

QUIET LUNCH

N°5



NEIL GRAYSON

SAVANT | SOCK ARMS | HARMONIA | MALINCHE | DICE



THE EVOLUTION OF A SERIAL SAVANT. | NEIL GRAYSON.

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Happiness is overrated but purpose is everything. After all, is it not safe to say that a life without it can lead to unhappiness? Purpose is not law but a life without purpose can be existentially excruciating; it can lack direction and incentive. Even the most basic needs give your life purpose. Food, shelter, love and belonging—these bare necessities all give most human beings a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Awakening to the smell of coal and a cast iron skillet, the thought of being safe and warm in your home during a storm, the feel of a lover's cheek gently brushing against your own... Abraham Maslow did not create a hierarchy of needs out of thin air. These casual occurrences are in fact far from casual; they create the very fiber of what we live for.

"I wouldn't be able to wake up and do anything if I didn't think I could find a new way of thinking. I feel my meaning as a human is to create a unique vision of world where all has purpose, where light gives meaning to the darkness, where darkness cradles the light. A universe that expands endlessly with our imaginations."

Having found a purpose that lies further beyond food, shelter, physical affection, Neil Grayson lives to create. In a strange way, he almost has no need

to do anything else. He has knowingly dedicated his life to dissecting and reinterpreting humanity through related, and unrelated, happenings.

Grayson loses himself in his work, giving his mind, body and soul to the journey of discovering what makes us tick. When in his presence, one gets the feel that Grayson does not have an ear for small talk. The act of producing art allows him to articulate the indescribable phenomenon of existing and the result is nothing short of perpetual intent and sheer, unadulterated joy. He knows no other language. Not to say that he is not up for a casual chat about the weather or your run of the mill political discourse, but he always manages to methodically make his way to the meat of the conversation every time. Grayson has a knowledgeable air about him that is grounded by an almost childlike inquisitiveness and a beaming sense of humility. He seems cognizant of his journey, from past, present to even well into the future. Grayson is an oracle, capable of seeing everyone's future but his own. After all, who wants to read a book or watch a movie if they know each detail, from beginning to end, beforehand?

When asked exactly what he would do without art, Grayson halfheartedly—but candidly—jokes, "My gut response is "I would be a law abiding criminal". And

as I think through it, I probably mean 'I would be a politician'. [Laughs] Grayson has an inadvertently dark, mysterious way about him. You can almost presume that he has an alter-ego; but nothing close to that of a criminal or a politician. Instead, he is an expressive anti-hero, a brilliant forensicist with the uncanny facility for creative analysis. He wears a slight smile when confronting death, madness and vulnerability, and in his fight, Grayson has made these existential antagonists allies—employing them as key players in his efforts to crack the universal code.

"Rembrandt found light and gave meaning to the darkness and purpose to the sadness."

The internal inferno that rages within Grayson has gone through its stages. When Grayson was a teen, he studied every medium almost extensively, eventually developing within his young mind a proverbial toolbox. He first became obsessed with painting through Rembrandt's self portraits. Grayson was hypnotized by the famous painter's signature lighting technique—which is specifically named after Rembrandt himself. Grayson believed Rembrandt's portraits were picture perfect examples of self-awareness and creative existentialism and was immediately inspired. "My first [core] theme, my older work which I began as a teenager,

was about self examination and trying to know the subconscious in order to take control of a self destruction impulse. I think we can imagine to the extent we know ourselves, and our universe mirrors our imagination. Nothing is finite," shares Grayson before going into Industrial Melanism, a body of work inspired by a natural phenomenon in which a creature—predominantly arthropods—changes its pigmentation according to changes in their environment. Grayson is exploring industrial melanism not just out of scientific curiosity but out of expressive serendipity.

Grayson's eyes burn with an unwavering desire when he speaks about the current concept behind his work; a concept that he has been shaping and molding itself for the past two decades and manifested almost by happenstance. But before we get into Grayson's obsession with the phenomenon that is industrial melanism, let us flashback to early nineteenth century England where the first major study of industrial melanism began. The white pepper moth flourished in the countryside of London and Manchester, enjoying near invisibility amongst the lightly colored foliage. Then, as those cities became populated with coal burning factories, the forest became coated in soot. The white pepper moth was greatly affected by the change in decor. Its cover was



blown and it was now susceptible to predators as it was not blending in quite as well as it used to. Now sticking out like a sore thumb, the white pepper moth had a choice to make—adapt or die. Flash forward to the mid-nineteenth century and the black pepper moth population, once a rarity, is booming. Naturalists took notice, specimens were collected and studied and by the end of the century the term “industrial melanism” was born.

