

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

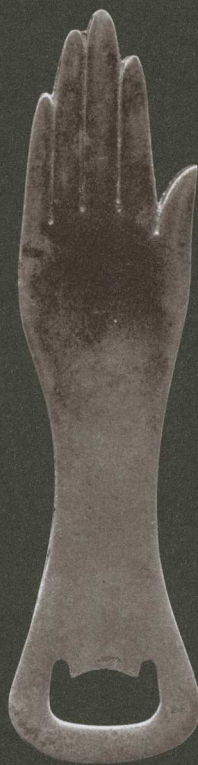
A space (and time) odyssey

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 Pridmore
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 Pridmore
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

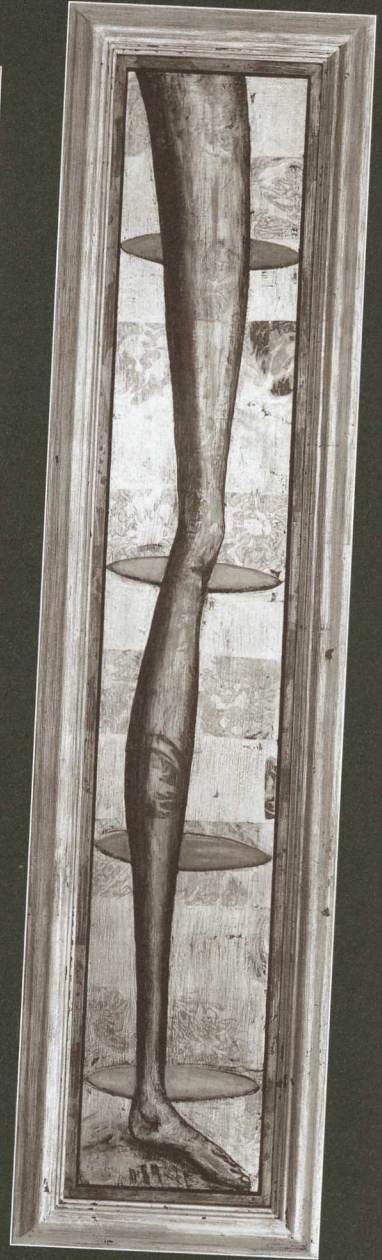
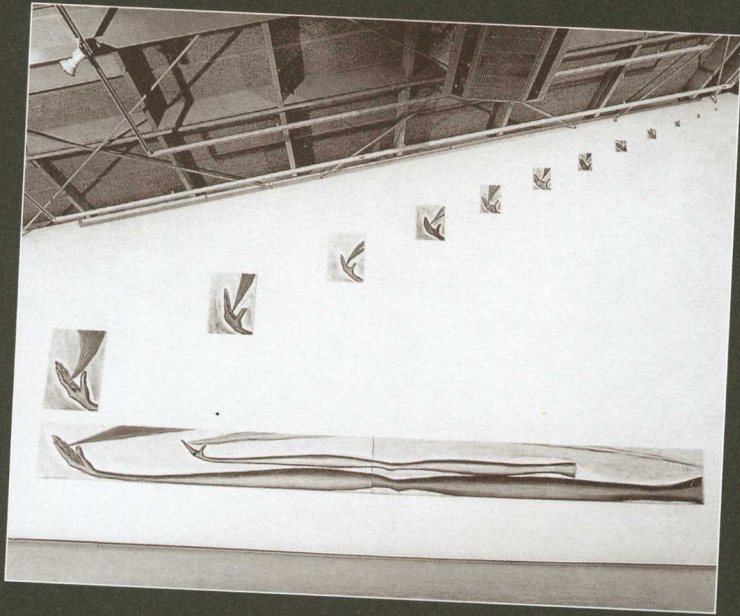
Practical Metaphysics includes work from 1989 to the present day. In 1989 Tony Lane was invited to develop a new artist's project for Wellington City Art Gallery (as it was then known), and this exhibition heralded a significant shift in his practice. **Tony Lane: Selected Works 1985-1989 with Commissioned 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'.² 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 Mundi³ (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 (With
of Infinite**
oil paint,
gesso gro
2050 x 52
Courtesy

