’t alone. I mean, millions of people adopted that photo and reminded themselves that we’re the only inhabited planet out there. Some of the imagery from space was quite humbling—how we’re all alone in this insignificant solar system, and that we’ve got to become better stewards and custodians of Earth. And that seen from space there were no borderlines of countries or counties.

I grew up feeling that. I was also interested in the Beat generation writers who wrote about the environment, like Gary Snyder and Lew Welch and Michael McClure. The combo of the Beat generation talking about ecology, the Sierra Club with David Brower and Ansel Adams, the moon journey, and astronauts exploring space and bringing back new data about our cosmos—all of that to me was interrelated in the sense that it was dealing with, you know, what is Earth? And that’s a pretty big question.

It’s not by coincidence that most of the top leaders that are combating climate change have come out of NASA. James Hansen, the Paul Revere of climate change, worked for NASA, and today NASA and NOAA come forward with all sorts of atmospheric data. You know, we may in the end be saved by some of our satellites, our ability to weather forecast and see now what we take for granted with Google Earth, but NASA pioneered it, the essence of it, in the 1960s.

EM: Your body of work includes biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt, focusing on their environmental legacies. What would an American president have to do in our time to have to leave an environmental legacy of the importance of Teddy Roosevelt’s or FDR’s?

DB: My book *Rightful Heritage: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Land of America* was really about what the Green New Deal was. I don’t mean climate change, I mean the Green New Deal of the 1930s and 40s. How FDR, through the Civilian Conservation Corps, combated the drainage of swamps, air pollution, poison of lakes, and dust bowls in the Great Plains. From 1933 to 1942, young men and

women planted three billion trees around the states, as part of a greening of America. Because back in the 1930s and 40s, we were already experiencing drought, forest fires, and environmental depredation. Now, with the [current] Green New Deal, young people are again trying to find ways to create new kinds of environmental guidelines, trying to transition to a world without fossil fuels and hyperindustrialization.

So, we live in a kind of continuum. My knowledge of Theodore Roosevelt’s conservation and FDR’s New Deal environmentalism helps put me in the twenty-first century of how one would do things, how one would conceive wild places, how to bring back endangered species, how we can scrub the earth of pollutants, how we can clean our oceans and waterways. I get great fortitude from American history in that we’ve faced different crises and weathered them well. We have been able to do some remarkable things.

I mean, today, we have 550 national wildlife refuges, and that’s due to Teddy Roosevelt’s and FDR’s foresight. Now we’re going to need a new political leadership that’s willing to take climate change seriously and think and plan in planetary terms. We’ve gone backwards the last few years, and hopefully after the 2020 election, we’ll find a new direction to start implementing a strategy for living in the age of climate change.

EM: The writer and historian Jon Meacham said of *American Moonshot*, “In an age when so little seems possible, Douglas Brinkley has taken us back to a moment when everything did.” And that seems like such a notable distinction between then and now. Do you think there’s anything that could capture the national imagination, now, as the space program did in the sixties?

DB: If we’re going to have another American moonshot—and that’s become a term that to me means “can do it self”—it has to be done in a bipartisan fashion, meaning we’ve got to all work together for a common goal. Jack Kennedy provided the leadership for going to the moon. The taxpayers flipped the \$25 billion, which is about \$185 billion in today’s terms, to do it because they wanted the United States to be the first in science and to beat the Soviets to the moon, and in 1960, *Time* magazine showed scientists as their Persons of the Year—as a whole, scientists.

By 1969, those scientists were often seen as part of the industrial military complex. It’d be interesting today if we’d start elevating our science community and listening to them in issues dealing with how to take care of the planet. So I think presidential leaders without it are not gonna move any big meters. And, I mean, I don’t know how we’d do it, but who doesn’t want to end respiratory illnesses in urban areas? Who doesn’t want to make sure children aren’t living in a toxic wasteland?

It just needs to be framed in a bipartisan way, and so it’s going to have to be quite a remarkable leader that will galvanize the public the way Jack Kennedy did it up on the moon.

EM: We’re a literary magazine, so we’re interested in your writing process. Can you tell us anything about what that’s like?

