

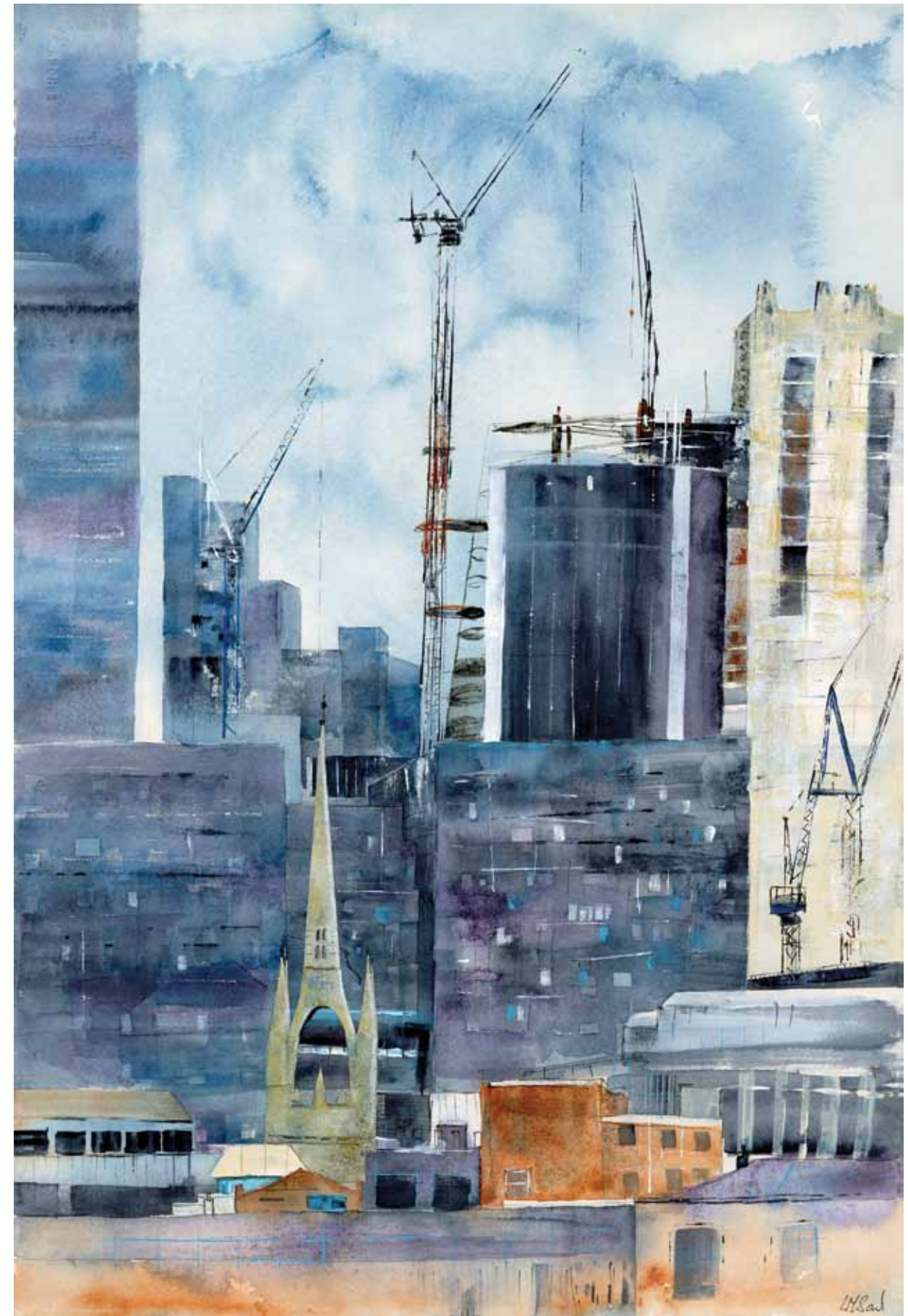
# UNDER CONSTRUCTION

For **Linda Saul**, several cranes working on a building project are not only an amazing sight but a masterpiece in the making.

By Tim Saunders

**RIGHT**  
The church in **Overshadowed** (watercolor on paper, 23x12) is dwarfed by the building under construction behind it. The foreground just dissolves into abstraction. Saul used a stamping technique to add accents of color and texture.

**FAR RIGHT**  
**St Dunstan Amongst the Cranes** (watercolor on paper, 23x15), which was painted in the studio with the help of on-site sketches and a quick study, depicts a church that was bombed in World War II and which is now a city garden. "The view that first caught my eye was very complex," says Saul. "It took a lot of looking to find a composition that I was happy with."





**LEFT**  
**Reflection in Canary Wharf Construction** (watercolor on paper, 15x13) is an example of a time when the artist happened upon an interesting composition “just by pure luck,” she says. “The reflection in the cladding of the building is rendered with loose watercolor washes, but structure is added with linear work, which I applied in various ways—with pen, with stamping and even scratching the paper surface.”