Unable to cope with a lack of camouflage and the increased pollution, the white moth population dwindled. The black peppered moth went from being an anomaly to now making up more than 98% of the pepper moth population. When we think of evolution, natural selection and Darwinism in general, we think of survival of the fittest. But if we were to reconsider, there is more to evolution than the strong begetting the strong. “That notion of evolution is too simplistic. It leaves no room for Nature to conduct experiments,” Grayson points out. Grayson continues, “looking at it like that, in real life, the biggest, the strongest, the most efficient kills off the weak and becomes bigger, stronger and more efficient and so forth... using that logic, in the back of our minds, you then believe it’s logical that a corporation swallows up all the smaller companies, become stronger and more efficient... and you would think that human beings, the stronger group, would kill off the weaker become stronger and so on and so. If you follow Darwinism in its simplistic view, you would end up with one corporation and one race.”

According to Grayson, there is more to Nature’s happy accidents than just casting them off as outliers. At heart Grayson believes that when it comes to Nature, there are essential experiments that are vital to the bigger picture. This is neutral evolution and the artist in the black peppered moth.

“We knew Neil’s technical skills were in a league of their own, but it has been exciting to watch how he used those skills, honed obsessively since childhood, to create a body of work that is wholly new and deeply personal. Neil’s Industrial Melanism series takes the viewer on a journey through the artist’s sometimes dark but always fascinating psyche, and we anticipate that the public’s response will be just as animated and excited as ours.”

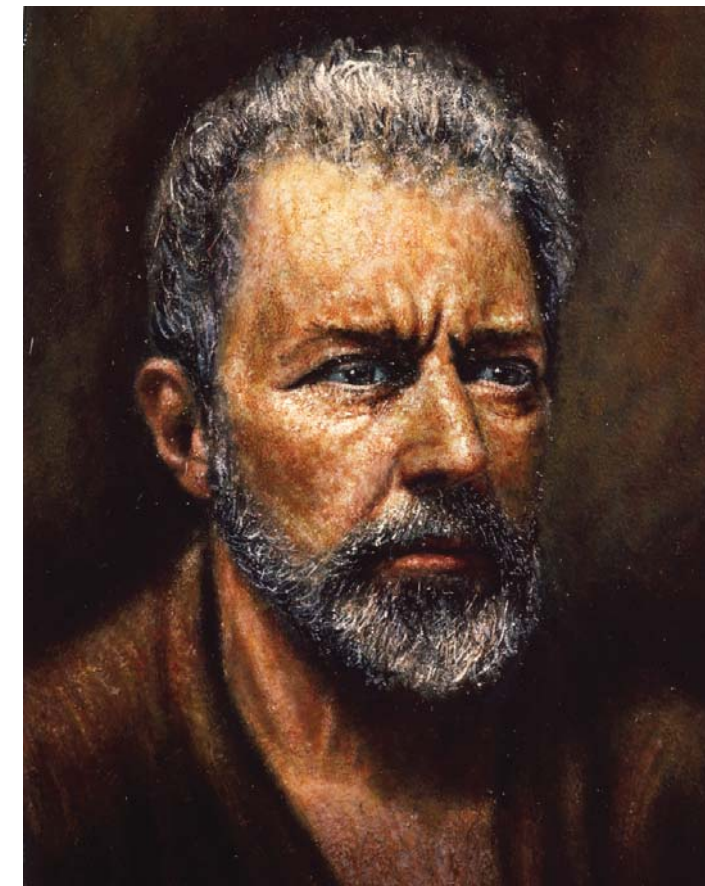
-Christopher Eykyn
Partner, Eykyn Maclean



The Falconer, 2017



Hindsight, 2017



Herbert L. Grayson, 1987

Fixated on the inner workings of life and how we adapt to our environments not just physically but mentally, Grayson has taken the prominent study of the white pepper moth and broadened its horizons. Because Grayson uses precious metals in his paintings—primarily silver—his works have a reflective range and spontaneity; which thusly reflects the notion of perspective and, more importantly, the unraveling of the mortal coil. When you walk by one of Grayson's pieces every angle is a new painting. Every point of view is its own unique experiment.

