

Heather Galbraith  
Senior Curator

Ed Ruscha (b. 1937)  
**Mighty Topic** 1990  
acrylic on paper  
762 x 1022 mm  
Private collection  
© Ed Ruscha

Heraldic knot  
illustration  
Collection of the artist

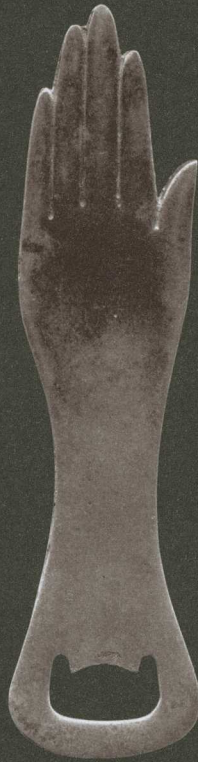
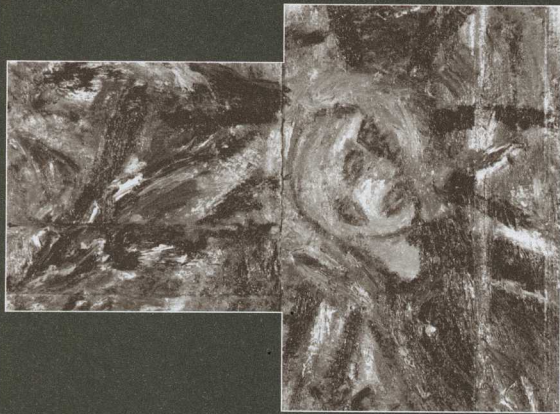
## A space (and time) odyssey

American artist Ed Ruscha's painting **Mighty Topic** (1990) consists of two layers of text hovering above a pale grey background. MIGHTY TOPIC in white blocky upper case lettering is 'shadowed' by a steeply raking italic text. The two texts say the same thing, yet they each have a very different character and historical association. Their spatial relationship does not make complete sense. While the image forcefully commands our attention, we have no indication of just what this 'mighty topic' might be. Ruscha's words do not declare themselves as a question, a proposition or an assertion. Through the accrual of dissimilar languages we are presented with a 'third' image, offering new possibilities for meaning. The synapses start firing.

Tony Lane paints recognisable objects which are part of our daily lives; a table with wine bottles, a chair, a linen cloth, a necklace, a coil of rope; 'common and garden' forms which suggest a myriad of cultural, religious and personal meanings. Akin to Ruscha's texts, Lane's objects have both a big, (uppercase) symbolic or allegorical meaning – drawing on myth, votive iconography, psychoanalytic and linguistic interpretations – and fuzzy (lower case) more subjective resonances. The symbolic and the experiential merge imperceptibly to produce a 'whole' meaning (which in itself is a slippery, contestable resolution).

Lane's enigmatic visual language is deeply connected to painting's history, from thirteenth century Italian painters such as Giotto (Ambrogio Bondone 1267-1337) and the Spanish still life painters of the seventeenth century, to modernist and contemporary artists. His interests extend outside of 'high-art'; he is equally as captivated by Mexican nineteenth century *retablo* and *ex voto* paintings, 'folk' and 'outsider' art. While Lane 'borrows' fragments of images or formal pictorial devices from art history, he does so selectively and knowingly; he is not a copyist, rather he re-constitutes aspects of visual language with the awareness that our understanding of the past is always partial and subjective. This engagement with historical visual culture is combined with his desire to radically reinstate the capacity of images to convey meaning and content in a contemporary context.

The title **Practical Metaphysics** may seem at first to be an oxymoron, so closely aligned has the contemporary understanding of metaphysics become with the immaterial. The derivation of the word, from the Greek *meta ta phusika* (which translates as 'the things after physics') helps us to understand the over-arching remit of this philosophical science. The concept of moving *beyond* physics, exploring realms other than the 'material', highlights the discipline's drive to understand the nature of all reality, be it visible or invisible, material or immaterial. Lane's paintings explore the ongoing tensions between these two realms (the real and the symbolic), embracing all of the inherent conflicts and parallels.



Tony Lane  
**Sleep-Walker** (Lazarus)  
oil on wood  
350 x 470 mm  
Photograph: Neil Perrett  
Private collection, Wellington

Bottle opener  
purchased 2005  
Collection of the artist

Tony Lane  
**Axis Mundi** 1989  
oil on linen  
1825 x 1215 mm  
Photograph: Neil Perrett  
Courtesy of City of Wellington

Tony Lane  
**Sleep-Walker (Lazarus)** 1985  
oil on wood  
350 x 470 mm  
Photograph: Neil Price  
Private collection, Wellington

Bottle opener  
purchased 2005  
Collection of the artist

Tony Lane  
**Axis Mundi** 1989  
oil on linen  
1825 x 1215 mm  
Photograph: Neil Price  
Courtesy of City Gallery  
Wellington