Tony Lane
Grace 1989
fresco
dimensions variable
Photograph: Neil Price
Courtesy of City Gallery
Wellington

Tony Lane
**Leg (With Representation
of Infinity)** 1989
oil paint, schlagmetal on
gesso ground on panel
2050 x 520 mm
Courtesy of the artist

upward facing palms receive a shaft of light. The hand form is repeated on panels which shrink in size as they travel diagonally up the wall until they are barely visible from ground. In the exhibition brochure, curator Greg Burke writes: "This unrelenting fixation on the hand reinforces its reception as an icon suspended through the medium in a state of miraculous transformation. There is a pronounced attention to the act of veneration in the work. This is achieved primarily through the choice and treatment of the subject matter. Of significance too is the use of the fresco medium. From antiquity to the renaissance fresco was a ritualized art form used by the church to enact biblical allegories and to invoke feelings of awe and devotion amongst the congregated."⁴

Both of these paintings also employ a less frenetic method of paint application than Lane's earlier works. Gone are the expressionistic, impassioned strikes and scumbles, replaced by smoother, tender brush strokes, modeling the rounded surface of the limbs. These two works, both formally and in terms of subject matter, nod towards one of the earliest works in **Practical Metaphysics, Leg** (1989) and later works such as **Wound** (2001). However these new works differ significantly through the application of *schlagmetal* (an imitation gold leaf), producing a rich, crazed, and metallic surface. Applying this tissue-thin material requires working slowly, laying the leaf down first, working the paint around the gilded areas. The introduction of this gilded element dramatically shifted the way Lane painted.

The marrying of the gilded surface with fragments of bodies: of legs, hands, arms, heads – all of which are active parts of the body that gesture, speak or propel – extends through into works such as **Five Profiles** (1991), **Mirror Image** (1991), **Study for a Mural, Six Veils with Portraits** (1991) and **Artifice of Nature** (1991). **Artifice of Nature**, a four panel work⁵, is a fantastically giddy consideration of the nature/culture duality. In this work, stylised plant forms and a coiffured female head with cartoon-like bangs, are set within an intentionally imprecise grid. The very left-hand panel houses the letters of the word 'nature' reversed and split, teasing out the interplay between the organic and the constructed.

All that glitters...

Lane's use of gilding has been prominent in his work during the last eighteen years; forming backgrounds, spreading over the frame unifying both ground and support, or highlighting passages within the total schema of the work. Golden backgrounds and frames developed in Europe through mosaic decoration; by the fifth century, gold *tessare* (small cubes of stone, marble or glass) commonly formed the background to a figurative scene. This translated into medieval book illumination and panel paintings during the tenth and eleventh centuries, where the ground was formed by extremely thin sheets of finely beaten gold glued to the panel or vellum. This incredibly expensive and rarefied material was thought to express a celestial, eternal ambience, and to signify beauty. Perhaps the high point of this gilded late Gothic style was the work of the thirteenth century Sienese school; painters such as Simone Martini (c. 1280/85-1344) and Duccio (di Buoninsegna c. 1255-1319).

Lane has consistently been impressed by the conceptual freshness of works by these artists, even seven centuries after their making.

With the increasing naturalism of the Renaissance, the use of gold fell out of fashion. In a contemporary context, the gilded surface also has a tough time – particularly given the sometimes close identification of opulence and kitsch. In furnishings and apparel the 'metallic' look has come in and out of vogue more times than can be counted.

Lane's use of gold is simultaneously sincere and knowing. He has clocked the current fascination with 'ice' and 'bling'; USA rappers groaning under weighty diamond-encrusted 24 karat chains, with their gold-capped teeth, flash cars and foxy maidens. Jewellery shops and pawn-brokers in any main street are festooned with more modest examples. But Lane is no follower of fashion and he has very much charted his own course. The 'golden touch' is no default mechanism for Lane, as the strong peppering of works *sans* gold in **Practical Metaphysics** demonstrates.