**OPPOSITE TOP**  
 Most of the bottom half of **Mousehole, Cornwall, U.K.** (watercolor collage on paper, 15x15) has been collaged to get a mix of textures from different paper surfaces. Saul added white linework over top and used charcoal to add the stones. She used Daniel Smith’s Apatite Blue Genuine for the sea.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM**  
 In **Red Door** (watercolor collage on paper, 12x11), Saul used collage to build textures. The red door was so prominent in this painting, it had to be reflected in the title.



The artist tends to focus on locations in London for her construction-site paintings, but much of her work is inspired by England’s coastal scenery. “There are two main threads to my work,” Saul explains. “There’s the city work, which is at the moment largely about construction and power stations, and the coastal work, which features wharves, harbors and lighthouses.” The subjects require slightly different approaches, but the artist finds there’s benefit in bouncing between the two. “I might get blocked on one thing and just need to shift focus,” Saul says. “It’s quite useful to be able to do that.”

### ATTUNED TO TEXTURE

Fundamental to Saul’s art is a textural quality. Inspired by the built environment, as well as the passage of time, the artist seeks to highlight decay, weathering, adaptation, repair and construction. “I find London inspiring,” Saul says, “as a place to explore the collage of textures as modern structures engulf the architecture of previous centuries.”

Capturing this textural excitement in her paintings is vital to Saul’s artistic vision, and it’s one of the reasons she works in watercolor. The artist considers the physical properties of the medium—its unpredictability and the variation of effects offered by different paper surfaces—as significant creative advantages.

Although there’s more scope for textural effects in her coastal work—which tends to feature a lot of older buildings and harbor walls, which show a lot of weathering,” she says—the presence of textures and patterns is also a large part of what draws her to a building site. “The textures in a construction site bring visual interest to a city view,” Saul says. “There’s a bit of a grid-like structure as the buildings are being erected, so there’s a lot of linear work. A lot of painters don’t use hard lines at all, but I actually like a lot of lines in paintings.”

### AN IMPROVISATIONAL APPROACH

Saul doesn’t have a fixed process for a painting. “Every subject has to be approached in its own way,” she says.

inda Saul finds construction sites completely captivating. She loves to observe the textures of buildings as they’re being erected, and she loves the machinery that makes it happen, particularly the soaring cranes. “I’m a bit obsessed with cranes,” Saul says, with a smile. “I find them quite fun as a subject, because they move around, so you get

a different potential composition every time they change position.” To find several cranes together on a site is, to this artist, beyond wonderful. Saul’s fascination with building sites began a few years ago when she did an artist residency at Wood Wharf construction site, in Canary Wharf, an area located in London’s central business district. “Although we had limited access, what we did see was mind-blowing,” Saul says. The artist admits that she’s not always excited about new development, especially when it threatens structures that have historical

significance. “We’ve got quite a bit of construction happening in Reading, the town where I live,” she says, adding, “I look a little more negatively on the building projects here, because it’s close to home, I suppose.” The former prison, Reading Gaol, for instance—is a structure the artist feels quite passionate about preserving. “The prison was made famous as the site where Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde was incarcerated,” Saul explains. The site became famous after Wilde wrote the poem, ‘Ballad of Reading Gaol,’ which he penned, in 1897, after his two-year imprisonment.



**LEFT**  
**Pendeen Cliff Top, Cornwall, U.K.** (watercolor on paper, 16x15) shows how granulating watercolor paints can be used to suggest rough land forms. The paints were allowed to run to achieve the interesting patterns. Some of the rocks have been collaged using a thin paper, prepared with a mixture of acrylic and watercolor.

**OPPOSITE**  
 Saul used a variety of different paper surfaces, including papyrus, which she collaged to the painting, to achieve the variety of texture in the rocks in **Fisherman's Hut** (watercolor collage on paper, 14x12).

**BELOW**  
**Lyme Cobb, U.K.** (watercolor collage on paper, 15x23) depicts a scene in Lyme Regis, a seaside town, in Dorset, in southwest England. "I wanted to focus on the cobb, or harbor, and the buildings," Saul says, "so the boats were just indicated in outline form." She used collage to build visual texture on the harbor wall and buildings.



## On Materials

**Paper:** For her main support, Saul uses 300-lb. hot-pressed watercolor paper. She likes to use a heavy weight, so she doesn't have to attach it to a board, thus allowing her to move and bend the paper to control the flow of her watercolor washes.

For her collage papers, Saul is careful to avoid adding materials that might not be archival. Therefore, all the colored work in her collage, she paints herself. "Although I'm using a lot of different paper surfaces and a lot of different textures, I'm still using my own paint, so I get that uniformity in the color palette," she says.

The artist will incorporate some printed materials, on occasion. She likes using tide tables, for example, which relate to the coastal theme. "I just paint over them so a bit of the texture shows through and adds interest," she says. (See *Fisherman's Hut*, at 00.)

Some pieces really call out for the use of text, such as a piece she based on the Oscar Wilde poem, "Ballad of Reading Gaol." Because she was worried about the archival properties of the printed page, Saul scanned the words and had them printed professionally on archival paper. She uses acrylic matte medium as the "glue" for her collage work.