### A precursor

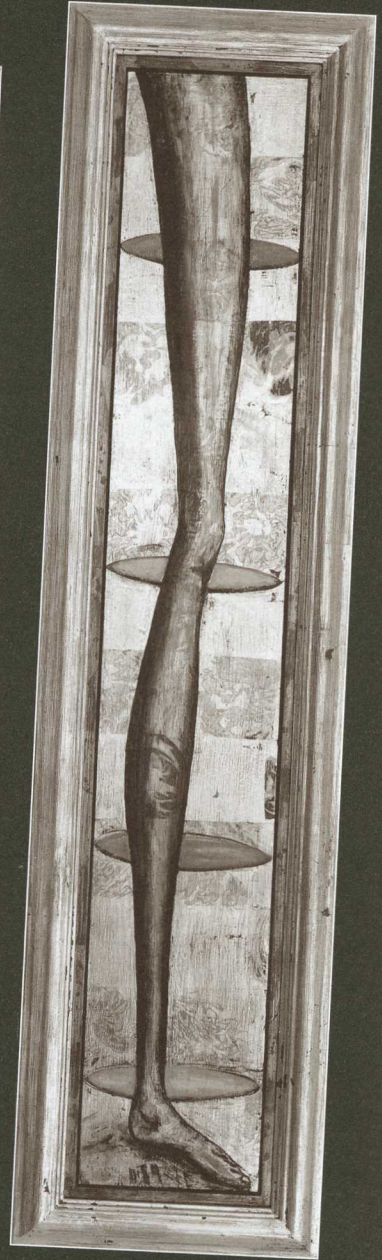
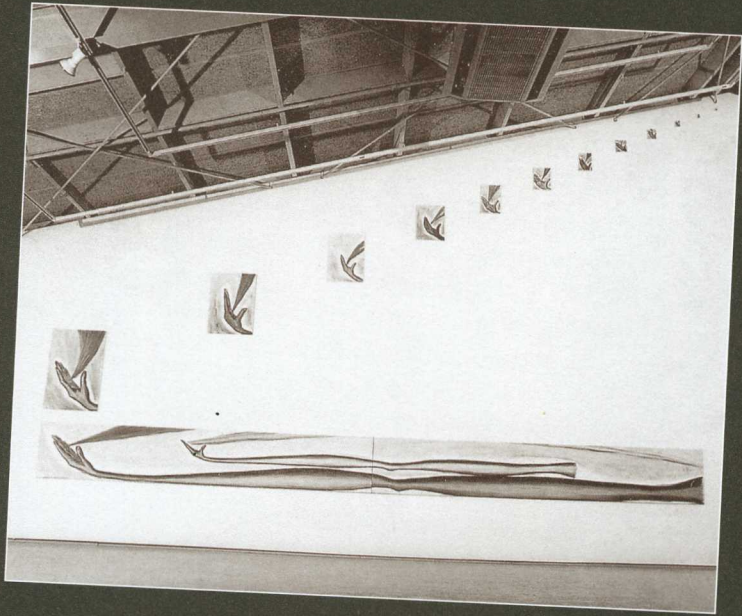
**Practical Metaphysics** includes work from 1989 to the present day. In 1989 Tony Lane was invited to develop a new artist's project for Wellington City Art Gallery (as it was then known), and this exhibition heralded a significant shift in his practice. **Tony Lane: Selected Works 1985-1989 with Commissioned Fresco** was held in 1989 in a large industrial-style space with exposed steel beams and a sharply sloping ceiling in Victoria Street, Wellington, not in the current Gallery (which only became the site for City Gallery Wellington in 1993). Having recently returned from the second of two influential, expansive overseas trips (which took place in 1984 and 1988), Lane was firing with new ideas.

On his 1984 trip to Britain and the USA, Lane relished seeing for the first time historical and contemporary works only previously available within New Zealand as reproductions in magazines and books. In 1988 Lane had an extended stay in Europe – based in Rome, from where he travelled to Spain and Portugal. Here he encountered many fresco and panel paintings outside of a museum context, in working churches and cathedrals, street-side shrines, embedded within their social framework. The votive object integrated within daily life captured Lane's imagination: their tangible physicality and their framing (both literally and more broadly).

The intense period of productivity on Lane's return included experimentation with the fresco medium. For the vast polygon end wall of the Gallery Lane made the work **Grace** (1989). This work wasn't a 'conventional' fresco – rather than painting into wet plaster directly onto a wall or ceiling, its ground was comprised of fourteen separate panels. The work was joined in the exhibition by series of earlier oil paintings and wood block prints, all of which included figurative forms. The figure had been making a notable appearance in Lane's work since 1983. In works such as **The Voyage** (1985); **Point of Balance** (1987) and **Sleep-Walker (Lazarus)** (1985) a dark silhouette or a black-outlined torso is suspended within a channelled turmoil of painterly marks fashioned from fast, wet on wet, gestural strokes. Lane has spoken of these 'floating' figure works as being 'more of an emotional depiction – to do with states of mind, the psychological moment'.<sup>2</sup> They explore how an image can be imbued with tension and an emotional kick without being sited within a fixed geographical or chronological 'location'.

**Axis Mundi**<sup>3</sup> (also in the 1989 exhibition) and the fresco **Grace** (both from 1989) depict body fragments as objects in themselves, bringing to mind the tin votive objects left in Catholic churches as a manifestation of prayer (of which Lane has a sizeable collection) or the limb-shaped reliquaries housing 'saintly' bone fragments. Lane's interest in these forms continues. He recently found an elongated metal hand which looks every inch a votive object, until you spy a ridged slot at the base of the arm revealing the object's practical purpose – as a bottle opener. Lane chuckles at the irreverence of this tool.

**Axis Mundi** features an assortment of extended leg forms, from mid-thigh to toe, which descend from above but are not yet 'grounded'. In the long two-panel section of **Grace**, two outstretched arms with open,



Tony Lan  
**Grace** 19  
fresco  
dimensio  
Photogra  
Courtesy  
Wellington

Tony Lan  
**Leg (Wit  
of Infnit**  
oil paint,  
gesso gro  
2050 x 52  
Courtesy

