

The Columbian
Life

Section D

Today's weather picture by Jessica Bunker, 9, Vancouver, Silver Star Elementary School



SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2007

Smart art can leave us struck dumb

Like many members of the uncultured, Cheez-It-consuming public, I am not good at grasping modern art. I'm the type of person who will stand in front of a certified modern masterpiece painting that looks, to the layperson, like a big black square, and quietly think: "Maybe the actual painting is on the other side." I

DAVE BARRY



especially have a problem with modernistic sculptures, the kind where you, the layperson, cannot be sure whether you're looking at a work of art or a crashed alien spacecraft. My

definition of a good sculpture is "a sculpture that looks at least vaguely like something." I'm talking about a sculpture like Michelangelo's "David." You look at that, and there is no doubt about what the artist's message is. It is: "Here's a naked man the size of an oil derrick."

I bring this topic up because of an interesting incident that occurred in Miami. When people ask me, "Dave, why do you choose voluntarily to live in Miami?" I answer, "Because interesting incidents are always occurring here." For example, (digression alert) federal agents here arrested two men on charges of attempting to illegally sell weapons.

"Big deal!" you are saying. "Federal agents in many cities regularly arrest people for illegally selling weapons!"

Right. But these were nuclear weapons. I swear I am not making this up. The two suspects are Lithuanian nationals; they were allegedly working on a deal to sell undercover agents some Russian-made tactical nuclear weapons.

Call me a Nervous Nellie, but I am concerned about the sale of nuclear arms in my general neighborhood. I say this because of the popular Miami tradition, which I am also not making up, of celebrating festive occasions by discharging weapons into the air. I am picturing a scenario wherein some Miami guy chugs one too many bottles of Cold Duck at his New Year's party, and when the clock strikes midnight, he staggers over to the closet where he keeps his tactical nuclear weapon — which he told his wife he was buying strictly for personal protection — and he says to himself, "I wonder how that baby would sound!"

But my point (end of digression alert) is that Miami tends to have these interesting incidents, and one of them occurred a while ago when Dade County purchased an office building from the City of Miami. The problem was that, squatting in an area that the county wanted to convert into office space, there was a large ugly wad of metal, set into the concrete. So the county sent construction workers with heavy equipment to rip out the wad, which was then going to be destroyed.

But guess what? Correct! It turns out that this was not an ugly wad. It was art! Specifically, it was Public Art, defined as "art that is purchased by experts who are not spending their own personal money." The money, of course, comes

BARRY, Page D8

DAVE BARRY is a columnist for the Miami Herald. His classic column was originally published Sept. 7, 1997. He is currently taking a leave of absence from writing his weekly humor column. Write to him c/o The Miami Herald, One Herald Plaza, Miami FL 33132.

WELDER SUMI WU'S SCULPTURES GIVE A DRAB AREA OF CLARK COLLEGE ...

CREATIVE FLAIR



OTHER PUBLIC WORK BY MEMBERS OF WOMEN WHO WELD

■ "Wendy Rose," a tribute to the female workers at the Kaiser Shipyard during World War II, an 11-foot tall figure that will be placed on the Columbia River waterfront sometime in the coming months.

■ "Urban Rhythm" and "Cityscape" adorn the front and back entrances of the Esther Short Commons building, 555 W. Eighth St., in downtown Vancouver.

