

ARTNEWS

Vasari Diary: Simon Schama's 'Civilizations,' Neil Grayson, and Dostoevsky as Draftsman

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Neil Grayson, *16 Birds (Industrial Melanism)*, 2017, silver, palladium, white gold, and oil on canvas, two views of the same canvas under different lighting—night and daylight.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Neil Grayson's Many Metamorphoses

Alchemy assumes many guises, real and imaginary, its reach extending from chemistry to magic. It can turn pleasure into sorrow, light into dark, stillness into motion. In Neil Grayson's elusive works, it touches on nothing less than the genetic, the material, the poetic, the spiritual, the psychological, and the metaphoric. A

founder of the Dactyl Foundation, based in New York and devoted to art and science research, Grayson purveys the deep and infinite realm of interconnectedness.

Since being established in 1997, by Grayson and novelist/philosopher of science V.N. Alexander, Dactyl has hosted poets, writers, and artists ranging from Robert Motherwell to John Ashbery to Elizabeth Hardwick, and sponsored conferences and events in New York and beyond, such as its “Biosemiotics Gathering” to be held in June, in Berkeley, California.



Neil Grayson, *Reinvented (Industrial Melanism)*, 2015, silver, white gold, and oil and canvas.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Testifying to the foundation’s aspiration was Grayson’s recent show of paintings, titled “Industrial Melanism,” at Eykyn Maclean Gallery, which was strikingly devoted to unearthing the complexities of art and science. Grayson said he is devoted to “poetics and structure—to maintaining the balance.” The ambiguity of tone in his painting and the inherent darkness and light at play in his imagery show and question the way we see and what we see.

Masses of shimmering silver lepidopterans that vary their individual and collective shape and substance depending on the angles from which they are viewed appear to be in continual motion as light glints off their surfaces; as a body, they shift into formations and then partially fade from view.

Grayson's inspiration is the peppered moth, a species that changes in color from white with speckles to pure black. He said he was motivated to make his work by studying the phenomenon of Industrial Melanism, a process whereby the skin or fur covering a living organism blends in with the environmental soot produced by industry. And "the melanization of a population," he explained, "increases the probability that its members will survive and reproduce." The presumption is that the evolution that takes place over generations favors the darker animals, which, being less conspicuous to predators, are better able to prevail.

Grayson began his investigation by hand when he was 16 years old, spending many hours at the Metropolitan Museum. He would painstakingly copy the techniques of the Old Masters—especially Rembrandt, and, as he closely examined the self-portraits, Grayson found himself exploring how light illuminates darkness. In fact, he is profoundly motivated by such polarities across the board. Drawn to darkness, he remarked, "I love the Hopeful Monster theory as well as *Breaking Bad*, in which the character who inevitably becomes what he/she was meant to be—bad? good?—reached that point where they discover their language." Nevertheless, he pointed out, "the challenge with darkness is that you find something unique in it without necessarily becoming negative." He admits to being an inveterate optimist.

There could be many expressions of the effects of alchemy—in literature, for example. In a short story written in 1908 by the American writer H. P. Lovecraft, titled "The Alchemist," the author sums up his state of mind: "I was isolated, and thrown upon my own resources, I spent the hours of my childhood in poring over the ancient tomes that filled the shadow-haunted library of the chateau, and in roaming without aim or purpose through the perpetual dusk of the spectral wood that clothes the side of the hill near its foot. It was perhaps an effect of such surroundings that my mind early acquired a shade of melancholy. Those studies and pursuits which partake of the dark and occult in Nature most strongly claimed my attention."

The proof, for Grayson, turns out to be in his life, where art and reality intertwine. Grayson's highly sensitive 13-year-old son Maddox, whom he home-schools, did not fit into any conventional school, but he spontaneously emerged from his chrysalis like a liberated moth as he sat at his computer and taught himself to write and mix music. He did this without having played any instrument and without knowing how to read music. Miraculously, however, he has ended up with a career, working under the guidance of his multi-Grammy-winning mentor, producer Mike Dean,

composing for and working with noted hip-hop artists. He broke out of his isolation and emerged, thanks to alchemy and nature, and talent, a fully engaged teenager.

In Grayson's haunting works, we see the forces of nature mimicked in human, plant, and animal life. Recently, Grayson said, he has been consumed by the idea of replicating the malleable shades of the peppered moth in metals layered in oil and pigment, magically uniting substance and light.