



FRED WESSEL

Constellations



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The Constellation Cancer, tempera on panel with gold, silver and palladium leaf, 24 x 18"

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Aquila, tempera on panel with gold and palladium leaf, 24 x 18"

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Delphinus, tempera on panel with gold and palladium leaf and pearls, 24 x 18"

Fred Wessel was a lithographer and draughtsman teaching at the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, in Connecticut, when he first went to Italy in 1984. Conceptual art and the principles of the Bauhaus were at the core of the curriculum at Hartford and Wessel tried to make "semi-conceptual" prints. Walking into the Botticelli Rooms at the Uffizi Gallery he was overcome with emotion. "There was overwhelming beauty surrounding me," he recalls. "The concepts, the drawing, the pigments. The beauty of it all!"

He didn't think he could be a painter until he realized that the tiny brushstrokes of egg tempera (the medium of Botticelli and the other masters he experienced in Italy) would allow him in effect to draw with paint. "I felt as confident as I did with a pencil," he says. He was also fascinated

by the placement of a dimensional figure against a flat, often gold leafed, background in the Renaissance paintings as well as the figure/ground relationships of abstract expressionism. "I've always been intrigued by creating a dimensional space and flattening it out somehow," he says.

His latest paintings continue his exploration of those ideas in a series based on the constellations. The series was inspired by a 17th-century sundial his wife had inherited from her father and by his own study of the work of the English astronomer John Flamsteed (1646-1719). He also refers to the digital collection of Felice Stoppa, a dealer in Milan, whose site Atlas Coelestis features the work of astronomers and artists from as far back as the 16th century.

"I realized there's so much I can do with the star charts," he explains. "Some I take

verbatim. With others, I'll take their basic schematic and change it, or I'll do my own drawing of the constellation."

One recent work is *Delphinus* inspired by the kite-shaped constellation in the northern sky recorded in the second century by the astronomer Ptolemy. The model wears a dress he found on one of his forays for props. It is studded with pearls. He decided to apply real pearls to the background to create an interplay with the painted pearls of the model's dress. A Chinese fighting carp kite recalls the shape of the constellation, and the branches of dogwood blossoms recall that connection to China.

Wessel's paintings are rich with associations and show his command of creating the luminosity and surface of the egg tempera paintings that first captured him more than 30 years ago. ●

