



A shot of Valley of Fire State Park by Nicholas Price

Godland

Photographer Nicholas Price divines the Valley of Fire BY JARRET KEENE

ANYONE WHO HAS EVER visited Valley of Fire State Park, located 50 miles northeast of Las Vegas, understands the strange power the red sandstone formations, which have existed since the age of dinosaurs, might have upon the imaginations of artists. Walking among the shattered walls of ancient dunes, one feels transported to another planet — Mars, perhaps — where the sudden appearance of an alien robot or a hungry Tyrannosaurus rex would be shocking, maybe, but not entirely surprising. After all, Valley of Fire simmers with cosmic majesty, making the Strip look puny and forced by comparison.

Yet as majestic as it all seems, Valley of Fire keeps its godlike distance, refusing to stoop to greet us humans at our own level. It is too celestial, too immense, for that. In order to make sense of the oldest of Nevada's state parks, an artist needs to approach it with a sense of wonder and with the bright-eyed awe of a supplicant. British-born photographer Nicholas A. Price proves this with the unveiling of his new exhibit, *Playground of the Gods*, now on display in the Big Springs Gallery of the ORI•GEN Experience building at Springs Preserve through April 30. The images are simply breathtaking.

Price culls from the more than 2,500 pictures he has snapped at Valley of Fire to arrive at the 40-plus images presented in *Playground*, alternating between black-

and-white film and Kodachrome color. In the same way a child seeks to find meaning and shapes in objects, so does Price, bringing the viewer's eye into alignment with his own. He treats our eye to a bestiary, including the red-faced profile of "The Gorilla," its craggy brow suggesting deep thought or morbid concern at having been discovered hiding among the calcified dunes. "The Crab" looks ready to scuttle its way across the sand in the manner of some B-movie monster made giant-size due to man's incessant atomic testing. "The Eagle," meanwhile, perches itself against an intensely blue sky, less an emblem of American patriotism now than a primeval totem of nature's enduring and inevitable wrath. Price's eagle is a war bird, biding its time, patiently waiting for another sign of the apocalypse before launching into the air and drawing the final curtain on mankind.

Speaking of air, there are signs of wispieness in black-and-white images like "The Ghost," where a vaporous rock formation tantalizingly oozes its way into the frame. Like Casper the Friendly Ghost, or maybe Slimmer from the movie *Ghostbusters*, this is a relatively approachable specter, and its hollowed-out eyes indicate mirthful intent. Still, this is an ectoplasmic figure one shouldn't dismiss; monsters are monsters, after all. Other otherworldly fiends include "The Predator," which bears resemblance to another famous Hollywood film fiend, its savage maw open for deadly business. Then there's the helmeted, religiously symbolic crust of "The Centurion," the blood-red sandstone providing this image additional heft, followed by "Blastocyst," an embryonic moment in time captured for eternity in rock and dust, illuminated by the life-giving sun.

Ah, the beauty of life. Softer moments can be enjoyed in "The Baby," its pretty bald head and big eyes grabbing the viewer's attention, and in "The Conversation," where two cliff faces seem to exchange intimate whispers across an expanse of blue sky. "Wisdom," on the other hand, stands alone, its towering authority akin to that of the Egyptian sphinx. Finally, "Cellular Division" ripples its way across an ocean of rock, symbolizing the gulf between god and man, the former's waves lapping at the edge of an abyss.

Landscape photography is often a little on the boring side, but Price's *Playground* offers a dramatic menagerie of men, animals and other forms of life. The exhibit's presence at Springs Preserve offers yet another good excuse to visit the cultural attraction, which includes outdoor botanical gardens and trails as well as a children's play area for families and a Wolfgang Puck eatery, which in itself makes the Big Springs Gallery a unique spot to experience art and then walk 20 yards for some good food.

But the real sustenance of the gods is served up in the imagery of Price, who does Las Vegas art enthusiasts proud with a series of Valley of Fire shots that, while plenty playful, poignantly emphasizes the divine strength of these ancient rocks. Indeed, gazing at these photos is a spiritual occurrence you don't often get in your average art gallery.

Playground of the Gods

Through April 30; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily
Big Springs Gallery — ORI•GEN Experience building
Las Vegas Springs Preserve
333 Valley View Blvd.
822-7700 or www.springspreserve.org
Free with Springs Preserve admission

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