DB: Well, for example, for *American Moonshot*, I did the official oral history interview of Neil Armstrong back in 2001. I give you that date because it tells you how long I’ve been mulling writing about the moonshot. And in the meantime, books like I did on Walter Cronkite had a connection to NASA. So I’ve been collecting books on the issue of NASA in the fifties and sixties, and beyond, for a long time. I’m a collector, so I have a big library designated for space.

I’m the Presidential Historian for CNN, so I’m always interested in classes on U.S. presidential history. So, it takes a lot of reading and building your mind up to engage with a particular topic. The writing itself is usually about a four-year process, and it’s a painting. You know, some months are more furious than others, but the key to me is try to write a couple of pages every day, even if some of it falls into the wastebasket, just to stay engaged with the book idea and start putting pen to paper. And so my last two years have been quite dramatic on *American Moonshot*, you know, working on it all the time.

EM: You write about books that have been great agents of change, like *Silent Spring* and *This Is the American Earth*, but you’ve contributed a number of change-making books yourself.

DB: I was recently working on an essay on Edward Abbey, who wrote *Desert Solitaire*, for the *New York Times* on the fiftieth anniversary of that book. And 2019 is the hundredth birthday of the Grand Canyon becoming a national park, so right now I'm looking at a book by a man named Joseph Wood Krutch called *The Grand Canyon*. He wrote the best book in my opinion on the Grand Canyon, and we're trying to get it reprinted, with a new introduction.

So I'm constantly trying to go back as a historian and find classic books that pertain to the wilderness and get them back in print and shed a new spotlight on them. And the other thing that's more of interest to me these days is the issue of environmental justice, such as recognizing the importance of Cesar Chavez's fight against pesticides and the public health concerns of that. And there's a book I highly recommend called *Women Strike for Peace* by Amy Swerdlow. She deals with women from the peace movement in the 1960s and with all the women working on the antinukes movement and beyond. Right now I'm very high on *Women Strike for Peace*, as I recently discovered it, and Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Grand Canyon*.

EM: Your book on Alaska, *The Quiet World: Saving Alaska's Wilderness Kingdom*, stresses that the saving of natural resources is essentially a never-ending battle that must be fought against commodification and development. My mother was a ranger at the Grand Canyon, and its preservation was more or less the most important thing in her life. Losing the fight for Glen Canyon devastated her as well as many others. Has there been a fight you've been especially emotionally invested in?

DB: Yeah, the big one for me, and the prompt for writing *The Quiet World*, was that I went camping up in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge [ANWR] in Alaska, and then I spent time in the Brooks Range, and it's the most beautiful country, the amount of teeming wildlife and solitude. Arctic Alaska was really a spiritual journey for me. So whenever I can, I've tried to protect that part of the world from oil and gas drilling. Dwight Eisenhower created ANWR in 1960, and they discovered oil in it in 1968, and ever since, people have been looking to gouge our nation's biggest wildlife refuge.

I feel like I'm a great protector of that particular ecosystem. But I'm also very concerned as I speak to you about what's going on in Lake Erie. The Great Lakes don't have a Sierra Club operating in earnest up there. Lake Erie was cleaned in the 1970s and '80s, only to end up in terrible condition right now.

