

# Robert Keziere A Requiem

*The Charles H. Scott Gallery  
Emily Carr College of Art and Design  
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## A REQUIEM

Robert Keziere, who has emerged in recent years as Vancouver's foremost photographer of fine art objects, and one of Canada's best, made two trips to the Greek island of Sifnos during the summers of 1982 and 1983. These journeys were the first extended absences in years from his staff work for the Vancouver Art Gallery and his commercial work. They were an opportunity to remove himself from his native environment, the stress of deadlines and exacting assignments to engage in what he calls "personal photography. . . to see if [he] could still do it." It was also a necessary time, particularly in 1982, to internalize and temporize the loss of both his parents in the preceding nine months.

His was not so much an investigative effort as a contemplative one. If Keziere trundled his 4x5 camera and tripod over the roads and footpaths of a six-by-twelve kilometer island in search of existential rationalizations and graphic beauty and mystery, it had to be within the framework of an already developed pragmatic and esthetic sensibility. Aware of the language and cultural differences, maintaining a cautious respect for the integrity and beliefs of others, he sought out the abandoned spaces, the silences, the non-verbal. To explain his presence and show his innocent intent, he even arranged an exhibition of his photos during the second summer at the home of Canadian Neville Anderson in the village of Kastro.

By then, he had titled the growing body of work *A Requiem*. What would constitute a *visual* requiem? What images or series of images could figuratively parallel a solemn chant for the dead in this land of cumulative archeologies? When the exhibition was announced, curious villagers responded by asking, "Who has died?" For Keziere, it was not, perhaps, so much a question of *who* had died, as *what* might constitute a *requiem*. Was it not possible that a requiem could be non-specific in its observance of the passing away and continuation of life—and what was it which was to be put to rest?

Keziere was initially unaware his content would take this direction, although he consciously avoided the obvious photographic clichés of Greece: the classical antiquity, the colours of sea and sky juxtaposed against reflective buildings, the wrinkled elders sitting in doorsteps on narrow streets. This was the easy part. What was more difficult was seeking out the immutable and timeless manifestations of an essentially peasant culture: its architecture without architects, its art without artists. During this first exhibition in Kastro, a young woman looked at the photographs and momentarily talked to Keziere, saying the compositions bothered her; they were not whole, and he had not shown her anything she could not see for herself. In his journal notes for August 16, 1983, he writes:

*It is a challenge to work in a selective process and show something which another could not see—which is not precisely what she meant . . . but . . . Perhaps I'm mainly interested in pointing. I wonder if there is a need for good pointing?*

To enter the unpeopled world which Robert Keziere presents requires something of the same humility and patience he possessed. There are few instant rewards or novelties among these laboriously distilled images, the substance of his four-month walking tours. Increments of diffused light passing over the hand-crafted walls of a sparsely furnished chapel can contain all the hermetic power of a colour-field painting, though not as immediately recognizable through the strictures of our own delimited high art conditioning. One can attempt to re-experience the topsy-turvy apparition the artist has seen through his hooded, ground-glass screen. His gaze moves and points and moves again through vaulted doorways, along whitewashed surfaces, picking out icons, wrapped objects, rectilinear chairs and forgotten dusting rags—the ineffable residue of places of sanctuary and shadowed, private reveries.

Keziere has referred to the spirituality and beauty of spaces and this may, in his contextual use, extend to any spaces set aside and commonly accepted as *special*. His powers of observation (which he and other photographers have spoken of as “walking around with a camera until something stops you”) are frequently greater than he would have us believe. His vision is not only acute, but also was, in a curious way, ordered by the particular mood in which he found himself. It was this gravitation toward the simple, unaffected forms and arrangements concerning worship, reverence and the quite literal *housekeeping* of hallowed places which he most often indulged. Wherever these photographs take us, indoors or out, we may register the distinct feeling we are singularly alone with our most private, inarticulate perceptions and thoughts and forced to draw our individual conclusions about these inadvertently ‘metaphysical landscapes.’