Raiding the larder

That Lane's work draws from the rich canon of Western art history, in particular from Christian iconography, is well documented.⁶ From the early 1990s onwards direct references in titles and in subject matter became considerably less explicit, paving the way for more lateral associations and readings. As Mark Amery commented about Lane's work: 'Its ultimate force remains aesthetic, a spirituality based around a no named religion.'⁷ The artist refutes that his work is driven by a theological discourse claiming 'I'm only interested in the issue the theology embodies, the way in which it portrays individual and social issues.'⁸ For Lane, 'theology is like the pearl that has formed over the irritant in an oyster'⁹; it is the medium through which ongoing discussions about the human condition have been, and continue to be held. Religious iconography forms the spine of Western visual culture and while our contemporary ability to de-code specific symbols of times-gone-by is provisional and flawed, a basic vocabulary has remained consistent.

Lane is 'in conversation' with a broad history of painting. His expansive knowledge and passionate enthusiasm for painting is matched by his judicious decisions about what points of its language he incorporates within his work. He utilises and extends an existing symbolic language, rather than seeking to reinvent one. His works subsequently retain a timeless ambiguity; they allude simultaneously to the ancient, the mythical and the just past. His affectionate 'borrowing' does not take a reverential or an ironic stance, as Mark Amery commented in 1996: 'there is a certain irreverence to Lane's reverence. A feeling of impermanence is retained, as if to remind us that Lane's art is playfully decadent rather than holier than thou'.¹⁰

His interest is also piqued by moments of rupture and discontinuity in twentieth century art, such as aspects of Cubism (the fragmentation/reconfiguration of the picture plane, use of everyday objects), the Metaphysical school (familiar objects drawn from a classical legacy, combined in an ambiguous interior/exterior space, creating a charged

but enigmatic confection) and the Italian *transavantgarde* of the 1980s (again, keen raiders of the larder, working across history, and including a meld of figurative and abstract forms).

In reading for this text, comparisons with a raft of artists across seven centuries appeared including: the thirteenth century Sieneese school; Giotto; El Greco (1541-1614); Pablo Picasso (1881-1973); Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978); Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964); René Magritte (1898-1967); Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) and Balthus (Baltusz Klossowski de Rola 1908-2001). Impressive company, but name checking in itself isn't that revealing as Lane's 'borrowing' does not follow a fixed or predictable route. As mentioned previously his 'grazing' is not restricted to 'high art'. 'Outsider' art, 'folk' painting (such as maritime scenes on shells, landscapes painted on glass), and contemporary work influenced by graffiti, illustration and street murals (such as the Clayton Brothers) compel Lane, as does non-art urban imagery such as peeling billboards and ageing painted signs. Considerable emphasis has been placed on the links between Lane's work and that of artists outside of New Zealand, but it is important to bring 'local' influences back into the equation. These included, during the 1970s into the 80s, Colin McCahon (1919-1987) who taught Lane at Elam School of Fine Arts, and *compadres* Tony Fomison (1939-1990), Phillip Clairmont (1948-1984) and Allen Maddox (1948-2000). From the mid 1980s into the 90s this extended to include folk such as Gretchen Albrecht (b.1943), Gavin Chilcott (b.1950) and Dennis O'Connor (b.1947).

A space (and time) odyssey

Lane has commented that Giotto 'seemed to have developed through the use of religious imagery, a complete language of subconscious archetypes. Just as Freud invented a language to explain psychological motivations, these artists portray, beneath the religious imagery, a direct metaphorical language.'¹¹ The configuration of space Giotto and his contemporaries employed differs from the mathematical system of single-point perspective recession we are now so attuned to. As writer William V. Dunning notes: 'Artists during the Middle Ages cared more for their faith and the theological significance of the image than for individual or mimetic qualities. Because the role of painting was to remind the viewer of the thing depicted, a strong likeness was not necessary; recognition was enough'.¹² Lane utilises this idea of the archetype or signifier with just enough essence of 'bottle' or 'chair' or 'necklace' to prompt multiple associations, to get our grey matter ticking over.

With the advent of deep space travel (manned and unmanned), satellite navigational systems (such as hand-held GPS devices), acoustic fish finders for commercial and recreational fisher-folk, and other cartographical 'advancements' we have collapsed the space all around us; from the outer reaches of the heavens to the depths of the oceans. Our ability to comprehend vast distance and time dramatically outweighs our capacity to actually experience such phenomena. Perhaps it is no surprise then, that we are forever finding new ways to image, measure and make the intangible, tangible.

