

# Castle Golf

Bruce Webb



*The cloud-capped towers,  
the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples,  
the great globe itself.  
Yea, all which it inherit,  
shall dissolve...  
We are such stuff as  
dreams are made on...*

- *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene 1

George Bernard Shaw was no friend to golf. When someone asked him about it, he replied that, as far as he was concerned, golf was a good way to ruin a nice walk. I doubt he would have found miniature golf much of an improvement. It even did away with the nice walk, leaving only the ruining part: the frustrating matter of "trying to control a small white ball with implements ill adapted for the purpose," to quote Woodrow Wilson, who, it seems, was also no friend to golf. Yet in spite of being the butt of countless critics and stand-up comedians, both big golf and little golf have enjoyed enormous popularity over the years. And both have left their mark on the American landscape: big golf in generous, bucolic preserves, mini-golf in colorful corners of kitsch and folk art – the common man's gardens of earthly delights.

The real heyday of miniature golf was the 1930s. Millions of players tried to forget their financial woes playing on the thousands of new courses that sprang up in depression-ridden America. John Margolies, in his picture book *Miniature Golf*, even credits the craze with providing a "much needed stimulus to such diverse industries as cotton, lumber, concrete, steel, roofing, and lighting" and claims it "saved 100,000 workers from soup kitchens and bread lines." But the passion for the "madness of the thirties" was short-lived. Miniature golf was soon openly attacked as slothful and wasteful, and communities duly enacted ordinances and imposed curfews to curb the mania. Even Will Rogers, who had earlier advocated mini-golf courses as a way to dress up desolate corner lots, turned against it, declaring: "There is millions got a putter in their hands when they ought to have a shovel. Half of America is bent over. In two more generations our children will grow upward as far as the hips, then they will turn off at right angles, and with the arms hanging down we will be right back where we started from. Darwin was right."

Miniature golf enjoyed a comeback in the fifties and to a lesser extent in our own time. (It may be a phenomenon of

Republican presidencies.) I played my first game in the fifties on the boardwalk in Ocean City, New Jersey, with the surf rumbling in the background, and ever since the game has reminded me of vacations. Miniature golf courses exude a nostalgic charm, and because they depend so much on this charm, like doll houses and Lionel trains, they cannot change very much without losing their essence.

I first glimpsed Houston's Castle Golf out of the corner of my eye from a particularly jumbled patch of freeway on the West Side, but I never seemed able to find it again. I was prepared to give it up as a mirage – a product perhaps of an unusual conjunction of sunbeams falling on a patch of strip junk – when I came across it again. From the superscale of the freeway, Castle Golf appears as a distant, ideal village, like a page out of a children's pop-up book. Spread out under the protecting mantle of the hilltop castle, its hillside setting is crisscrossed with pastoral rills and majestic fountains spouting pure mountain water. If everything has an ideal distance and point of vantage from which it should be seen – especially stage sets, shams, and follies, which depend upon the principle of aesthetic distance to preserve their

illusion of verisimilitude – for Castle Golf that point of view is from the freeway at 50 miles per hour. The closer one gets, the more the illusion breaks down and begins to melt; like Prospero it pronounces itself to be made of "insubstantial stuff." But it all doesn't break apart in the same way. The castle turns out to be a thin example of architectural trompe l'oeil on a concrete-block building whose anonymous interior is filled with the usual video machines and arcade games. And despite the presence of real live ducks (who must have been operantly conditioned to get them to live there), the extensive waterways have the artificial look and smell of blue toilet bowl water. But the quarter-scale buildings and bantam landscape, the only true miniatures on the grounds, reward closer scrutiny.

The human fascination with things in miniature constitutes a special case of control: making the very large into something instantly graspable. A true miniature, like a Bruegel painting, creates within itself little worlds of great detail and exactitude in which you can easily occupy yourself in corners selected at random. Only the most exquisite miniatures hold up under really close scrutiny, for miniaturization involves a process of reduction not only of size but





also of detail that taxes the mind as well as the craft of the maker. To a point in this downscaling process it is possible to distill a scene in miniature and still retain its essential, recognizable features, as though the object being depicted were being moved farther and farther from the eye. Beyond that point important elements drop away, and symbols with little or no pictorial resemblance to the things themselves must be brought into play – just as reading a map requires an interlocutory step before the content can be grasped.