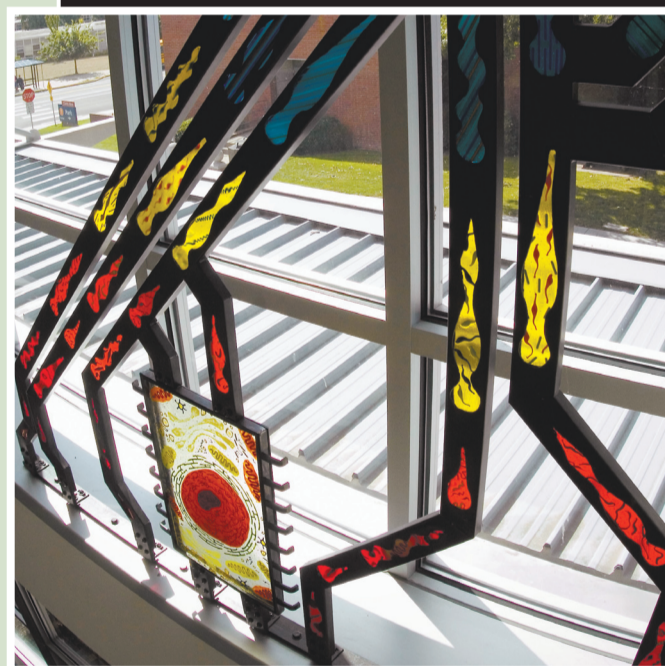
■ "Pillars of Fulfillment," a memorial for Washington State University Vancouver professor Lori Irving, who died in 2001, sits on the main trail that leads through campus.



A recent public art installation at Clark College by Sumi Wu, "Sky Machine," is meant to connect the origins of mechanical technology with modern microscopic advancements that also use the same structures, such as gears.

Photos by KRISTINA WRIGHT The Columbian

Wu's other new piece, "Urgent Messages," blends integrated circuits with cellular processes, fusing shapes from microbiology into a computerlike format.



By BRETT OPPEGAARD
Columbian staff writer

The building is called AA-5. The one next to it is AA-4. This southeast corner complex of Clark College has that kind of institutional character.

The atmosphere inside these bunkerlike brick boxes, though, has begun to change. The Washington State Arts Commission requires 0.5 percent of state-funded construction budgets to go toward public art. That meant this maze of interconnected rectangles — which also includes conjoining buildings AA-1 and AA-2 but not, inexplicably, AA-3 — needed something artistic to be part of the cluster's recent

\$7.8 million renovation.

Sumi Wu, who studied welding in these Applied Arts structures a few years ago when she made the transition from potter to sculptor, was the one chosen by the arts commission to add a bit of creative flair.

Wu, a member of the artists collective Women Who Weld, said she "felt a personal level of responsibility" to the space, thankful for the education she received there and the friends she met. Yet she acknowledges designing something artistically attractive in this place went beyond the usual challenges.

Besides a tight budget and few site options, Wu encountered an odd mix of hues and

ART, Page D8

Burns keeps WWII veterans' memories alive

By GAIL SHISTER
The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — The presence of Ken Burns' father looms large in his son's latest PBS epic.

But viewers won't know it. An unidentified photograph of Lt. Robert Kyle Burns Jr. is the first and last image in "The War," a 15-hour documentary series about World War II. It launches Sept. 23.

Burns hadn't planned to use the photo, a beloved possession since college. After all, his dad had spoken to him about the

war only once before his death in 2001.

But as "War" began taking shape as personal reminiscences of vets from various American towns, Burns decided the image "would be a quiet way to honor my father," he said during a recent visit to Philadelphia.

There is nothing quiet about "War," however.

Its ear-splitting, raw combat footage is as shocking to the senses as the savage opening

BURNS, Page D8

ON TV

Ken Burns' 15-hour documentary, "The War," launches at 8 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 23, on OPB, Channel 10. It continues at 8 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, Sept. 24 to 26; and at 8 p.m. Sunday through Tuesday, Sept. 30 to Oct. 2, at 8 p.m.



Filmmaker Ken Burns' documentary series "The War" starts Sept. 23 on PBS.

