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Miniature Golf as Art

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Bunny rabbits with Cheez Doodle pelts swim gracefully in the air above hole No. 3. As a golfer stands at the 15th tee, a 12-foot-tall, 14-armed figure with flashing red eyes slowly inflates, barring the path to the putting green. Even the ablest miniature golf architects — whose twisted minds gave us fairways protected by hollow alligators, giant plaster whales and that infernal machine the windmill — might arch an eyebrow at the surreal hazards and distractions on this course.

But as the score card exhorts: "Please Remember These Are Works of Art!" This fully functional miniature golf course is an exhibit titled "Putt-Modernism," on view through Sept. 27 at Artists Space, a nonprofit gallery at 223 West Broadway in TriBeCa. It is the work of 18 contemporary artists, including such heavy hitters

bles National Endowment for the Arts-bashing Sen. Jesse Helms. Ms. Sherman makes a strong feminist statement: A putt into the mouth of a laminated photo of a reclining female figure ensures a hole in one. In an elaborate expression of anger over the U.S. government's response to the AIDS epidemic, Chris Clarke constructed a replica of the White House of neon tubing and AZT and Zovirax bottles. A putt rolls through the building, then lazily winds down a path of two red neon tubes and into a blood-colored cup. Even the balls themselves have been converted to artwork, inscribed with "truisms" by Jenny Holzer such as "Raise boys and girls the same way" and "The mundane is to be cherished."

Difficult as it is to imagine these sophisticated artists knocking golf balls around replicas of pirate ships and the like, Mr. Buhler says many "turned out to be closet miniature golf fans." Still, he admits, a few artists didn't know a putter from a palette knife. "Some had to be coached in the fundamentals of the game," he says. "That the ball has to roll, has to go into the cup — that sort of thing." Entrance into Artists Space for viewing only is free, but it's hard to resist the urge to rent a putter for \$5 and play a round.

The par-49 course has all the standard accouterments: score card, pencils imprinted with the course name, lots of artificial turf and several skill-testing holes. Joan Snyder's wood-and-water-lined 8th hole has a nasty break to the left; daring putters who try to ace the Gehry hole — stacks of Vogue, Newsweek and Italian architectural magazines supporting a tripod of metal fittings — can get their ball wedged under a standing steel grate. For the skilled, John Diebboll's 18th hole can lead to a 19th: A hole in one down a bumpy ramp of birch logs entitles a golfer to a free drink at a local bar.

For all its challenges, "Putt-Modernism" is no more likely to please miniature golf purists than it is stoical art mavens. Joe Aboid, director of the Professional Putters Association, the prize tournament-sponsoring offshoot of Putt-Putt Golf Courses of America Inc., sniffs at gewgaws on fairways, no matter who has created them. "Props, as we call them, can add flavor to the course, but we never allow them on the putting surface itself," he maintains. As for artistic statements like the puffed-up Jesse Helms figure, Mr. Aboid says, "That's funny, but politics has no place in putt-putt. Politics and putting are not in the same book."

The more than 1,000 people who have visited "Putt-Modernism" so far might disagree. If there is any example of art for the masses that's a true success, this is it. Late on a recent weekday afternoon, haughty bohemians shared the fellowship of the fairway with tourists and Wall Street brokers. A group of four teenage boys, in requisite baggy shorts and backward baseball caps, grappled with the severely tilted spiral fairway of John Torreano's par-4 "Black Hole," learning one of the primary lessons of life and the game of golf. As one boy sent putt after futile putt past the cup, a friend griped, "Give it up, man. We'll be here all day."

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The Gallery

"Putt-Modernism"

as Frank Gehry, Cindy Sherman and Michael Graves, who each designed one hole. The show is the brainchild of Ken Buhler, a painter and the gallery's exhibition designer, who was nostalgic for his boyhood as a mini-golf greenskeeper in Sioux City, Iowa.

"It was a pretty crummy course," Mr. Buhler remembers. "I always thought I could do better, and I wondered what artists would do." The result, even for a game that celebrates the bizarre, may be the strangest miniature golf course ever built.

Some artists approached their designs in the spirit of pure fun. Aside from sculptor Sandy Skoglund's homage to snack foods and sport on the par-2 third hole, there's Mr. Graves's wooden colonnade-topped pavilion: A putt up one of three ramps into the pavilion will roll out either side, or straight into the cup. At Gregory Amenoff's par-3 16th hole, a golfer putts up the neck of a guitar and through a cutout of Elvis Presley's face. The fairway is labeled with a time line of The King's life. A correct tee shot will follow history — past "The Ed Sullivan Show" and the Army and into an opening marked "Las Vegas: Hole of Fate." Stray putts can drift into sand traps marking "what might have been" destinies for Elvis: "truck driver," "Star Search contestant" or, worst of all, "Elvis impersonator."

Artists being artists, however — and miniature golf being as indelible a piece of Americana as the BarcaLounger — most of the designers have used the holes as an occasion for commentary on U.S. culture and politics. In a take on golfing's country club elitism, putts on Fred Wilson's par-2 11th hole must pass under "No Trespassing" and "Private Property" signs. The blow-up figure on the 15th hole, created by Pat Oleszko and Ward Shelley, wears a hat labeled "Censorama" and strongly resem-