Tony Lane
Vacuum 1994
oil paint, schlagmetal
on gesso panel
1200 x 1200 mm
Collection ANZ National Bank,
New Zealand

In terms of a medieval cognition of space it is argued that: 'Medievals referred only to their religion and those facts and relationships that they could experience with their unaided, un-amplified senses.'¹³ It was not a priority to depict depth or roundness of form; more significant were proportion, light, symbol and allegory. The meaning of the image was paramount, not the look of it; a problematic concept for contemporary audiences fed on computer-generated seamless fictions which prioritise hyper-real illusion over context (and often content).

An interest in marking and measuring time and space is also present in Lane's paintings. Grid structures underlie a number of works, alluding to an interest in mathematical ordering such as **Vacuum** (1994), with both its chequerboard background and the hourglass form, and **Votive Image: Water** (1990), although here the order is disrupted by the penetrating antler/branch form poking through the surface of the grid. Lane's use of the 'grid' connects with long traditions in both figurative and abstract painting.

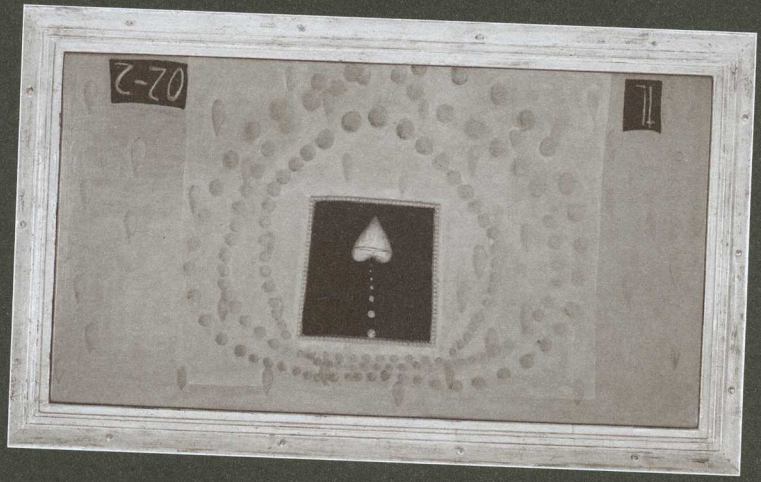
Still life; sex and death

While Lane is best known through the 1970s and 80s for brushy 'neo-fauve' abstract work, at Elam School of Art (1968-70) he made still life paintings where he was first introduced to the idea that all objects 'exist in space and that space constitutes a link between all objects.'¹⁴ While there are elements in Lane's more recent work that can be read abstractly (forms which have a degree of impulse or movement harking back to the velocity of his earlier abstract works), more prominent are the carefully selected objects he paints, sometimes floating on a flat ground, sometimes placed within a tableau.

Still life as a genre evolved in the early seventeenth century in the Low Countries (The Netherlands) with more sporadic appearances in Germany, France, Italy and Spain. It was characterised by a depiction of recognisable objects isolated or placed in a group, often on a table or a flat plane like a shelf. A hermetic language of symbols within the genre, often comprising a hidden language was derived from specific contexts and associations. 'Although the objects are relatively generic, as subjects they are not timeless; their choice is dictated by their place, be it passive or aggressive, in a historical and cultural fabric.'¹⁵ The rise of the still life paralleled that of the iconoclasm that accompanied the Protestant split from the Catholic Church. While recognizable, the objects in still life are also fictional; they are representations, distant and deferred, removed from the direct experience of the real world.

An overarching theme in the genre of still life is that of time passing; the temporal nature and the fragility of existence (*memento mori*) and warning against the futility of pleasure (*vanitas*). Many visual tropes are used repeatedly: the burning or just snuffed candle, a skull, fruit, vegetables, game birds, sea creatures, carafes or glasses of wine.