Files The Associated Press

your Guide:



Some tough Emmy choices to be made /D3



Books: "Engleby" a departure for Sebastian Faulks /D9

Coming Monday:

Families save on gas money with cargo bikes /D1

Author gives Eisenhower civil rights credit

Look at his work behind scenes, historian argues

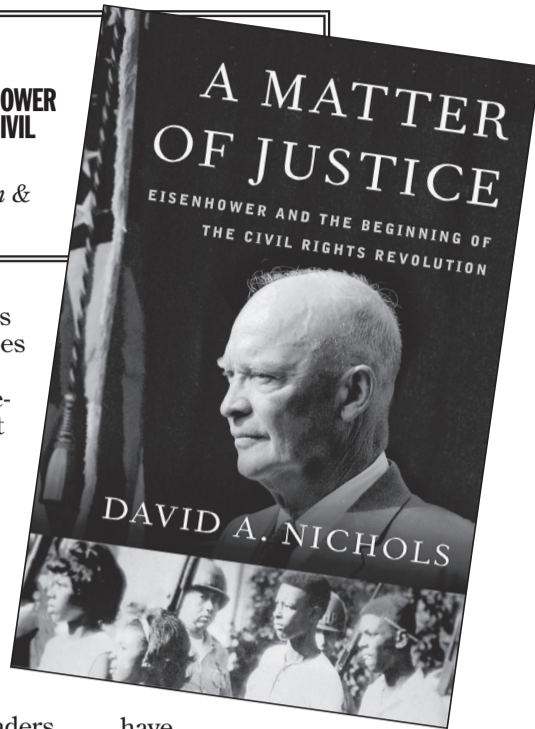
By **ANDREW DEMILLO**
Associated Press writer

As the 50th anniversary of Little Rock Central High School's desegregation approaches, David A. Nichols offers a new, much-needed look at the civil rights legacy of the man who ordered troops to escort nine black students into the all-white school. Nichols mines newly discovered documents from Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidential library in Abilene, Kan., to argue that the 34th president doesn't get the credit he deserves for his successes on the civil rights front. Nichols does so engagingly, defying the notion put forth by some historians that Eisenhower lacked leadership on civil rights and sided too often with Southern whites. Nichols asks readers to disregard Eisenhower's rhetoric on civil rights — which he calls "disappointing" — and focus instead on his deeds and work behind the scenes. "We must look closely at what he

did, not just what he said, or we will miss much of what Eisenhower was about in civil rights," Nichols writes. Those actions included Eisenhower's efforts to desegregate the District of Columbia and to address employment discrimination by federal contractors and the government itself. The book also says Eisenhower deserves more credit on implementing Harry Truman's executive order to desegregate the armed forces and notes that he went even further by integrating schools for military dependents under federal control. A key player in these actions is Herbert Brownell, Eisenhower's attorney general and conscience on integration in the White House. Nichols writes that Brownell and Eisenhower together formed the strongest pro-civil rights Justice Department in American history, and were a team that helped form an alliance to pass the civil rights acts of 1957 and 1960. Naturally, the centerpiece of Nichols' book is the Little Rock crisis and Eisenhower's decision to send in the 101st Airborne after Gov. Orval Faubus defied an order to integrate

the school. Nichols dismisses as a myth the conventional narrative that Eisenhower was indecisive about sending troops into Little Rock to escort the nine black students into the school. He notes that a day after Faubus used National Guardsmen at the school to prevent its integration, he approved a public warning by Brownell that raised the possibility of sending troops, a warning that was repeated by Eisenhower himself in a telegram and a meeting with Faubus. Instead of presenting Eisenhower as reluctant to use the military to enforce desegregation, Nichols shows the president as deliberate in his plans and notes the significance attached to a president ordering troops into a Southern state. He also contrasts Eisenhower's approach to integrating Central with President Kennedy's intervention at the University of Mississippi in 1962. (Two people were killed in the riots that ensued in Oxford, Miss.) Little Rock was the most dramatic illustration of Eisenhower's civil rights legacy, but the book shows his

REVIEW
"A MATTER OF JUSTICE: EISENHOWER AND THE BEGINNING OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS REVOLUTION"
By David A. Nichols, Simon & Schuster, 353 pages, \$27.



greatest contribution was in his appointments. Nichols describes how Eisenhower guaranteed decades of support for desegregation with his Supreme Court nominees — five Northerners who were staunch supporters of Brown v. Board of Education — and his appointment of desegregation advocates to the lower courts. Nichols' book won't satisfy readers who believe Eisenhower failed to use the bully pulpit to condemn segregation and publicly challenge leaders who seemed to dominate the public arena throughout the South. But at least it will show that while he may

have been muted on the issue of civil rights, he certainly wasn't silent.

