



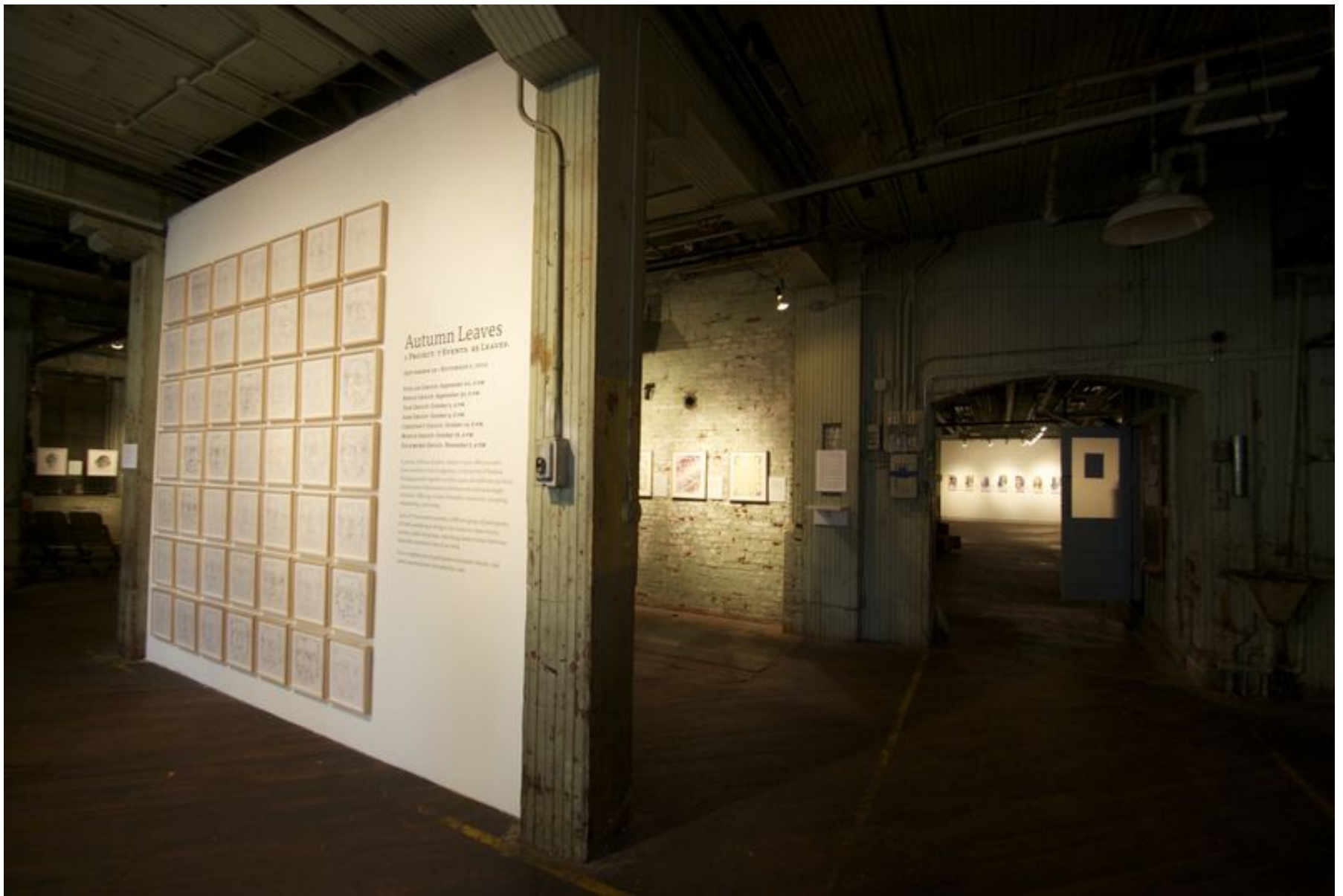
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BALTIMORE CITY PAPER

Peter Bruun's Autumn Leaves series reaches across ages and backgrounds to share knowledge about the meaning of life

By **BY EVAN SERPICK**
CITY PAPER
OCT 27, 2014 AT 5:58 PM





Autumn Leaves creator Peter Bruun's 49 sketches are on display at Area 405, foreground, as are the portraits done of each event's seven speakers. (Marie Machin)

A few weeks ago in our State of the Arts issue, City Paper launched a conversation about the divisions, or silos, within the local arts community. It turns out that, as we were publishing that issue, local artists were putting on a series of events that is, in many ways, a perfect example of a project that could break down those divisions, or at least reach across them to broaden conversations about art and life.

