

# Sharon Kopriva's Mummies, Skeletons and Spirits Come Home to Earth Mother

BY SUSIE TOMMANEY

THURSDAY, JULY 7, 2016 AT 7 A.M.



*Fin de Siecle* by Sharon Kopriva, 1987 - 2001, 80 x 115 x 11 inches, oil and mixed media on canvas.

*Photo courtesy of Sharon Kopriva*

Sharon Kopriva's little monsters have come home. As recent museum and gallery exhibitions have wrapped up, her Heights-area studio is packed with mummified clergy, the spirits of hairless dogs and rope-



bound headless earth mothers sprouting roots. It's shaping up to be an impromptu 30 year retrospective of Kopriva's work, and when we heard that representative Deborah Colton Gallery was hosting an open house, we jumped at the chance to view her Gothic babies in their natural setting.

Her passion for the weird began with a fateful trip to Peru in 1982, where she witnessed the culture's mummified remains dating back to the Inca period. "Peru kicked off a re-investigation of my own Roman Catholic religion," says Kopriva. "It opened up my mind to other cultures, and aboriginal cultures, but especially Peruvian." Early works include 1986's *Penitent Woman* (below) and *Surveillance*, an oil painting depicting a skeleton in fetal position. Another early piece is *Fin de Siecle* (above) which spanned more than a decade in its creation and which she recently reacquired. "The big painting with all the avenging angels is my turn of the millennium piece," says Kopriva. "But I worked on it for 17 years. I just kept adding on and building and I guess that's when I started really building out paintings. I'm glad I have it back; it's like *The Confessional*. It's one of the most important pieces for me with my story."



(center) *The Confessional* by Sharon Kopriva, 1992, 84 x 96 x 36 inches, papier mâché, wood, and mixed media; and (top) *Stations of the Cross* by Sharon Kopriva, 2002, 15 x 150 x 1 inches, clayboard, tin, dried flowers, paint and mixed media.

*Courtesy of Sharon Kopriva*

*The Confessional* from 1992 is also one of our favorite pieces, with the veils obscuring the mysterious figures in the booth as secrets unfold. According to Kopriva's niece, Rebecca Long, who has been tasked with many installs and grew up collecting bones for Aunt Sharon.

the life-sized sculpture is modular and breaks apart for easy transport. Although the *Stations of the Cross* pair beautifully with the piece, as shown in the above installation view from 2012's "From Terra to Verde: The Art of Sharon Kopriva" exhibition at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the mixed media works (clayboard, tin, dried flowers) were produced a decade later.



(L) *Penitent Woman* by Sharon Kopriva, 1986, 36 x 18 x 18 inches, papier mâché and mixed media; and (R) *The Cardinal* by Sharon Kopriva, 1994, 50 x 48 x 48 inches, papier mâché and mixed media.

Courtesy of Sharon Kopriva

Only the bold dare to walk through Kopriva's studio after dark. Turning a corner to find the corpulent *The Cardinal* from 1994, sitting in judgment, is not for the faint of heart. While there aren't any hard and fast rules about the eras in Kopriva's career, most of her Catholic imagery was produced between 1989 and 2006.







*Vessels* (detail) by Sharon Kopriva, 1996 - 2004, 121 x 96 x 18 inches, papier mâché, wood, and mixed media.

*Courtesy of Sharon Kopriva*

Informally titled the "three boatmen" these pour souls (1996-2004) are trapped for eternity, bound to their primitive canoes with crosses and rope. Kopriva has been known to use animal or poultry bones to form the fingers and other elements in her sculptures. A little digging in the studio will reveal a box of "fingers and toes" and, resting on top, the desiccated carcass of a cat who died in a wall. There is a similar piece to *Vessels* in Kopriva's studio kitchen. Legend has it that its owner was away from home and there was a fire or some sort of disaster; when the police arrived they found the suspicious-looking sculpture and sent it to the coroner where it received a toe tag before they realized it was art.