Burns:

From Page D1

scene of D-Day in Steven Spielberg's acclaimed "Saving Private Ryan." With one exception: "Those guys (in the film) got up and went to craft services," Burns said. "My guys don't get up. They're dead." Seven years and \$13 million in the making, "War" is Burns' 22nd historical documentary. All have been for PBS. The mind boggles. Even with specks of gray in his "Leave It to Beaver" mop, the 54-year-old Burns occasionally gets carded. He credits his youthful appearance to "excessive worry and travel." Everything about Burns is excessive, from his evangelical promotion of projects to his inexhaustible work ethic. PBS's rain-making poster boy never takes time off. Even at his New Hampshire lake house, he gets itchy after two days. "Fridays, Mondays

don't mean anything to me. I cannot imagine not working." It shows. Burns and his producers spoke with more than 600 potential subjects for the seven-episode "War," winnowing the list to 40 interviews with men and women from places like Mobile, Ala.; Sacramento, Calif.; Waterbury, Conn.; and tiny Luverne, Minn. Burns wasn't looking to document another war. Quite the opposite, in fact. His 1990 masterpiece "The Civil War" — the top-rated limited series in PBS history — "was so wrenching for us, we felt spent. We vowed not to do another war film. Period. End of statement. "It was too heavy. Too close. We're emotional archaeologists. We're not just excavating dates from the past. These are not products or ways to make a living. These are grand obsessions." Still, aging vets and/or their children kept pleading with Burns to turn his unique, quintessentially American lens on World War II. He

politely declined. Until the late '90s, that is, when he read that U.S. vets were dying at the rate of 1,000 per day. Suddenly, Burns felt he couldn't let their memories die with them. These aren't our ancestors, he thought. These are our fathers, our grandfathers. Also, it didn't hurt that his friend Tom Brokaw had blazed the trail with his hugely successful "Greatest Generation" franchise. Brokaw, an adviser to "War," "did an amazing service to our country by giving an unusually reticent generation permission to speak," Burns said. "He probably should be given a medal for that." Burns is not so quick to endorse "greatest" laurels. The war "brought out the best and worst in a generation, and blurred the two so they became, at times, almost indistinguishable. "We live in a media culture where we're dialectically pre-occupied with labels. What you need is art that can see both."

"Seeing both" caused quite a commotion for "War" during its production. In January, Hispanic groups such as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus attacked Burns — and PBS — for the absence of Hispanics in the series. Numerous independent filmmakers urged Burns to maintain his own artistic vision and not to bow to outside pressure. They worried it might set a dangerous precedent. After thinking "long and hard," Burns added two Hispanic vets and, for good measure, an American Indian. The former appear at the end of the first and sixth episodes; the latter in the fifth. In total, they add 20 to 30 minutes' length to the film, Burns estimates. Did Ken cave? No, he simply lives to fight another day. "I'm Br'er Rabbit. I got to go back in the briar patch and tell more stories," Burns said, recognizing a good sound bite when he hears one. "I didn't change the essential integrity of the film. It was a win-win."

Art:

From Page D1

materials cobbled together as part of the three major renovations of the Winchester House-like buildings since they were erected in the late 1940s and early 1950s. "The steel columns in the hallways, that color, I call it mortician's wax beige. It's a little corpse-like," Wu said. "The walls are the yellow that's maybe good for a person's mood and makes (the students) into zombies. But it doesn't work for me." Narrow hallways and few open areas left only a couple of options for the artwork. One Wu ruled out right away was the plaza in the center of the complex, which features bright aqua blue picnic tables and industrial-sized utility boxes. Wu surmised, "That area is ugly." She instead focused on a window at the top of the stairs at the western entrance of AA-5 and an atrium at the intersection of AA-4 and Joan Stout Hall. Her goal is to make a statement about how electronic technology and cellular biology are blending. "Everything in electronics is so small now, we have no idea what's going on in there," she said. "Think of a cell phone. Mysterious things make music come out or pictures appear. Amazing stuff is going on in there, but we can't touch it or relate to it in any way. The same is true for our bodies. Amazing processes are happening that create my life and existence. But we can't understand what's going on down there in the chemicals." Just as mysteriously ethereal is the effect of placing artwork in a nondescript vocational complex at the local community college. What difference can one or two pieces make? How much — or what kind of — artwork does it take to change the character of a school, of a city?

