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Mini Golf at the Museum

In an Elmhurst revival of a 1988 exhibit, you can play putt-putt on works of art. By CLAIRE VOON

Illustration by GLEN GYSSLER

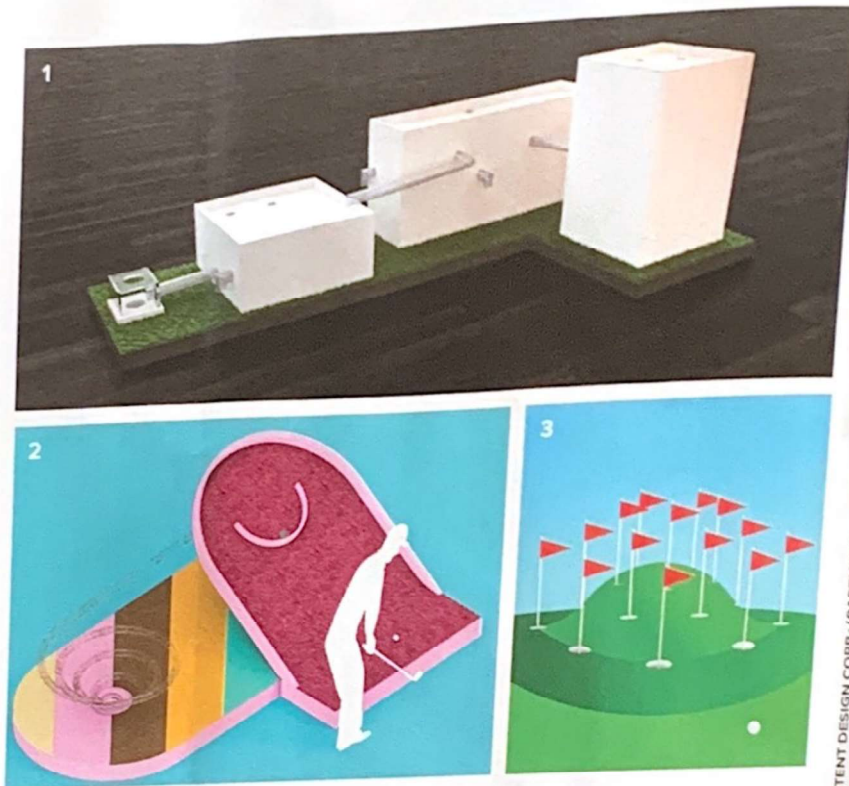
IN THE SUMMER OF 1988, Chicagoans were introduced to a game of miniature golf unlike any the city had ever seen. Each hole was an imaginative obstacle, like a replica of the Dan Ryan Expressway—pileups, potholes, and all—and a scaled-down Wisconsin super club. At the 18th, a winged skeleton reclined against a tombstone, ready to collect balls between its legs.

The madcap, windmill-free game, called *Par Excellence*, was created by local artists and housed indoors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where it drew thousands of people weekly. Its mastermind was the late sculptor Michael O'Brien, a lifelong miniature golf enthusiast and then curator for the Illinois Arts Council, who recruited two dozen others (with multiple artists working on some holes) to help realize his vision.

"We all grew up playing miniature golf in the area and started imagining how we would make these things," recalls Annalee Koehn, who devised hole 14, *Determine Your Fate*, an arcade-game-inspired route that told players' fortunes based on where their balls went. "This was a really great design project. It forced you to consider not just what mini golf looks like, but how it operates."

Now, 32 years later, Koehn's contribution is being revived as part of *Par Excellence Redux*, an exhibit planned for the Elmhurst Art Museum that pays tribute to the original. Joining her are 16 contemporary artists, who have each dreamed up new holes, plus members of the museum's Teen Art Council, who collaborated on one. The resulting course, which will spill into every gallery, is fully playable. (The show is scheduled to run May 9 to September 13, though the museum says the opening could get pushed back because of the coronavirus pandemic.)

Par Excellence Redux isn't just whimsical amusement—it underscores a pioneering vision of interactive art. "There are a lot of museums now that have commissioned artists to make mini golf courses," says curator Christopher Jobson, who also



Renderings of three pieces in the exhibit:
1 Untitled work by the Teen Art Council
2 *Just Desserts* by Katherine Darnstadt
3 *Participation Trophy* by Jesse Meredith

runs the art blog *Colossal*. (Among them: the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri.) "But we can find no example of an artist-designed golf course that predates the 1988 show." An archive of photographs and other ephemera, some saved by O'Brien's wife, will greet visitors at the end of the 18 holes.

To finalize his roster in 1988, O'Brien sent out a public call and assembled a jury of artists, including Hairy Who founding member Jim Nutt. Jobson similarly partnered with the Elmhurst Art Museum to issue a call for proposals and received more than 60 submissions. "We had light restrictions"—nothing with sound or water—"but outside of practical and technical considerations, we really wanted to keep it open," he says. "A lot of ideas really turn the whole concept of a golf course upside down. There are some that don't even require clubs."

Disorientation and disruption are at the heart of a hole designed by local artist

Jesse Meredith. Titled *Participation Trophy*, it consists of elements typical of a putting green, but Meredith exaggerated them to the point of absurdity: An AstroTurf mound, far from smooth, is pocked with 18 flag-bearing holes. "Everybody can win very easily," Meredith says. "But what happens to the idea of winning when everyone is rewarded? I'm really interested to see how people decide to play, because there are so many options. The hole creates its own set of terms."

Winning seems beside the point in the hole by Julie Cowan, which is less concerned with recreational shortcuts than with real-world injustices. Players launch their balls in front of a mockup of the Cabrini-Green row houses, worm around a scene of the housing project's now-demolished high-rises, and conclude next to a miniature Whole Foods. It's an eye-opening trip through the realities of gentrification.

But expect mostly high jinks on these strange terrains, an accessible pleasure many of us will be craving postsequestering. "Mini golf is a low bar," says Jobson. Now that it's in a museum, though, it just might be high art. **G**

PHOTOGRAPHY: [UNTITLED] ELMHURST ART MUSEUM TEEN ART COUNCIL; [JUST DESSERTS] KATHERINE DARNSTADT/LATENT DESIGN CORP.; [PARTICIPATION TROPHY] JESSE MEREDITH