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THE WIRE

'Autumn Leaves' project explores the art of aging

By **BY TIM SMITH**
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A portrait of Juanita Brown by Nicole Buckingham Kern, part of the "Autumn Leaves" project created by artist Peter Bruun (Courtesy of Nicole Buckingham Kern/Bruun Studios, Handout photo)

It all started with a number: 49.

Peter Bruun, a Copenhagen, Denmark-born artist who has made Baltimore his home since 1987, created a series of 49 drawings two years ago.



"I thought at the time that they were simple sketches," Bruun says. "I then realized that I was 49, soon to turn 50. No one would know looking at those 49 drawings that they addressed life passing, but that's what I saw in them — the dawning awareness that you have a life behind you, and a finite horizon ahead."

That recognition became the catalyst for "Autumn Leaves," a multiweek art project that addresses the age-old theme of old age, and explores the things that give life meaning.

Bruun sought out 49 men and women of diverse races and backgrounds from the Baltimore community who are 50 or older — the now-51-year-old Bruun calls those subjects "leaves." He then engaged seven artists under the age of 50 to do portraits of those 49 people.

The portraits will be unveiled, seven at a time, over the course of seven free, public events held at the Station North artist-owned warehouse, Area 405, starting Saturday. Each event is named for the leaves a particular tree — ash, birch, poplar, etc. The last one is scheduled for Nov. 2.

Such an ambitious venture comes naturally to Bruun, who describes himself as "a community engagement artist."

In addition to creating his works, the artist has been involved in community enterprises. He founded Art on Purpose in 2005, for example, to address social issues with art; through that organization, he coordinated the Black Male Identity project in 2011 to challenge stereotypes.

When he confronted the prospect of turning 50, Bruun decided to seek input from others about the process of getting older. Arranging for the 49 portraits of the 50-plus group was just the beginning.

"I wanted it to feel like a celebration and a reflection," he says. "I wanted the [subjects of the portraits] to do some sharing. So I gave them three questions: What gives your life meaning? How do you think about your own dying? What do you have to say to young people coming after you?"

At each "Autumn Leaves" event, the seven "leaves" will be asked to answer those questions during seven-minute presentations. Florian Svitak, an artist and recently retired Stevenson University professor, is one of the leaves.

"I've been thinking about this for months," he says, "but I probably won't know what I'm going to say until I start speaking. This whole thing is so interesting, how Peter has brought all these people together. It's like winding up a whole lot of toys and letting them go."

Each portrait subject has also been asked to prepare a slide show to be projected during proceedings — "49 images that help explain who they are, the story of their lives," Bruun says.

Still more numbers: Seven writers, under the age of 50, are part of the project, fashioning 49-word labels that will be placed alongside the portraits.

Among those getting the portrait treatment are choreographer Liz Lerman; makeup artist Debi Young, whose credits include "The Wire"; Juanita F. Brown, a single mother who has overcome various obstacles in life; and Janie Baylor Stephens, a minister who helped family

members get off of drugs.

Bruun is extra-sensitive to the issue of drugs. One of his daughters died of an overdose while he was in the midst of creating the project.

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"When she died, I thought even more about the meaning of life," Bruun says. "Each event in 'Autumn Leaves' became a way for me to emphasize that you don't have to worry about being good enough, that we need to be more accepting of people for who they are. I want this project to be a way to celebrate, reflect and come together as a diverse community."

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If you go

"Autumn Leaves" begins with "Poplar" at 4 p.m. Saturday at Area 405, 405 E. Oliver St. Free admission. For more information, go to autumnleaves.bruunstudios.com.

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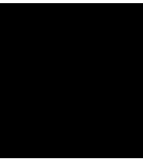
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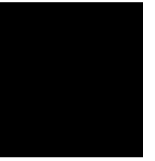
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