

Artist Joanna May tells **Barry Leighton** how her wild neighbours have inspired her latest project



Search the sky for signs

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**S**HE has created painstakingly detailed scenes of exotic wildlife which have been exhibited around the country and sold for thousands of pounds at art houses including Christies.

But talented artist Joanna May always returns to the wild hares which she watches frolicking in the fields behind her rural home near Swindon.

Now the 41-year-old specialist artist has embarked on a unique project, producing a series of 12 paintings linking hares with the signs of the zodiac, using famous Wiltshire landmarks as the backdrop.

The zodiac paintings will each feature hares in or over a part of the Wiltshire countryside, with the appropriate constellation in a night sky behind.

Such is her reputation, that she has already sold six of the works in advance, for £8,000 each - even though only three are finished and the buyers don't know how the artist will interpret their star signs.

Joanna May, whose work was featured on Bill Oddie's BBC2 *Springwatch* series, said: "I've done a lot exotic scenes over the past few years; leopards, cheetahs, zebras.

"But I really love the hares. I see them out the back all the time. They're not only fascinating to watch but they are also associated with folklore and mysticism."

The first in the series was *Gemini Hare*, showing two of the creatures - representing the sign of the twins - floating in a midnight blue sky above Marlborough High Street,



**Star struck: Joanna May has used her love of hares in her latest project painting star signs - this is Aquarius Hare**

which is reputedly the widest in the country.

Ms May, whose studio gallery is at Old Hughenden Yard, off the High Street, said: "I'm a Gemini, so I painted this one first. Gemini is an air sign, and you can see the constellation mapped out in the sky and a streak of silver flashes behind the second hare, since it is ruled by Mercury.

"The hares are in running positions because Gemini's are considered to be quick-thinking, sharp witted and adaptable - moving from one situation to another with ease and confidence.

"Marlborough High Street is lit up at night

and you can see all of the buildings through to Saint Mary's Church and the Town Hall."

Scorpio was next, and as it is a water sign, Ms May has painted a single hare leaping over the River Kennet.

She said: "The Kennet flows through the grounds of Marlborough College, and this is the part which I have depicted in the picture, linking it with this big institution of knowledge.

"Scorpio is supposed to be the most intelligent sign in the zodiac. In the painting you can see the constellation, with the front three stars as the claws sweeping around

to the tail, with two stars forming the sting." A slithering grass snake represents the serpent of wisdom, while a tawny owl personifies knowledge.

Ms May is now putting the finishing touches to *Aquarius Hare*, featuring the Avebury stone circle.

She said: "Liberty-loving Aquarius is supposed to be very interested in social causes and debate."

When hares famously box, sometimes other hares gather around to watch, forming a circle, she said.

"The hares in the circle appear to be judging the two hares boxing in the middle.

"The ring of hares floats in the sky, again because it is an air sign. It is elevated above the stone circle, as the monument would have looked in its original state, thousands of years ago.

"Avebury was used for social gatherings and social causes. Aquarians are very gregarious and love to be in gatherings of people but don't want to be the centre of attention."

She is now looking to include Stonehenge and Silbury Hill in the series.

Ms May has been painting since she was five and graduated in art and design from Falmouth in Cornwall in 1991.

She soon became in demand as a wildlife illustrator for magazines, encyclopedias and children's books but for the past five years has concentrated on her studio gallery, where she sells prints and original work.

■ Further information is available from 01672 519277 or [www.joannamay.com](http://www.joannamay.com)