**Paint:** Saul uses Daniel Smith watercolors, but has a few odd tubes from other manufacturers. "I really like granulation in watercolor, and some Daniel Smith watercolors have amazing granulation properties," she says. "I try to get the maximum out of what watercolor will do in terms of textures." Although most of her paintings are more than 95 percent watercolor, the artist introduces acrylic paint at times. "Sometimes I use watercolor over acrylic," she says, "because the behavior of the two different paints offers interesting effects."

**Brushes:** "I use a lot of Rosemary & Co. brushes because they're excellent and very good value," Saul says.

"When I'm painting a coastal scene, I typically paint the main washes—the sky, sea and other major shapes—and then I'll work it up using collage pieces, playing around with the various paper surfaces." The artist appreciates these variations in surface quality—whether the paper is rough or smooth, how absorbent it is—and puts this to work in her painting. "I might also manipulate the surface properties in various ways," she explains, "scratching, tearing or sealing it with matte medium to change absorbency."

If she wants to build texture for a portrayal of a weathered surface, for instance, she might collage the area with pieces of painted papers, then paint over that, and then tear some of the paper back and add still more collage to produce rich, layered effects. "I even may tear off a bit of

collage paper and paste it somewhere else on the painting," she says.

Saul may also opt to stamp some lines and shapes on a painting, using a range of items—pieces of cut eraser, perhaps, or bits of mat board and foam. "There's a lot of building up of layers, which isn't so unlike what has actually happened to the old, weathered subjects I'm painting," she points out. "They've been battered, worn down and repaired. The process is really quite similar." When her subject is a more modern building, the artist takes a different approach, which may not involve as much, or any, collage.

### COMMITTING TO THE WORK

It was 30 years ago that Saul picked up a paintbrush for the first time since childhood. "I started painting,



**LEFT**  
 Inspired by a view from the Tate Modern, in London, **Evolving City III** (watercolor on paper, 21x12) includes the Shard, London's tallest building, in the background. Saul painted the main forms with loose watercolor washes and added some stamped texture using a piece of burlap. The crane was rendered almost entirely by stamping, using the edge of a piece of mount board.

**OPPOSITE**  
**Evolving City IV** (watercolor on paper, 14x16), another view from the Tate Modern, shows construction to the north. The artist put down loose washes and then stamped the detail.

and the work was dreadful, absolutely awful, for a long time," she says. "It was several years before I produced a painting I liked. I don't know how I kept going. At some point, I just told myself: If I stick with this, I will get better at it."

She started attending workshops with various artists and, in 2017, her drive to improve her skills led her to sign up for a mentoring course at Newlyn School of Art, in Cornwall. With that experience as reinforcement, Saul decided to retire from her 30-year career in computing, and committed herself full-time to her painting.

One of the artist's current goals is to improve her productivity. "My large paintings take a lot of time to produce," she says. "It's not the same with my abstract landscapes; they're rather relaxing and I can produce them more quickly."

Although working on more than one painting at a time can be a challenge in terms of the mental switch, Saul finds it to be an efficient strategy. "Some of my techniques require a lot of water, so it can take several hours for the paint to dry," she says. "If I'm not working on something else, I can be blocked by that process."

The artist tries to spend at least six hours a day in her home studio, depending on what it is she's working on. "I've been struggling on a particular London scene for two or three years now, and I'm still trying to make a decent painting of that," she says. It's not that unusual for Saul to set aside a painting for a period of time. "I often have to stop working on a painting when I realize that I need some other texture, for example, and need time to prepare some new sheets of collage material," she says. "Every day is different, really."



## Meet the Artist



Linda Saul ([www.lindasaul.co.uk](http://www.lindasaul.co.uk)), who works in water-based mixed media, was elected as an Associate of the Royal Watercolour Society (RWS) in 2021 and won The Artist Prize in the RWS Contemporary Watercolour Competition 2020. Her watercolor, *Pendeen Cliff Top* (page 00), was featured among the paintings in the *Sunday Times Watercolour Competition*, in 2019. In the same year, Saul—who has a keen understanding of the significance of historic buildings—organized the Reading Gaol Hug, which brought together approximately 1,000 people to surround the famous prison, with linked hands, as part of a campaign to save the structure as a cultural center and museum. Although the artist enjoyed painting as a child, it wasn't until she was in her twenties that she received any formal art training. Saul eventually retired from a long career in IT in order to work as a full-time professional artist.

Saul is currently working on a series of paintings she calls, *Evolving City*, based on new development in central London. The series started with her sketching and photographing views from the Tate Modern to use as reference material for studio paintings. Four such works, including *Evolving City III* (opposite) and *Evolving City IV* (above), were exhibited in the Royal Watercolor Society's Autumn Show at the Banksie Gallery, on London's South Bank, in 2020.

Saul's success in watercolor certainly underscores the reward for a decision to work hard and "stick with it." **WA**

*Tim Saunders is a U.K.-based journalist, living in Hampshire.*