*Matrimony* by Sharon Kopriva, 2001-2002, papier mâché and mixed media, 74 x 48 x 48 inches.

*Photo by Susie Tommaney*

There's something special about viewing Kopriva's works in their natural habitat, taken out of the pristine environs of a museum or gallery space and back into the garage-like studio surrounded by who-knows-what. Boots anchor the betrothed to the ground and to each other



in *Matrimony*, one of her newer pieces from 2001-2002, as their faithful (but skeletal) dog stands by.



*In the Name of the Father* by Sharon Kopriva, 2003, 38 x 80 x 24 inches, papier mâché and mixed media.

Photo by Susie Tommaney

It was pointed out to us that the fourth nun, to finish making the sign of the cross, was never created. Kopriva formed these characters with vintage shoes, tomato cages, papier mâché and her imagination; the legs of the chairs morph into the spindly legs of the nuns. Behind the trio is one of the oldest pieces in the studio, *Surveillance* from 1986.







*Canis Major* (detail) by Sharon Kopriva, 2010-2011, oil and mixed media on photo canvas, 75 x 48 x 11 inches

*Photo by Susie Tommaney*

Although many only know of Kopriva's work through her sculptures, her paintings are highly detailed and romantic, incorporating ghostly and spiritual themes. Her "Dogs Without Hair" series from 2008-2015 shows the love she has for her pets. "The first dog painting I made was *Canis Major*; I had done some drawings and that was the first major painting," says Kopriva. At its base is a small box, containing the ashes of her golden retriever. "It's kind of another milestone for me. It's about dogs in general, especially these guys, the dogs flying through the air. [The golden retriever] had a good life, but I still miss her." Kopriva travels with her current hairless dogs, Pluto, Luna and Thor, while summering in her studio in Idaho.



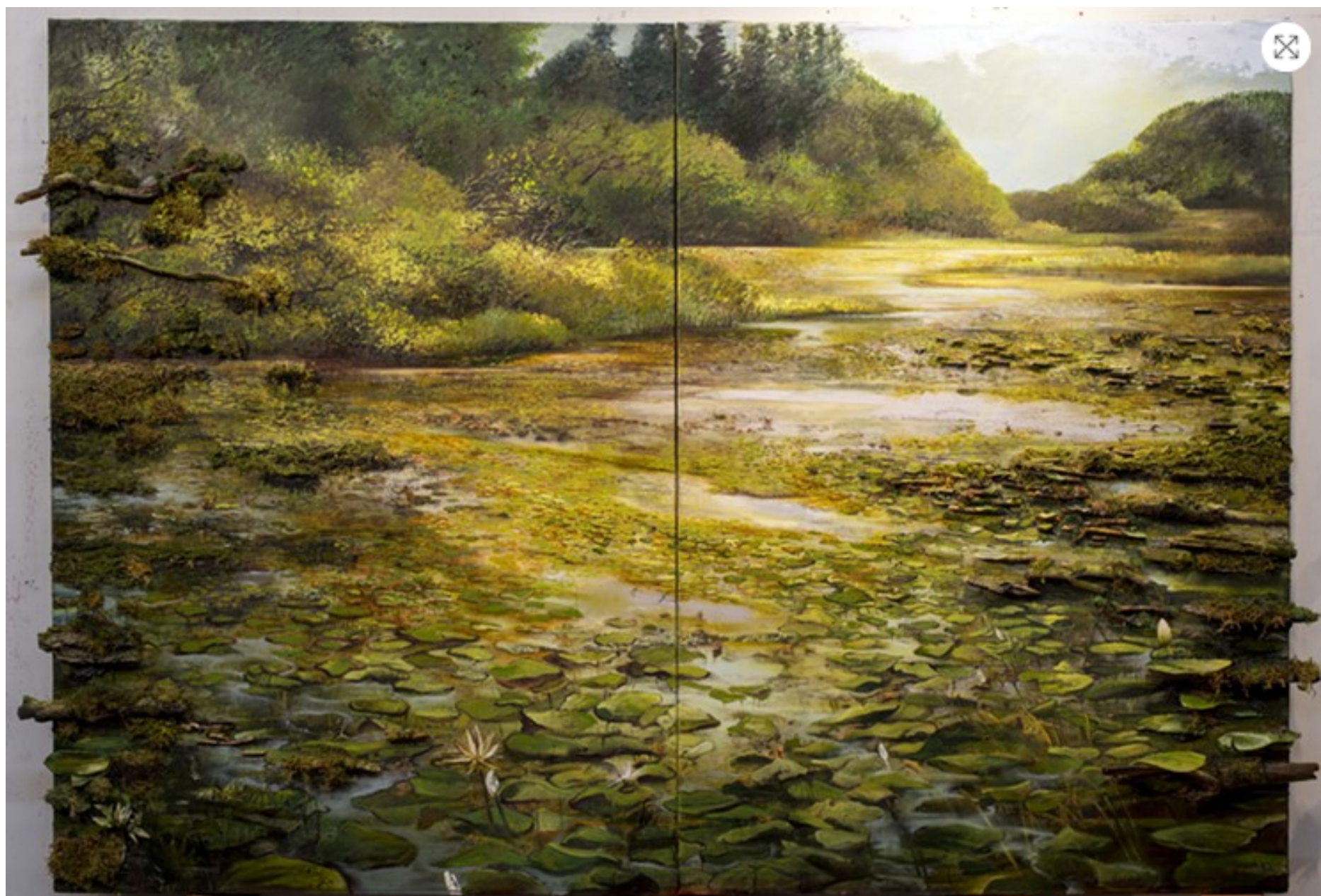
*Cathedral Green* by Sharon Kopriva, 2012, 81 x 186 x 2.5 inches, oil and mixed media on photo canvas.