Most lavish were the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch depictions of tables laden with allegorical goodies, extravagant accumulations featuring flowers in full bloom, exquisite silver salvers



Tony Lane
Pendant 2002
 oil paint, composition
 ornaments on gesso
 1050 x 1750 mm
 Private collection, Au



Tony Lane
Two Hanks 1990
 oil paint, schlagmeta
 gesso ground on pan
 515 x 2055 mm
 Courtesy of the artis



Juan Sánchez Cotán
 (1561-1627)
Quince, Cabbage, M
Cucumber c.1602
 oil on canvas
 690 x 845 mm
 © San Diego Museu
 USA, Gift of Anne R
 Amy Putnam
 Courtesy of The Bri
 Art Library

Juan Sánchez Cotán
(1561-1627)
**Quince, Cabbage, Melon and
Cucumber** c.1602
oil on canvas
690 x 845 mm
© San Diego Museum of Art,
USA, Gift of Anne R. and
Amy Putnam
Courtesy of The Bridgeman
Art Library

or delicate glassware, fecund fruit on the point of decay (often complete with a butterfly or fly to remind us of the imminence of rot; the unstoppable cycles of birth, procreation and death). These blowsy depictions do not capture Lane's attention as much as a more pared-back Spanish tradition as seen in the work of Juan Sánchez Cotán (1561-1627). In **Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber** (c.1602), suspended and placed fruit and vegetables sit within a shallow, shelf-like space against a pitch-black backdrop, resulting in a curious diorama-style image. Objects glow against an unspecified void, with an asymmetrical kilter to the composition. The devil is in the detail; hyper-real modeling and harsh directional lighting add high drama to a very humble scene. The spaces (silences) between the objects become as important as the objects themselves. Lane's fascination with the austerity of Cotán's compositions and the dramatic lighting can be seen to play out in works such as **The Saints, Pedestal, and Three Necklaces** (all from 2004) and **Schwarzwald** (2006). Lane has a parallel interest in a Cubist re-ordering of space (as seen in late Cézanne, or early Picasso paintings) to suggest an abstract hypothetical relationship between objects. Rather than seeing this as a conflicting methodology, Lane relishes the opportunity to merge fragments from different traditions within the picture plane.

Infinity and beyond!

Lane's use of circles, ovals, necklaces and most directly of the *lemniscate* form – the infinity symbol (akin to a number 8 lying on its side) – explore limitless, cyclic time, where past, present and future are one. In **Two Hanks** (1990) a length of rope is formed in two coils laid out in a serpentine form. The eye is drawn from one corner of the work to its opposite diagonal corner via the two hanks¹⁶ of the title. Neither end of the rope is visible. Similar to many of Lane's motifs, the rope is a humble, utilitarian object. This work gives it top billing, lifting it out of its commonplace, commonsense reality.

The threaded, beaded necklace is another recurring object. They are made up of individual units strung collectively to make a circular, endless form. They have multiple associations; they can be read as an allegory for time, a symbol of cyclic renewal, or illustrate the meditative qualities of counting (such as when you are saying the rosary). In **Infinity** (1997), two necklaces are pictured side by side forming two infinity symbols, formally echoing the work **Two Hanks**. **Pendant** (2002) features three pale blue concentric strings of beads surrounding a rectangular black field, within which sits an anaemic-looking heart sliced across its widest point. **Planets; Necklaces** (1996) is comprised of constellations in duck egg blue, olive green and pale rose madder, orbiting on a pitch black ground, with satellite 'bracelets' hovering top left. None of these necklaces are dripping diamonds, emeralds or sapphires – they are more akin to what could be found in a grandmother's jewellery box. They act as a signifier of a necklace rather than a depiction of an actual string observed from life (or even remembered from a singular point of reference). This generic quality



Tony Lane
Two Hanks 1990
oil paint, schlagmetal on
gesso ground on panel
515 x 2055 mm
Courtesy of the artist

Tony Lane
Pendant 2002
oil paint, composition
ornaments on gesso panel
1050 x 1750 mm
Private collection, Auckland