If you go
■ **What:** "Urgent Messages" and "Sky Machine," two new pieces of public art by local sculptor Sumi Wu.
■ **Where:** "Urgent Messages" is in the window at the top of the west staircase in Clark College's AA-5 building, 1800 E. McLoughlin Blvd., Vancouver. "Sky Machine" is in the ceiling atrium at the junction of the adjacent and connected building, AA-4, as it intersects with Joan Stout Hall.
■ **When:** Building hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays.

Clark College. Wu's work in this otherwise utilitarian part of campus demonstrates the impact that spreading art around a community can have. It's not just about pretty breezeways that look good on brochures. The applied arts — such as repairs of automobiles, computers and other machines — includes the term "arts" for a reason. Creativity is encouraged. Patrick Gonzales, chairman of Clark College's welding department, teaches his craft as strictly a functional form of labor. But he also helps students learn about its applications as an art form, the approach that attracted Wu. "Artwork's a barometer of how healthy an organization is," Gonzales said. "If an institution has the foresight to fund artwork, then it's usually a very innovative and progressive community. And the opposite is the opposite." He added, "I've been to many campuses around the country that have very little art, and those places are pretty mundane. ... This campus is alive, and its artwork is something that shows exactly that." Wu said she initially considered creating just one large sculpture with the \$38,000 renovation budget but eventually decided that two smaller pieces would have broader impact. The only other artwork on display in the 100,000-square-foot complex are two relatively small Washington State Arts Commission works funded by an earlier renovation: "Journey No. 89: Caterpillar," a wooden basketlike piece by Darlene Nguyen-Ely, and "Weaver's Passage," a wall tapestry by Judith Foxson Fawkes. Both are hung near each other in one of the many hallways. Wu said the atmosphere in the refurbished complex is "new and clean looking. But there are just so many more places (in and around the structures) that could use art. We could address those in a lot of ways."

Barry:

From Page D1

from the taxpayers, who are not allowed to spend this

money themselves because 1) they probably wouldn't buy art, and 2) if they did, there is no way they would buy the crashed-spaceship style of art that the experts usually select for them.

The Miami was in fact a sculpture by the famous Italian sculptor Pomodoro. (Like most famous artists, he is not referred to by his first name, although I like to think it's "Bud.") This sculpture cost the taxpayers \$80,000, which makes it an important work of art. In dollar terms, it is 3,200 times as important as a painting of dogs playing poker, and more than 5,000 times as important as a velveteen Elvis. Fortunately, before the

sculpture was destroyed, the error was discovered, and the Pomodoro was moved to another city office building, where it sits next to the parking garage, providing great pleasure to the many taxpayers who come to admire it. I am kidding, of course. On the day I went to see it, the sculpture was, like so many pieces of modern taxpayer-purchased public art, being totally ignored by the actual taxpayer, possibly because it looks — and I say this with all due artistic respect for Bud — like an abandoned air compressor. So here's what I think: I think there should be a law requiring that all public art be marked with a large sign stating something like: "Notice! This is a piece of art! The public should enjoy it the tune of 80,000 clams!" Also, if there happens to be an abandoned air compressor nearby, it should have a sign that says: "Notice! This is not art!" so the public does not waste time enjoying the wrong thing. The public should enjoy what the experts have decided the public should enjoy. That's the system we use in this country, and we're going to stick with it. At least until the public acquires missiles.

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From page D3

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