Brian DeGraw
James Fuentes LLC
New York

The works in Brian DeGraw’s recent exhibition, ‘As the World Burns’, at James Fuentes LLC – the artist’s first show in New York since 2007 – were made at around the same time that the artist-musician was recording the tracks for his band Gang Gang Dance’s recent album E3ctac3nt (2011). Speaking to music website Pitchfork about the album, he said: ‘I imagined our music being more about closing your eyes and escaping. This album, however, felt wide-eyed, as if we were just staring at the listener.’ ‘As the World Burns’ had a similar quality – both E3ctac3nt and the works in this show felt holistic, each playing off qualities of the other.

In the front space, four ceramic owls were perched on plinths made of hollow concrete blocks. Two of the owls were painted a metallic colour, one was painted a creamy white and its counterpart was bi-chromatic, black paint crawling down its once-white body. On one of the metallic owls, square and jagged pieces of coloured Perspex were arranged on the bird’s head and shoulder like a synthetic extension of the eerie rendition of the animal, and another sported a honeycomb Mohawk. Two had New Age crystals poised on their heads.

On a wall opposite the parliament of perched owls, a white ceramic hand protruded from the wall ominously; a long, iridescent Perspex strip emanated from its palms and ended in the fingertips of a second hand (attached to a forearm) resting on the floor, like something from a sci-fi movie.

Similar strips were also seen on an untitled painting (2011), a black and white portrait of a suave, bespectacled middle-aged man, the deep lines in his face and downward expression of his mouth overlaid with the coloured lines. Next to it, a light box held a miniature plastic replica of the White House with a browned banana placed on top of it; the concrete block plinth it was staged on was flanked by two more owls, one black and one white, gazing outward. DeGraw’s tongue-in-cheek sculpture The Thinker (2011) is a ceramic version of Rodin’s famous work, but sat hunched over, checking a blackberry. This rather unsubtle play between past and present – the technology-inundated now and seemingly simpler past – rested on a base of paper Monopoly money.

Issues of culture versus nature, reverence, humour and humility – as well as virtual relationships, communities and the misuse of money – played a crucial role in this show, most clearly evident in the apocalyptically titled As the World Burns. A collection of works on paper that hung salon-style in the intimate nook at the back of the gallery, this piece was the highlight of the show and, as DeGraw said of his last album, looked viewers straight in the eye. The collaged portraits of visionaries included anthropologist Jane Goodall, The Fall’s Mark E. Smith, jazz drummer Billy Cobham, Constantin Brancusi, Nina Simone, Karen Dalton, and others. On a portrait of Scott Walker, a halo of words around the subject’s head reads, AND ROARING THROUGH DARKNESS – THE NIGHT CHILDREN FLY ... a line from Walker’s 1969 song ‘Rhymes of Goodbye’.

In a self-portrait, DeGraw depicted just the frontal part of his profile. Two lines, one red and one blue, moved from the area behind his eye in a right angle to almost the bottom right-hand corner of the page. The rigidity of the lines contrasted with a black and white decorative pattern that also framed the back of the artist’s head – the complement of rigidity and pattern, colour and lack of colour and the intense gaze of the artist into the white space before him seemed to offer a window into his mind. Like many of the album covers and lyrics by Gang Gang Dance, the presence of ghosts refers to those friends that DeGraw has lost over the years. In the same way the band honoured their former band member and friend Nathan Maddox, who was struck by lightning whilst standing on a New York rooftop in 2002 – adorning the covers of both their 2005 album God’s Money and 2009’s Saint Dymphna with Maddox’s face – DeGraw honours his icons and heroes, all of whom have displayed strong connections or commitment to nature and the environment.

Marina Cashdan

Friedrich Schreiber-Sonnenstern
Night: Zynus Theory – Whither Demons of Desolation and Withering
1933
Coloured pencil on cardboard
75×51 cm
Below right: Justizvorsorge, Dummness with the Scales of the Last Judgment
1932
Coloured pencil on cardboard
75×51 cm

Brian DeGraw
The Thinker
2011
Ceramic, Perspex and brass
t. 1.7×1.2×1.2 m