Inside the precincts of Castle Golf you can't help remembering the view from the road. It gives you the feeling an actor must have facing the audience and looking at the backside of the scenery flats. The two landscapes, the miniaturized one of the golf course and the superscale of the freeway, relate to different scales of movement, and the two exaggerate one another. The relationship creates some serendipitous examples of collage: looking out to the road, the overhead freeway and the on-grade portion of Loop 610 create a long horizontal frame filled by a warehouse whose painted sign, in letters ten feet tall, proclaims the location of the "Wizard of Spas."

The inventors of miniature golf realized that reducing golf to a pint-sized essence could create an exercise in pure boredom. But by making the course in a sense episodic and creating a toy landscape,

they could fashion a pictorial map through an obstacle course of figural demons. In Sweetwater, Texas, mini-golfers play on a course dedicated to the glory of God in which players work their way through the trials and epiphanies of the Holy Scriptures in settings depicting biblical scenes and populated by holy statuary. The scorepads cite scripture for each hole – a kind of Weberian exercise for those who need to justify their play-time. By comparison, the four 18-hole courses at Castle Golf seem to be lacking in specific allegorical inspiration. Instead the place has the look and feel of a generic model railroad layout. Most of the buildings, scatter-sited in the idealized landscape, look like doll houses, one-fourth the scale of the habitable replicas you might find in a suburban theme subdivision – miniatures of buildings that are themselves miniatures, in detail if not always in scale. And while the Castle Golf landscape has the innocence of a picture from a children's story book, the concrete-curbed golfing lanes and obstacles take their inspiration from the no-nonsense aesthetics of the freeway. The destructive operation of the one on the mood of the other seems the very model of the effect of the great road-building mania of the late fifties and early sixties on the American landscape.

The freeway and the golf course are near-perfect metaphorical extensions of one another. The obstacle course begins out on the road: going south on the Loop you



have already gone too far when you pass the Malibu Fun Center signs. A note underneath tells you, "Next exit, return 610 N." Going north, the obverse of the same sign reads, "Exit 18th Street, return 610 to Katy Road." In the parlance of the golf course, getting off the freeway and onto the Castle Golf grounds is on the order of a par ten maneuver. From the feeder a gently curving road circles behind the castle into a parking lot flanked on one side by the Malibu Raceway and on the other by a batting cage. The batting cage is a splendid geometric construction, a large circular cage divided into pie-shaped segments, each one facing onto the center, where a mechanical arm delivers up pitches of precisely calibrated velocities to batters who insert tokens into a slot for the privilege of swinging.

The castle, front and center as you leave your car, is a hub of activity. Its concrete blocks are painted over to resemble gray stone and trimmed in the colors of a pack of Black-Jack chewing gum. The dark, blank space within, like the underside of an elevated freeway, harbors a near-deafening cacophony of buzzers, bells, and disembodied electronic voices. Passing through puts you on a promontory overlooking the golf course, and the

sounds change to the vigorous aural massage of rushing water. As you move down along the course, the sound of the water gives way to the deep, persistent hum of traffic on the freeway.

Castle Golf inspires thoughts of a weird kind of Borgesian symmetry. Imagine a wall of infinite length in which there is a single window. On one side, the world is shrinking at an almost imperceptible rate. On the other, its equivalent is being constructed to an ever-expanding scale. Looking through the window at the expanding world, elements are losing their detail as their surfaces stretch. On the other side, detail is dropping away. For an instant the smaller version exactly reflects its bigger opposite, then the relationship changes. Both sides are headed for nothingness. At which point, perhaps, someone inserts a video screen into the window frame and the process of growing things from a dot or reducing them to a dot can be reenacted over and over for the price of a quarter. It's the kind of thought that can come to you as you push the little white ball up and down the alleys of Castle Golf. But at \$4.50 a round (\$3.50 for children), who can afford to follow it along to its denouement? ■

