

Using art to get to the heart

By **LINELL SMITH**
THE BALTIMORE SUN

OCTOBER 9, 2005

The exhibit celebrates the sunny contents of a lost world - long days of shooting marbles and riding streetcars, of neighborhood streets used as community playgrounds. These bright works from senior citizen workshops speak of summers still alive within graying heads.

Across the hall at Park School in Brooklandville, artist Allyn Massey has created a more subdued vision of aging, one as haunting and open to interpretation as the sound of distant laughter. There is a row of seven beds of soil, separated by diaphanous hanging veils, an overturned armchair, water-filled jars that bubble, a song crackling from an old-time radio, carefully dimmed lighting.

The creative force joining the two facets of *We Age* is Peter Bruun, a Baltimore artist known for his strengths as a curator and educator. Animated and engaging, Bruun has a flair for sweeping people from different backgrounds into unexpected conversations about art and its many meanings in their lives.

He believes art has an intrinsic value that is best shown when it engages with real life.

"Art has power to do things that other things don't," he says. "I'm an artist, and I take for granted that the art is worth seeing. But I want to make clear to people that that's not enough, that there's also a purpose outside that art experience. In a way, I also want the content behind the art to become the thing and the art to become invisible."

Because it is set in a school, the paintings in *We Age* invite students to think of "old people" as children, like themselves, who shared similar pastimes. Similarly, a nearby display of childhood art by Park faculty members invites students to imagine their teachers as young, perhaps even as classmates.

Such confrontations are completely intentional, Bruun says. *We Age* is the first exhibition by Art on Purpose, the non-profit organization he has created to forge untraditional connections between artists, teachers and community service organizations. (For this show, he is working with Park School and The Baltimore County Department of Aging.)

'Public intellectual'

Bruun doesn't limit his exploration of a theme to art, however. He believes in art as a catalyst to community outreach. In November, a group of elderly African-Americans from Baltimore's Ivy Family Support Center

will gather at Park to tell stories about growing up during segregation. And Art on Purpose will co-sponsor an effort to help seniors register for the new Medicare Prescription Program.

He hopes such programs will bring in audiences to contemplate the dual views of "We Age."

"This show typifies what I want to do with Art on Purpose: Seek out the heart of complex, universal matters."

Sometimes truth brings complications. Massey's installation seemed too mature for the elementary school students at Park, and Bruun also worried it might upset some of the exhibiting senior artists and their friends. Instead, their reactions taught the 42-year-old artist something about his own stereotypes.

"I found that most people were fine with those (end-of-life) issues because they already deal with it," he says.

"They're already living this - or their spouses have. Instead, I found they were much more wondering about this kind of art."

He was more than happy to guide them through it: Bruun is a pro at demystifying the difficult. As former exhibitions educator at Park School and founding director of the gallery exhibition program at Villa Julie College, he has helped countless audiences engage art's ambiguities.

Debra Rubino, an artist and board member of Art on Purpose, calls Bruun a "public intellectual."

"He's able to speak to every generation and make them think about art," she says. "There are very few people who have that ability to bridge all socio-economic groups. Peter asks questions that make people think about how they are affected by art."

Defining identity

A founding board member of the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance, Bruun says he's had a lifetime of making connections, dating back to a childhood spent shuttling back and forth between the households of his divorced parents. Born in Denmark, the artist lived mostly in New York, but divided the years from 9 to 14 between the New York home of his father and his mother's house in London.

"The households were very different from one another," he remembers. "So there was this paradox that in each place I was a different person, but I was still me." A trip to India as a college student made him further aware of trying to define his own identity.

After graduating from Williams College in 1985 with a degree in art history, he received a master's degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art. For the next decade, married and starting a family, Bruun taught part-time throughout the Baltimore area and explored his identity through a series of self-portraits. Then a teaching job at Villa Julie College led him to propose a series of exhibitions for its newly opened arts center.

"I was surprised what an impact a gallery could have on a community," he says. "It opened my eyes to the alternative to being an artist working for an audience of three."

Bruun began considering the identity of his paintings in terms of different contexts and settings, eventually inviting other artists, students and members of the public to build upon the "conversations" he had started.

In "Being Seen: 1-2-3," a show held at the Creative Alliance's former location in East Baltimore, a series of installations featured commemorative chairs made by school children, works by artists in the Creative Alliance and self-reflecting objects chosen by small business owners in Highlandtown - all unified by his paintings. In another show, "Anonymous Requiem," Bruun's paintings became "mood-setters," or "frames," for individual performances of poetry, prose and music dedicated to the presenters' dead friends and loved ones.

Art on Purpose's next show, "Elegant," will juxtapose and explore visions of mathematicians and artists, including work from students at the Stadium School and the Algebra Project.

"Everything I do is collaborative," Bruun says. "Art on Purpose is like a series of ligaments while our partners are the bones. All we're doing is connecting them."

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Art on Purpose

Art exhibit

We Age

Park School, 2425 Old Court Road, Brooklandville. Through Nov. 18. 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Mon.-Fri.; Sat. 9 a.m. --3 p.m. Free. 410-769-5701 or artonpurpose.org.

Tea and Talk

With artist Allyn Massey

Oct. 17 at 3:30 p.m. Park School. Free, registration required. 410-769-5701.

Oral histories

Life Stories, a work in progress

Oral histories by seniors from the Baltimore City Ivy Family Support Center. Nov. 15, 10 a.m. Park School.

Free. 410-769-5701.

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