Juan Sánchez Cotán
(1561-1627)
**Quince, Cabbage, Melon and
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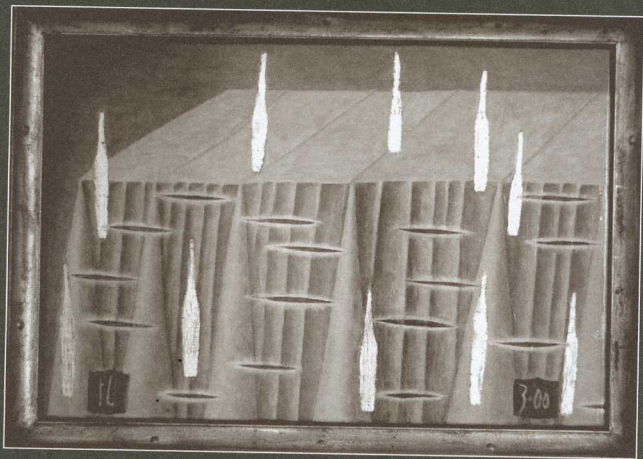
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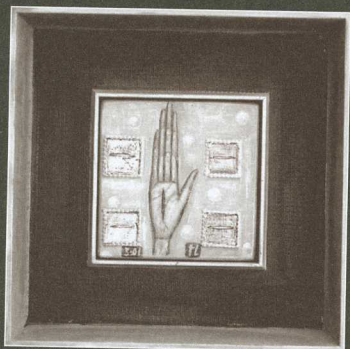
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gesso ground on panel
515 x 2055 mm
Courtesy of the artist

Tony Lane
Pendant 2002
oil paint, composition
ornaments on gesso panel
1050 x 1750 mm
Private collection, Auckland



Tony Lane
Table With Bottles
 oil paint, gold leaf
 gesso panel
 1340 x 940 mm
 Private collection



Tony Lane
Wound 2001
 oil paint, gold leaf
 composition ornate
 gesso ground on
 620 x 620 mm
 Collection of Joe
 Auckland



Tony Lane
Table, Wounds 1
 oil paint, silver leaf
 composition ornate
 gesso ground on
 1255 x 1455 mm
 Private collection



Sir Anthony van Dyck
 (1599-1641)
Pietà (detail) c. 1630
 oil on canvas
 2010 x 1710 mm
 Collection of Museo de San Felipe,
 Spain

Tony Lane
Table With Bottles 2001
oil paint, gold leaf on
gesso panel
1340 x 940 mm
Private collection

Tony Lane
Wound 2001
oil paint, gold leaf,
composition ornaments on
gesso ground on panel
620 x 620 mm
Collection of Joe Brownlee,
Auckland

Tony Lane
Table, Wounds 1996
oil paint, silver leaf,
composition ornaments on
gesso ground on panel
1255 x 1455 mm
Private collection, Dunedin

Sir Anthony van Dyck
(1599-1641)
Pietà (detail) c.1618-20
oil on canvas
2010 x 1710 mm
Collection of Museo del Prado,
Spain

extends to a number of Lane's motifs, for example the bottles in **26 Bottles** (2003) and **Table With Bottles** (2001), the chair in **Large Chair** (2001) and the shrouded tables in **Three Necklaces** (2004). These objects have strong associations for Lane. Their multiplicity of meaning is of paramount importance, in that it also elicits, in a parallel fashion, a range of associations from the viewer.