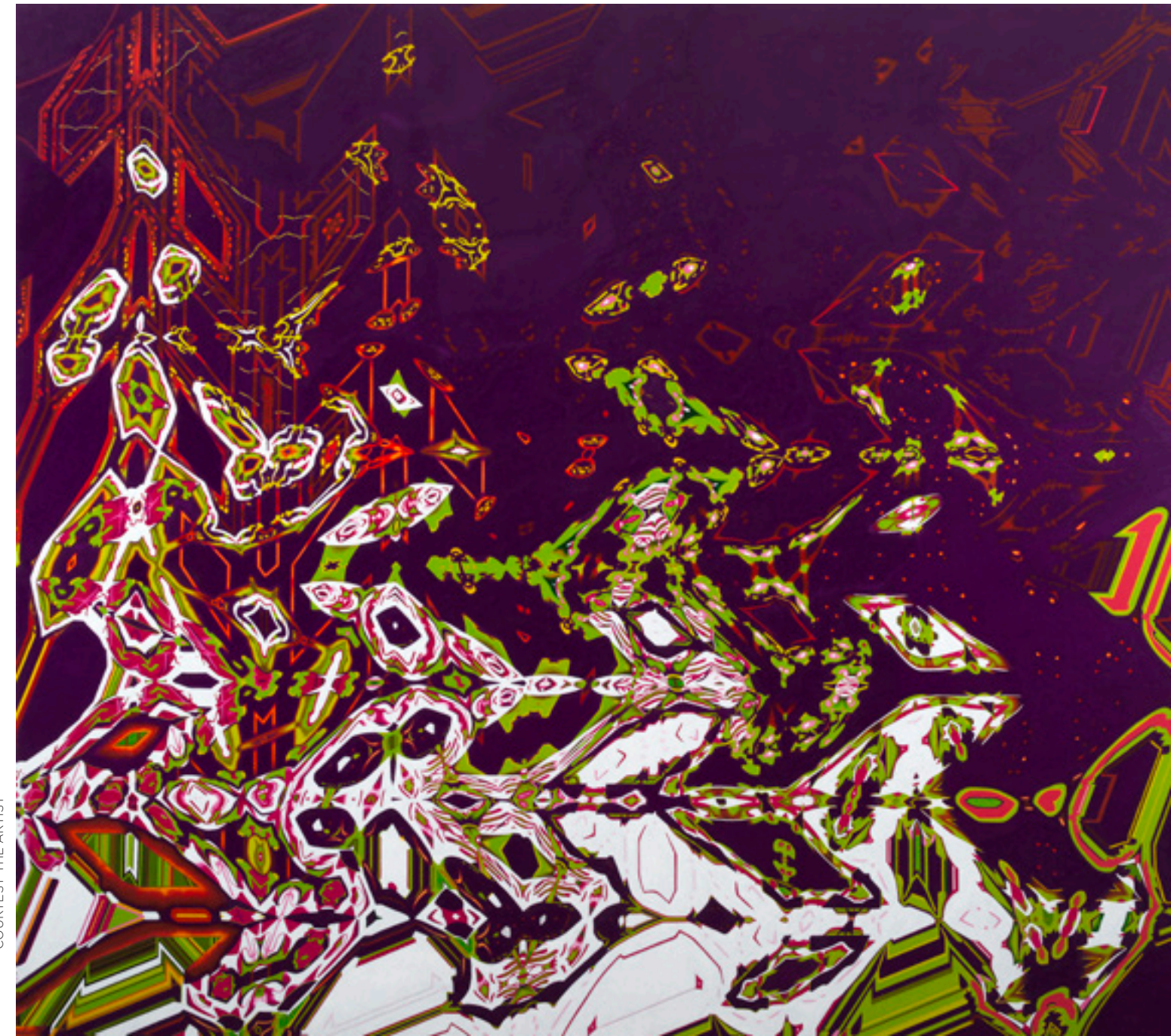
And so, you just have to keep weighing in with op-ed pieces, testifying before Congress, writing articles, books, and just doing your part. I try to go to as many college campuses as I can to talk about American wilderness and the preservation of public land.

**Douglas Brinkley** is the Katherine Tsanoff Brown Chair in Humanities and Professor of History at Rice University, a CNN Presidential Historian, and a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*. In the world of public history, he serves on boards, at museums, at colleges, and for historical societies. The *Chicago Tribune* dubbed him "America's New Past Master." The New-York Historical Society has chosen Brinkley as its official U.S. Presidential Historian. His recent book *Cronkite* won the Sperber Prize, while *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* received the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award. He was awarded a Grammy for *Presidential Suite* and is the recipient of seven honorary doctorates in American studies. His two-volume, annotated *Nixon Tapes* recently won the Arthur S. Link-Warren F. Kuehl Prize. He is a member of the Century Association, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the James Madison Council of the Library of Congress. He lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife and three children.

**Elizabeth McKenzie**'s novel *The Portable Veblen* was long-listed for the National Book Award for fiction and received the California Book Award for fiction. Her work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and others. McKenzie is the managing editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader*.

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*Still Life*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 72 x 80 in



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