

## The Artist: Karen Hawkins



Austin artist Karen Hawkins creates a new chapter for books that have reached the end of their shelf life.



*Above: Books marked withdrawn from libraries or sold for pennies at discount stores become remarkable works of art in the hands of this Austin artist.*

Artist Karen Hawkins' love affair with books began in childhood, with weekly visits from the neighborhood bookmobile delivering summer entertainment. That she now destroys them is not the act of a jilted lover, but an ongoing devotion to keeping them relevant in today's digital world. Books marked withdrawn from libraries or sold for pennies at discount stores become remarkable works of art in the hands of this Austin artist. *"These are books that are either too old or have been handled by so many hands that they're falling apart and unsellable,"* Hawkins says. *"I wanted to do something different with them—to turn them into something beautiful and give them a life outside of their original context."*

Though a voracious reader, when it comes to her art, it's not a book's content that inspires Hawkins. Rather, it's the common shapes in everyday life—the square grid backsplash behind her kitchen stove, circular hay bales lined up along the road to Houston—that spark the rhythmic patterns she uses to author her creations. This has led her to turn and fold college yearbook pages to form the hanging columns of each Totem piece, and wind small segments of paper, cut from mass-market paperbacks, into tight scrolls for her site-specific installations of Jellyrolls. Rhythm, repetition and movement are as central to Hawkins' work as the books themselves and each piece can take hundreds of hours to complete.



*Above: Hawkins also works with other medium, like the toy soldiers that make up her 'Peace' sign.*

Today, private collectors around the country are starting to share her passion—often commissioning biographical pieces, such as using law books for an attorney and sheet music for a musician—as do the galleries in Austin, Dallas and Hong Kong that showcase her work, including Gallery Shoal Creek and Laura Rathe Fine Art. *"Even though I am, in many ways, destroying these books, it's about paying respect to them, as well,"* Hawkins says. *"They're beloved to me, and I want books to continue to be that for other people. That requires changing the way we look at them, and that's what I hope I'm doing."*