Is That a Table Saw?

I grew up using tools. I don't remember when I first held a hammer, or the first time I used a table saw. I do remember the hot pink desk-turned-workbench that sat next to my dad's workbench in our basement, filled with wood scraps, hammers, and nails. Learning to use tools, and to be trusted to use them, was part of growing up.

Now I get to spend my days in the woodshop surrounded by students learning to use tools. I teach Design Lab at Barre City Elementary and Middle School. Much to my surprise, my class is often the first time that students are using tools. Prior to teaching, I worked professionally in theatre, on and off Broadway, and then transitioned into residential construction here in Vermont.

When I first started teaching, I bought every "kids woodworking" book I could find. Many are written for adults, aimed at helping them help a kid make something. All of them focus on projects, not *tools.* I was looking for a reference guide for tools that wouldn't overwhelm kids with jargon or highly technical drawings.

I learn best by sketching – whether it's a machine I'm trying to understand or penciling out an idea for something I want to make. My father encouraged me to become a competent sketcher because he believed that it's the best form of communication.

I constantly sketch in the shop with my students and require them to as well. They have freedom to build projects that they design, but they must draw out their ideas before I hand them a new piece of lumber. It hadn't occurred to me to use a finished sketch as a teaching tool until recently. I painted a picture of the band saw, scanned it, and turned it into a worksheet for my students. They loved it. Something about a painting of the bandsaw made it more approachable. A painting isn't just a record of what something looks like; it's an attempt to share how the artist sees it. By painting a tool, rather than photographing it, I can emphasize the forms and details that reveal how it works. Understanding tools, their various uses, and in what situations they become dangerous gave me confidence in the shop and I sought to share that with my students.

When I applied to the Studio Place Arts Residency Program, I pitched a series of paintings that would become the foundations for the reference guide I couldn't find. During the residency, I have painted many of the tools that we use in our shop. I find a tension between the control necessary to depict the details of a tool, and the loose, soft feeling that I admire in watercolors. Instead of focusing on the technical aspects, I focused on subtly highlighting the tools' primary functions in each piece.

During my residency, my husband and I welcomed our first child into the world. Seeing her interest in simple and high-contrast artwork, I was inspired to make some tool paintings that she would enjoy. My daughter often accompanies me to the studio and is the inspiration for my series of bright and bold tools that I hope to turn into a picture book called "Woodshop for Babies."

Mackenzie Kovaka teaches Design Lab, a hands-on woodshop-based class, at Barre City Elementary and Middle School. Prior to teaching, she was a stagehand and built sets for regional theaters across the country and on Broadway. She transitioned to residential construction during the pandemic and gained experience making cabinets, renovations, and timber framing. As a teenager, she attended Hartford Area Career and Technology Center in Industrial Mechanics and Welding. She went on to earn a B.S. from Centre College in Mathematics and Dramatic arts, and an MFA in Theatre, Technical Production from UNC Chapel Hill. She lives in Barre with her husband, daughter and dog.

"Is That a Table Saw?" by Mackenzie Kovaka
Watercolor paintings of common woodworking tools created during her 2025-26 SPA Studio Residency.
Exhibit Dates: September 9 – October 24, 2026
Studio Place Arts – 201 N Main St., Barre, VT 05641 – studioplacearts.com