The diminutive artist Sharon Kopriva, whom I have known since the early 1980s, always amazes me with her creations—powerful sculptures, paintings and assemblages that ask questions about life, death and immortality. This year Kopriva was awarded the prestigious Three Dimensional Artist of the Year award from the Texas Commission for the Arts.

When did you first know you were going to be an artist? When I was five… drawing was my favorite activity.

Were you in Catholic school? I attended Catholic school from first through eighth grade. It is a significant part of my roots—the thread that carries through no matter what I do. Whatever you learn as a child becomes your core, and mine came from Italian Catholicism.

You've created altar boys, nuns, bishops and Popes. Only one Pope, “From Dust Thou Art,” which is in artist Nancy Kienholz's collection. I specifically did a take off of “Pope Innocent X” by Diego Velázquez. His painting shows the Pope from the waist up, holding a letter in his hand and looking very serious. Francis Bacon's take on this same piece, “Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X,” shows the Pope screaming. The day after I read an article saying that the Vatican had accepted evolution, I thought, “I have to do a piece on that.” My Pope is three-dimensional and sits in a wheelchair. He is bent over like the Pope in the Velázquez painting and holds a copy of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* with a monkey on his lap.

What do these figures tell us about the meaning of human relationships and religious experiences? My own interpretation often differs from those who view it. I’m always interested in what other people are saying. I get reactions like “Does this means the church is dead?” For me, the figures are frozen in time, performing rituals that I witnessed. It’s impossible to go into a Catholic church today that has not become more modern. Nuns don’t wear the habits that I put them in, but that’s my roots, so that’s why they are there.

You also do relief tableaux, like the one in my collection called “The Trinity.” Yes, it was in the 2000 exhibition I had at the Menil Collection.

When did Dominique de Menil first become aware of your work? It was at the Byzantine Fresco Chapel fundraising event where I had donated a piece of sculpture, “Catherine’s Wheel.”

Dominique fell in love with it, and you now have three works at the Menil. In the early 1980s, was your visit to Peru and Machu Picchu the beginning of your sculpture period? It changed my life. Changes happen when we are ready to receive them. I fell in love with Peruvian mummies in a way that I never imagined. I didn’t see them as dried up dead people—for me, they are an extension of life. It was fabulous to meet a 500-year-old person.
Did you feel as though you got to know any of them? I really did. It’s the strangest thing you’re probably going to hear. Of course they were dead, but they were beyond dead. They still had lived.

Did you always have an interest in archeology? If I hadn’t become an artist, I would have gone into archeology. I remember being 4 or 5 years old and my neighbor giving me a View Master with a slide of Aztec and Inca ruins. I looked at those images over and over. I was ready for Peru long before I went to Peru.

What is it that you want the viewer to understand? In “The Confessional,” I hope the viewer sees the sacrament of penance, as well as the cleansing and renewal. “The Confessional” is my definitive work and is in the collection of Dr. Ted Pillsbury.

Do you consider “The Confessional” voyeuristic? Yes. With that piece, you are looking through the curtain. When I went to confession as a kid, there was a curtain strung across the booth so you had privacy. In this piece, I simulated the confessional where I grew up, but I put the lights inside. You’re a voyeur because you see right through the curtain.

Do you see light in the dark? I always leave some hope. Look at “The Confessional.” People see that as something dark. In Catholicism, spirituality comes out of darkness. The churches were dark, candlelit, and we’d go into a dark confessional. Afterwards, we’d feel renewed.

Didn’t something unusual happen with one of your works, “St. Sebastian?”
Yes. St. Sebastian was sent to the morgue. He was in collector Andy Lubetkin’s apartment. Andy was out of town and an aquarium sprung a leak and water was going into the apartment below. The manager was called to go in and check the leak. He saw Sebastian and called the police, who called homicide, and Sebastian was sent to the morgue. We got him back, and I had to repair a toe. I don’t know if they tagged his toe or what.

Would you say your work is shocking to some and provocative to others? It has shocked a few people, like the guy that took St. Sebastian to the morgue. Sometimes we have to jar a viewer loose from their everyday tasks and thoughts to get them to absorb the message, which might be to find their own spirituality. I would feel wonderful if my art made someone stop and think about the whole picture, life and death.

What do you want to leave behind? God, that’s a great question. A few marks, a presence, if you’d call it a mark or an imprint that says I’ve been here.

Do you do the art for yourself first? You have to do what you are doing for you first, and then you put it out there. We are very lucky. For you, it’s in your writing; for me, it’s in art. Unlike musicians and theater performers, we get to trash the ones that don’t work.

When is your next show and what galleries carry your work? This fall at LewAllen Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I’m also represented by Gerald Peters in Dallas and Barbara Davis in Houston.

Who is Sharon Kopriva? I’m still learning who I am through my art. I think Max Ernst said “I seek,” and Picasso said, “I find.” Well, I say, “I’m a seeker.” In each piece of art, I’m searching for more. I’m trying to understand myself in relation to the world.