Autumn Leaves consists of seven events held at Area 405 (2014's "Best Gallery"). At each event, named after a type of tree (Birch, Oak, etc.), seven people aged 50 and older (leaves) are tasked with giving a seven-minute talk responding to the following questions: What gives your life meaning? How do you think about your own dying, or passing? What do you have to say to young people coming after you, or what advice would you give your 21-year-old self?

For each event, a local artist has created portraits of the seven leaves and a local writer has written 49-word pieces about them. Members of local youth groups read the pieces and introduce the leaves, and youth music and dance groups have performed before and after several of them. The final event, Sycamore, takes place Nov. 2 at 4 p.m.

For cynics like us, it's easy to raise an eyebrow at the contrived nature of an event like this. The emphasis on the tree metaphor and using sevens and its multiples as the structure for everything is a bit hokey. Potentially worse is the framing of a series in which "older" people—and 50 is really not that old these days—are asked to talk about death and life lessons, as if their active lives are practically over.

The cynicism is tempered by the fact that the series was conceived by local artist and

curator Peter Bruun, who created 49 drawings, which are also on display, on the occasion of his own 50th birthday. It is further tempered by the events themselves, which, in our experience attending two of them, have been rich with insight and humor.

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We attended the Chestnut event and enjoyed the time before the talks, wandering around and enjoying the portraits for all the events on display. Area 405 is a perfect venue for this series, airy, with lots of wall space. Painter Paris Johnson made the portraits for the Chestnut leaves, which included Adote Akwei, Alvin Eng, Mel Holden, Harriet Lynn, Zinaida Rozenberg, Tamra Settles, and Marc Steiner. Johnson's lush, colorful pieces were full of life, and, in a brief talk from the stage after the event, it's clear they were the result of meaningful time spent with the subjects.

The event had its awkward moments. When the hosts of the Chestnut event, Pamela Eisenberg and Kevin Griffin Moreno (also the Chestnut writer), gingerly tried to explain the purpose of the event, to hear the wisdom of people in the "autumn of their lives," one on the leaves in attendance—we weren't sure which one—got a big laugh when he shouted out "late summer!" Eng, a Goucher theater professor, started his talk saying, "Now that I have officially been designated as a leaf . . ." and got another laugh. And Akwei, a union organizer originally from Togo, expressed puzzlement over the whole concept. "Where I am from, there is no such thing as 'autumn,'" he said. "So, I'm not sure what this is all about."

Indeed, the Baby Boomer generation seems to have succeeded in shifting the way we think about aging. Rather than go gently into that good night, as many in previous generations may have done, Boomers, who considered themselves hell-raisers, raged against the dying of the light, insisting that lives can still be vital long into their autumn. It showed how much this mentality had seeped into the general zeitgeist that asking people in their 50s and 60s to talk about dying seemed downright rude.

And yet, when the talks began, there was wisdom. Rozenberg talked about growing up in Latvia and losing her family in the Holocaust, Settles talked about realizing the value of freedom after spending 28 years in prison, and Steiner, the WEAA radio show host, talked about reconciling with his conservative father after years of difficulty.

We also attended the Maple event and there were also intriguing anecdotes and life lessons there, but leaves at both events tended to breeze past the death question. "I don't really think about it" was the most common response—and that in itself could be considered wisdom. Artist Lee Boot, a Maple leaf, was one of the few to engage the question in any depth, suggesting that, though he is an atheist, he believes that neurologically there is life after death, because it's been shown that our interactions with other people actually change the way their brains work, so that we leave a physical trace on humanity.

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At the Chestnut event, young people from Muse 360 Arts introduced each of the leaves, orating the written pieces about them from memory and presenting them with copies of the portraits of themselves that hung on the walls. At the Maple event, performers from a youth group called Walks of Art, including a dance troupe and a pair of high school rappers performed before the talks and members of another group, Encouraging the World, introduced the leaves.

Speaker after speaker at both events, particularly the Maple one, remarked that they

had never seen such a diverse crowd at a Baltimore arts event, and neither had we. Area 405 was packed to standing room only with people from all backgrounds, genders, and age groups, from high schoolers to retirees. Clearly, that was part of Bruun's intent: The lineup of participants for each event seemed carefully calibrated to include people from different walks of life, backgrounds, ages, etc. It might have seemed a bit contrived, but it occurred to us as we sat amid this rare and beautiful gathering of Baltimoreans that maybe that kind of detailed forethought and planning is what it takes to create a truly diverse Baltimore arts event. It would be great if it happened on its own, but experience tells us it doesn't.

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The final Autumn Leaves event, Sycamore, takes place Nov. 2 at 4 p.m. at Area 405. Info at autumnleaves.bruunstudios.com

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