*Courtesy of Sharon Kopriva*

Recent works by Kopriva fall into the "Terra" and "The Verde" series, which she calls romantic landscapes inspired by both nature and a fascination – stemming from her trips to Peru – about our origins and where we came from and burying our spirituality. "Working my way through the Catholic series I kind of stayed in the brown palette," says Kopriva. "I started coming to Idaho in 1989 and it took awhile but it eventually just changed my outlook. So



many walks in the woods, that's where I wanted to find my spirituality. I was always searching for something and I found it here." She says it took a while to open up to nature, and says that walking alone in the woods is different and more special than walking with a group.



*Denton Slough* by Sharon Kopriva, 2015, 88 x 60 x 5 inches, oil and mixed media on photo canvas.

*Courtesy of Sharon Kopriva*

*Denton Slough*, from 2015, began with a photograph, and then Kopriva added layers of paint and objects to build out the canvas, breathing new life into the scene. More recently she has been working on her "Tuber" series, which are self portraits of a sort. Hung from the ceiling, these headless female torsos of earth mothers are bound with rope, ending with roots instead of legs.

We asked Kopriva what's next, now that she's wrapped up solo and group exhibitions in Monterrey, Mexico; New Delhi, India; New York City; Billings, Montana; and several cities in Texas. "I'm working with some more of the tuber people and I'm gonna give it a go trying to develop a group of them into what I call muses," says Kopriva. She has just returned from Mexico City, where she visited the museum established by Dolores Olmedo Patiño, the muse to Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. She is exploring drawings or sculptures based on the nine Greek muses, supporters of the arts, and naming them. "Starting with Dolores, maybe

Gertrude Stein, Peggy Guggenheim, Alma Mahler. "I am searching right now where to take it next. I do want to do more of the tubers that go with the green paintings. I really want to show them together."

*For information about making an acquisition or touring the studio space, please contact Heidi Vaughan at Deborah Colton Gallery at 713-869-5151 or emailing [heidi@deborahcoltongallery.com](mailto:heidi@deborahcoltongallery.com). For more information about Sharon Kopriva, visit [sharonkopriva.com](http://sharonkopriva.com).*

ADVERTISING

[inRead](#) invented by Teads

Sponsor Content