Keziere’s eyes are secular, impartial, admirably trained, but nonetheless searching here for significant form in the naïveté of an alien culture. The Old World is preponderantly a cemetery compared to the empty vastness, relative youth and death-denial of our New World. What can be learned, or more importantly, given subjective character in these brutal/beguiling/desiccated/anonymous mausolea? What solace can be drawn from these funereal alcoves and altars? Is it to be found in the soaring, cursive line Keziere introduces in *Interior, Ay. [St.] Stefanos, near Kastro* (1982)? The line traces the arch and vault forms and catapults out of the picture while a modest, out-of-scale bench with a dusting rag parked on its finial holds us clearly down to earth. Humour in the tabernacle, or, more rewardingly, *humanity* in the tabernacle.

There is, it turns out, a matter-of-fact earthiness about much of the island

Keziere records, or a mixture of earthiness and eloquence, which inevitably pulls us back from the brink of melancholy. *Gateway to Chrysopigi (17th Century Monastery)* (1982), for all its stodgy symmetry and cruciformed overkill may not bring to mind a rock-bottom sense of certitude as much as Federico Fellini's evocations of avenues of tombs and concrete mausolea in the film, *8½*. The Mediterranean preoccupation and exultation in the eternal, which borders on an unabashed sense of melodrama, is strangely theatrical to our dour northern sensibility, but always delicately balanced in its observance of the dead and the living.

Surely only a photographer of contemporary art objects would *see* the inherent, piquant mystery in a wrapped, hanging lamp, as in *Interior (Candles and Object), Ay. Ioannis, near Kastro* (1982). The person who wrapped the lamp, probably against flaking whitewash and tarnish (but we can only guess), intended no more. Here, Keziere begins to hit his stride in the wealth and variety of visual poetry to be found at each turning of his walking meditations.

The *Interior, probably Panaghia Kokhi, Artemona* (1982), is packed with cadences, counterpoint and modulations, as much as in any Dutch architectural genre painting of the 17th Century. Did the Greek masons, tilers, carpenters and sacristans plan this in so obvious a way? Probably not. Did Keziere see something others didn't? Most decidedly, yes. It is, admittedly, a moot and debatable point. The woman at the [Kastro] exhibition takes exception, but we, as observers, are removed in time and space but for these induced agencies of light on emulsion-coated plates. Keziere counts the seconds. The image is fixed for those who would have walked blindly through.

Images of images. The Old World is not only a graveyard. It seems at times nothing less than an unrelieved succession of martyrdoms, including all the tragedies of Greece under invaders and oppressors. Icons are created and assume religious significance. Photographs, memorial busts, statues and bas-reliefs take their place in an imagistic pantheon. Votive images are attached. The oldest uses of art are reflected in *Icon and Votive, Moni Foyia* (1982). One might reflect on *their* worship of art as compared to *our* worship of art. The literalness of placing a cut-out figure to plead for intercession by a saint. How practical the uses of art! How touchingly honest, compared with our utterly submerged collective superstition!

The eerie night photograph of a deserted street corner under electric light (*Ay. Nikolaos, Kastro* [1982]) upholds the same sepulchral mood Keziere has otherwise encountered in out of the way places. He says he was struck, everywhere, by the variety and elegance of intuitive solutions to structure. The masonry accretions of slate paving stones follow the relief of the ground in an almost organic way. There is an aptness to the way a buttress to a church corner becomes a sitting place during the day.

*Flower Offerings, Ay. Dimitrios, Kastro* (1982), is an example of breathtaking acquisition and control of textures, tonalities and variegated light in an image not likely possible in any other medium. What more must be said? There is the relief, occasionally, of natural forms amidst the evidence of relentless human ordering. A venerable pair of ancient, pollarded olive trees (*Three Trees, Cemetery Trail, near Apollonia* [1983]) evoke their own sense of dauntless will, as if expressing their remarkable survival in this harsh, sun-baked environment.

In the next moment, Keziere is at the cemetery (*Candle-Box, Graveyard, near Apollonia* [1983]), and again singles out a man-made object of ordinary utility which takes on a bizarre presence, its periscope chimney confronting us like a cornered cyclops. A candle to comfort the dead in a graveyard. How patently ineffectual, how wholly comforting!