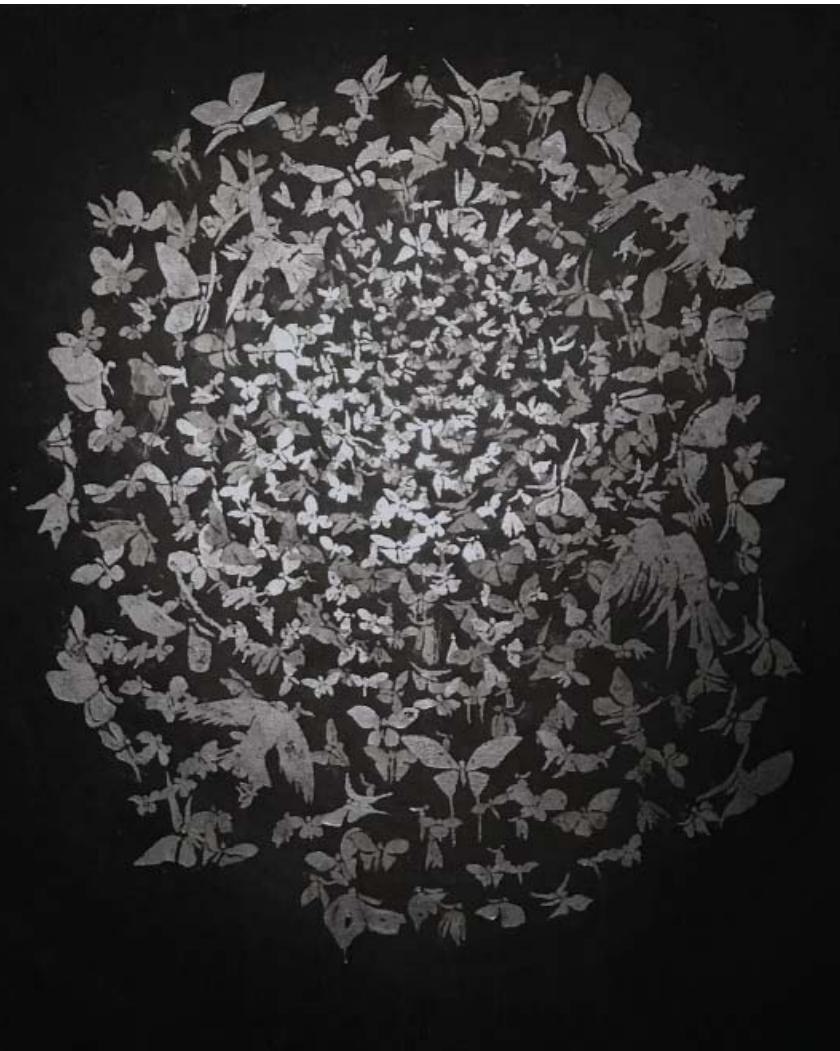
Grayson's battle with the light and the darkness, happiness and depression, lepidopterans and revolvers is an evident element in his work. He intends to relinquish the darkness, depression and revolvers but deep down he knows that they are all a part of the structure and refrains from throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Similar to how Rembrandt used light, Grayson has simultaneously picked up and extinguished the torch, using the dark to further the existential narrative in his own right. One may not realize it at first but Grayson's current body of work is indeed a series of self portraits.

The pieces are organized chaos huddled and thrashing underneath one conceptual umbrella. There is an allegorical tug-of-war taking place between illumination and the abyss—one that takes place in most of us. As a human being, Grayson knows this struggle all too well; but as an artist, he has taken it upon himself to illustrate, demonstrate and eventually alleviate this immutable quandary. This is a feat that no creative can pursue on their own.