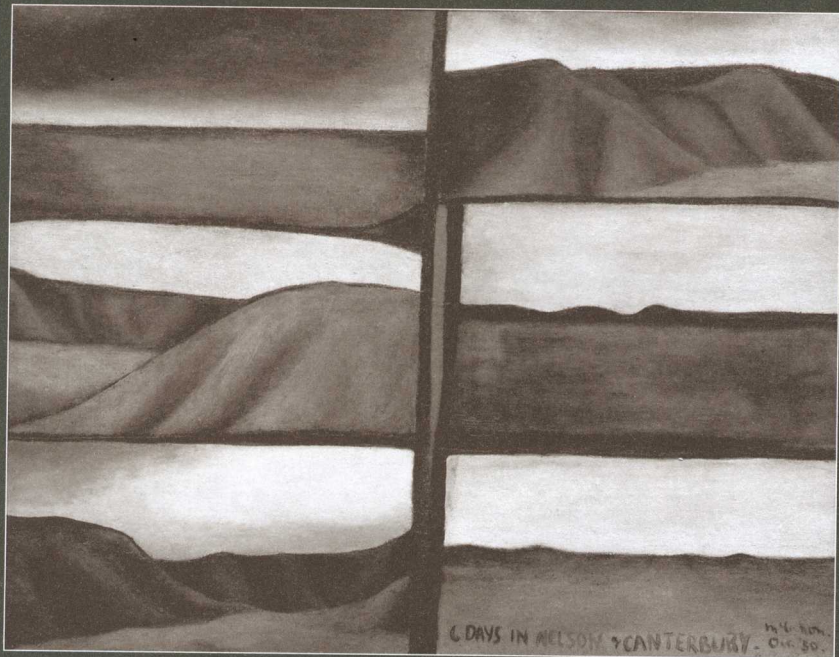
The physical and spiritual wound

In the Middle Ages popular piety was intensely focused on the Passion of Christ, in particular on the wounds Christ suffered during the crucifixion; two through the hands, two through the feet and the longer horizontal wound by his ribs where his heart had been pierced with a lance. Representations of these wounds included the depiction of the 'main event', and more curiously (in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) use of a 'shorthand' where wounds were pictured in isolation from any bodily host (known as *arma christi* – emblems of the Passion of Christ). These wounds are sacred forms, they were the channels through which Christ's 'precious' blood was spilled, blood from the only victim believed to be pure enough to atone all of humanity's transgressions. It would, however, be naïve to not also acknowledge the strong association that this shape (in particular its bloodied form) has with female genitalia and bodily functions, which have through history received a combination of veneration and distain.

A precursor for the sharper 'wound' form in Lane's work is a rounder almond-shaped nimbus seen in **Leg (With Representation of Infinity)** (1989), **Air** (1990) and the companion work from the same year **Water**. Lara Strongman has identified this shape as the *vesica piscis* of sacred geometry: 'the womb-shape formed by the intersection of two identical circles, which to the early Christians symbolized the meeting of heaven and earth.'¹⁷

The later, more explicitly 'wound-like' form has multiple manifestations with different associations in Lane's work. Sometimes it echoes the visceral quality of a laceration, weeping a droplet (such as in **Cabinet** (2004), where a tearful heart is poised over a coffin-like table); other times it may appear more like a tear in a draped cloth, as in **Table, Wounds** (1996) or **Torn Cloth** (1997). A further manifestation is a more solid, flat floating disc skimming across the surface of the painting as in **Two Tables (In Memory Of)** (2000). Sporadically the form appears depicting an actual wound, as in **Hand** (1997), **Wound** (2001), and **Blue Veil** (2005).

The fragility of the flesh – as illustrated by its puncturing – has held an ongoing fascination for artists and audiences alike. Many works demonstrate this symbol's potency – a small smattering include: Diego Velázquez de Silva's **Christ Crucified** (c.1632) and Sir Anthony van Dyck's **Pietà** (c.1618-20), both in the Prado Museum, Madrid. In van Dyck's work the gaping wound, seeping blood down Christ's body is every bit as visceral as in the contemporary photographic work by American artist Andres Serrano **The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)** (1992).



Colin McCahon
Six Days in Nelson & Canterbury
oil on canvas
885 x 1165 mm
Collection of
Gallery Toi
presented by
Friends of the
Art Gallery,
Courtesy of
McCahon R
Publication

Colin McCahon (1919-1987)
**Six Days in Nelson and
Canterbury** 1950
oil on canvas
885 x 1165 mm
Collection of Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,
presented by the artist, per the
Friends of the Auckland City
Art Gallery, 1978
Courtesy of the Colin
McCahon Research and
Publication Trust

Little hills and valleys

This 'wound' form also extends into Lane's depictions of landscape. In **Three Stigmata** (2000) three pale blue, roughly circular shapes are each contained within a golden rectangle. The juxtaposition of the wounds/slits (surrounded by gold) floating in front of the landscape of small rounded hill forms, teases us to make a connection between spirit and land, but does not provide us with any clear instruction. We can look to Colin McCahon's **Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury** (1950) for an example of how such a union has been employed previously with an equally haunting effect.

With landscape such an overarching fascination in New Zealand art, Lane's exploration of this topography is judicious. In Lane's landscapes there is no figure, no sense of scale, no specific sense of place, and although the land forms in works such as **Terra firma** (1998) and **Three Stigmata** have an affinity again to the 'lumpy hills' painted by Colin McCahon in works such as **Takaka, night and day** (1948), or by Rita Angus (1908-1970) in the painting **Central Otago** (1940), you could equally say that they echo the chalky foothills in the paintings of Duccio and Giotto. Lane's sites are not observations from life; they are generic, they too become symbols. That Lane has titled his most recent (2006) show at Jensen Gallery, Auckland 'No Man's Land' does not seem accidental.