*Interior Arch, Monastery Church, Profitis Elais* (1983), is easily one of the most elegant and spatially disconcerting prospects in this collection. Once again, Keziere was troubled by the incongruity of a string of flags strung across what was to be the top corner of the picture, but stifled the impulse to truncate his composition. The prospect of flawed beauty, again. Ambiguity—the constant presence of ambiguity.

The aspect of peasant stewardship evinced in *Landscape on Road between Kastro and Apollonia* (1983), seems to have been perceived as indomitable struggle, not merely as effortless growth. This, too, fits into Keziere's accumulated construction of a requiem: evidence of the painstaking delivery of water to a parched field or the endless terracing of hillsides in other photos, the labour of uncounted generations of Sifnians.

Robert Keziere has thus travelled, it seems, halfway around the world to express through the vernacular of another culture the visual equivalent of a dirge. What might have been a set of architectural observations has become a personal celebration of a continuum, made apparent on a pedestrian Greek island. This was not so much a plan as it was an unfolding; not so much a revelation as a condition of being sustained. It has been unquestionably better to light a candle than curse the dark.

Ted Lindberg,  
Director



*Interior Arch, Monastery Church, Profitis Elais,*  
1983, gelatine silver print, 28.5 x 22.6 cm.



*Interior, Ay. Stefanos, near Kastro*  
1982, gelatine silver print, 28.6 x 22.6 cm.



*Interior (Candles & Object), Ay. Ioannis, near Kastro,  
1982, gelatine silver print, 28.6 x 22.5 cm.*



*Ay. Nikolaos, Kastro,*  
1982, gelatine silver print, 28.6 x 22.6 cm.



*Flower Offering, Ay. Dimitrios, Kastro,*  
1982, gelatine silver print, 28.7 x 22.6 cm.



*Landscape, on Road between Kastro and Apollonia,*  
1983, gelatine silver print, 29.0 x 22.7 cm.



*Icon and Votive, Moni Foyia,*  
1982, gelatine silver print, 27.9 x 22.6 cm.



*Interior, probably Panaghia Kokhi, Artemona,  
1982, gelatine silver print, 28.4 x 22.6 cm.*



*Candle Box, Graveyard near Apollonia,  
1983, gelatine silver print, 28.3 x 22.8 cm.*



*Three Trees, Cemetery Trail, near Apollonia,*  
1983, gelatine silver print, 28.7 x 22.7 cm.

## LIST OF WORKS

All dimensions height x width.

All photographs gelatine silver prints.

Works courtesy of the artist.

*Interior, Ay. Stefanos, near Kastro*

1982, 28.6 x 22.6 cm.

*Gateway to Chrysopigi (17th Century Monastery)*

1982, 19.0 x 24.2 cm.

*Detail of Chrysopigi*

1982, 28.5 x 22.5 cm.

*Interior (Column), Ay. Ioannis, near Kastro*

1982, 28.4 x 22.5 cm.

*Interior (Candles & Object), Ay. Ioannis, near Kastro*

1982, 28.6 x 22.5 cm.

*Palm at Christostomos*

1982, 28.3 x 22.5 cm.

*Interior, probably Panaghia Kokhi, Artemona*

1982, 28.4 x 22.6 cm.

*Altarpiece (Crucifix), Unknown Church*

1982, 27.5 x 22.5 cm.

*Icon and Votive, Moni Foyia*

1982, 27.9 x 22.6 cm.

*Courtyard, Aghios Sostis, Apollonia*

1982, 28.6 x 22.5 cm.

*Two Covered Stands, Theoskepasti, Kastro*

1982, 28.5 x 22.5 cm.

*Crucifix, St. Anthony, Kastro,*

1982, 28.1 x 22.5 cm.

*Reredos Detail (Crucifix & Cloth), Small Church near Kastro*

1982, 27.6 x 22.5 cm.

*Chair, St. Anthony, Kastro*

1982, 28.2 x 22.5 cm.

*Intersection, Apollonia*

1982, 18.8 x 24.2 cm.

*Monument to a Teacher, Artemona*

1982, 26.6 x 22.5 cm.

*Ay. Nikolaos, Kastro*

1982, 28.6 x 22.6 cm.

*Standard, Lamps, Icons*

1982, 29.4 x 22.0 cm.