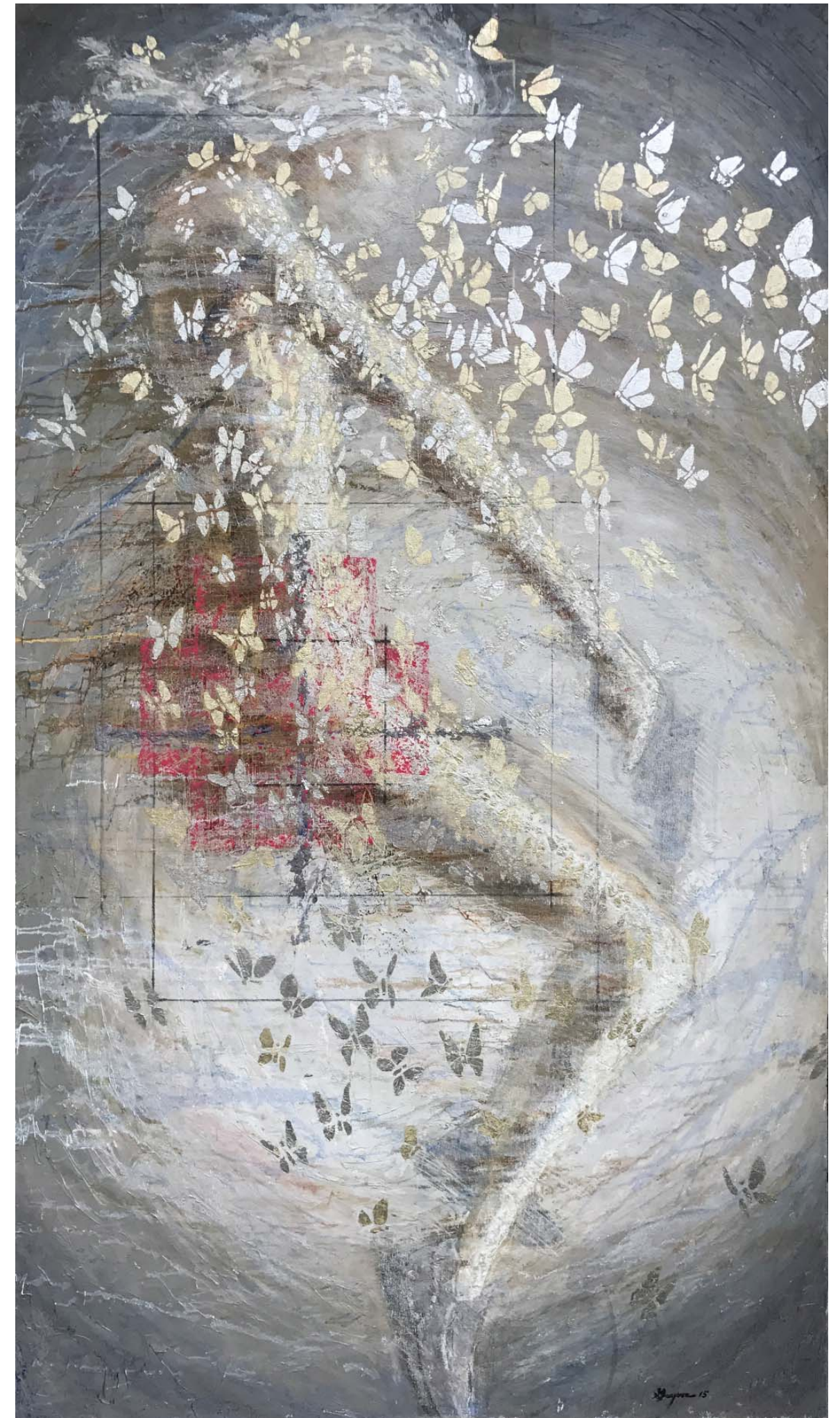
"Fortunately there was always someone, or something, that randomly appeared and in the smallest isolated moments that lifted me. There is a family, the Sussmans, that has believed in me for 30 years and have continuously supported my art as if it were a calling."

With a willingness to acknowledge the existing elements that surrounds him, Grayson has become an inspiration to all of us who are merely trying to make sense of it all. He is genuinely vested in the work and is disposed to getting his hands dirty when piecing together multiple truths. Grayson is a creative of the people, content with confronting, and simultaneously taking comfort in, the unknown. For all the anomalies, the atypicals, the misfits and the oddballs—for all those unable to fight the good fight, Grayson has taken upon himself to give it purpose.

My paintings change drastically depending on the light, like night and day.



Turn of the Gyre, 2017



Horizontal Blonde, 2015

ARTNEWS

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

BY **Barbara A. MacAdam** POSTED 05/14/18 4:11 PM



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.