*Reredos Detail, Panaya I Yeraniofora, Apollonia*

1982, 28.6 x 22.5 cm.

*Altarpiece Detail (Votives), Panaya I Yeraniofora, Apollonia*

1982, 28.2 x 22.5 cm.

*Cemetery, Ay. Stefanos and Ay. Ioannis, near Kastro*

1982, 28.8 x 22.6 cm.

*Flower Offering, Ay. Dimitrios, Kastro*

1982, 28.7 x 22.6 cm.

*Reredos Detail, Ay. Yeoryios, Kastro*

1983, 29.1 x 22.6 cm.

*Three Trees, Cemetery Trail, near Apollonia*

1983, 28.7 x 22.7 cm.

*Interior (Chairs & Arches), Unknown Church*

1983, 28.8 x 22.7 cm.

*Reredos Detail (Two Crosses), Unknown Church*

1983, 29.0 x 22.6 cm.

*Marble Portrait on Tomb*

1983, 29.2 x 22.7 cm.

*Candle Box, Graveyard near Apollonia*

1983, 28.3 x 22.8 cm.

*Marble Grave, near Apollonia*

1983, 28.4 x 22.8 cm.

*Sacristy Detail, Ay. Varvara*

1983, 22.2 x 22.7 cm.

*Memorial Portrait*

1983, 28.9 x 22.7 cm.

*Valley Landscape near Apollonia*

1983, 28.6 x 22.5 cm.

*Bust, near Theologos Tou Mongou*  
1983, 23.4 x 18.7 cm.

*Interior Arch, Monastery Church, Profitis Elais*  
1983, 28.5 x 22.6 cm.

*Reredos Detail, Profitis Elais*  
1983, 28.9 x 22.7 cm.

*Marble Stone, Trail N.W. of Apollonia*  
1983, 28.9 x 22.7 cm.

*Interior (Large Plant), probably Ay. Sostis*  
1983, 28.7 x 22.6 cm.

*Landscape, Trail to Profitis Elais*  
1983, 28.1 x 22.8 cm.

*Goat Skull (Kerata)*  
1983, 28.2 x 22.5 cm.

*Icon, Ay. Evstathios*  
1983, 28.7 x 22.5 cm.

*Landscape (Tree, Walls, Trail)*  
1983, 29.1 x 22.7 cm.

*Interior Arches, Taxiarkhis Skafis*  
1983, 28.7 x 22.6 cm.

*Icon (with Matchboxes), Ay. Evstathios*  
1983, 28.4 x 22.5 cm.

*Ruins (probably Kiln), E. of Artemona*  
1983, 28.8 x 22.5 cm.

*Crucifix, Small Church S. of Artemona*  
1983, 22.6 x 29.9 cm.

*Reredos (Detail of Right Side), Small Church near Kato Petali*  
1983, 29.1 x 22.8 cm.

*Landscape, on Road between Kastro and Apollonia*  
1983, 29.0 x 22.7 cm.

*Rag on Candle Stand, Unknown Church*  
1983, 26.6 x 22.5 cm.

*Marble Eternal Flame, Main Square, Apollonia*  
1983, 29.2 x 22.8 cm.

*Interior (Ladder), Rural Church N.W. of Pano Petali*  
1983, 29.2 x 22.8 cm.

## BIOGRAPHY

### Education:

M.Sc., University of British Columbia, 1969.

### Grants:

LIP Artist Program, 1973.

Canada Council Short Term Grant, 1973.

Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation, 1975.

Burnaby Art Gallery, 1975.

Canada Council Project Cost Grant, 1985.

### Exhibitions:

1972 Gallery of Photography, Vancouver, B.C.

1973 Minds' Eye Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.

1974 Photographer's Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

1975 Seattle Arts Festival, Seattle, Washington.

1977 Nova Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.

1983 Andersons' House, Sifnos, Greece.

1985 *A Requiem*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta.

### Books:

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Glenbow Museum.

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Victoria; The Vancouver Art Gallery.

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### Collections:

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Department of External Affairs, Cultural Affairs Division, Ottawa, Ontario.

Artists Gallery, The City of Vancouver, Vancouver, B.C.

Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa, Ontario.

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