In **The Hidden Hills** (2000) landscape traces remain, but are housed within three speech bubble forms. **In Time Like Glass** (2006) – the vast 9600 mm long work – has the most expansive 'constant' depiction of a singular spatial configuration. Here a lone table sits to the left of two drawn, tethered heavy curtains. Behind these objects runs a continuous landscape. In this work a connection with the Metaphysical painters and the Surrealist tradition is perhaps at its most distinct. The depiction of incongruous objects in exterior space, or in a spatial plane that exists between what we understand to be interior and exterior brings to mind Giorgio de Chirico's **The Song of Love** (1913) and **The Uncertainty of the Poet** from the same year. Often in Lane's work the picture plane has been tilted, the perspective skewed, encouraging the viewer to question whether the site depicted is 'real' or imagined. The rash of single icons embedded in rectangular and square metallic grounds which skitter across the surface of **In Time Like Glass** chart symbols recurrent in Lane's practice of the last ten years. This painting acts as both index and summary.

Points of influence

When we view works (historical and contemporary), we do so as they are now, complete with damage, deterioration and signs of age. We note and inspect the evidence and we may surmise how and when damage might have occurred. Equally we also come to read these marks formally, embracing the interruptions and lapses. Studying works like **Two Tables (In Memory Of)**, **Chandelier** (1992) and **A Spanish Convent** (2006) there is a striking affinity between the abstract slits, squares and circles skimming the surface of these works and the 'accidental' marks on Giotto's fresco of the **Death of Saint Francis** (c.1325) in Santa Croce, Venice. This work is



Giotto di Bondone
(c.1266-1337)
The Death of St. Francis
the Bardi Chapel
c.1325
fresco
2800 x 4500 mm
Santa Croce, Florence
Courtesy of The
Art Library

Giotto di Bondone
(c.1266-1337)
**The Death of St. Francis, from
the Bardi Chapel (detail)**
c.1325
fresco
2800 x 4500 mm
Santa Croce, Florence, Italy
Courtesy of The Bridgeman
Art Library

encountered complete with passages of blank plaster patching where the original fresco has been damaged. These blotches travel through the bodies and faces of the grieving Franciscan monks. They are not part of the original composition but are an integral part of how we now see the work. This work keeps coming back into view, not just because of these abstract interruptions to the image, but also because the tonal modeling of the monk's robes shares a solidity and economy of rendering with Lane's linen table coverings.

The Italian *transavantgardists* of the 1980s ('the three C's' as Lane calls them: Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente and Enzo Cucchi) are also of interest to Lane – particularly their attempts to relocate traditions such as the fresco in contemporary context and as Ian Wedde notes, to 'work across history'.¹⁸ Wedde continues: 'He shared the Italian *transavantgarde's* passion for a linking of personal expression with deep historical perspective – personal and even confessional expressions of archetypal subjects reaching back to peasant art, primitive icons, the Coptic and Iberian forms that Picasso also found compelling, the extended history of classicism'.¹⁹ The discourse of post-modernism, evolving during this period (evident in the work of the *transavantgardists*) as Lara Strongman has noted: 'gave Lane the intellectual freedom to collapse the historical and the contemporary together into a single new entity.'²⁰

Francis Alÿs, a contemporary artist who has caught Lane's eye, also draws upon *retablo* and *ex voto* traditions of nineteenth Century Mexico. Alÿs (Belgian-born, resident in Mexico City) has worked with the format of the *retablo* to depict cyclic social rituals such as the c. 90 post card sized paintings that comprise **Le Temps du Sommeil (Sleep Time)** (1998). He has also collaborated with Mexican sign painters on multiple series of paintings, one enigmatic cycle shown as part of 'Antechamber' at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in 1997, featured single male figures posing with long strings of beads. Both the contextually driven 'outsourcing' of the production of these paintings and the puzzling, unexpected unions of figure and action/acoutrement strike a chord with Lane.

Divine light

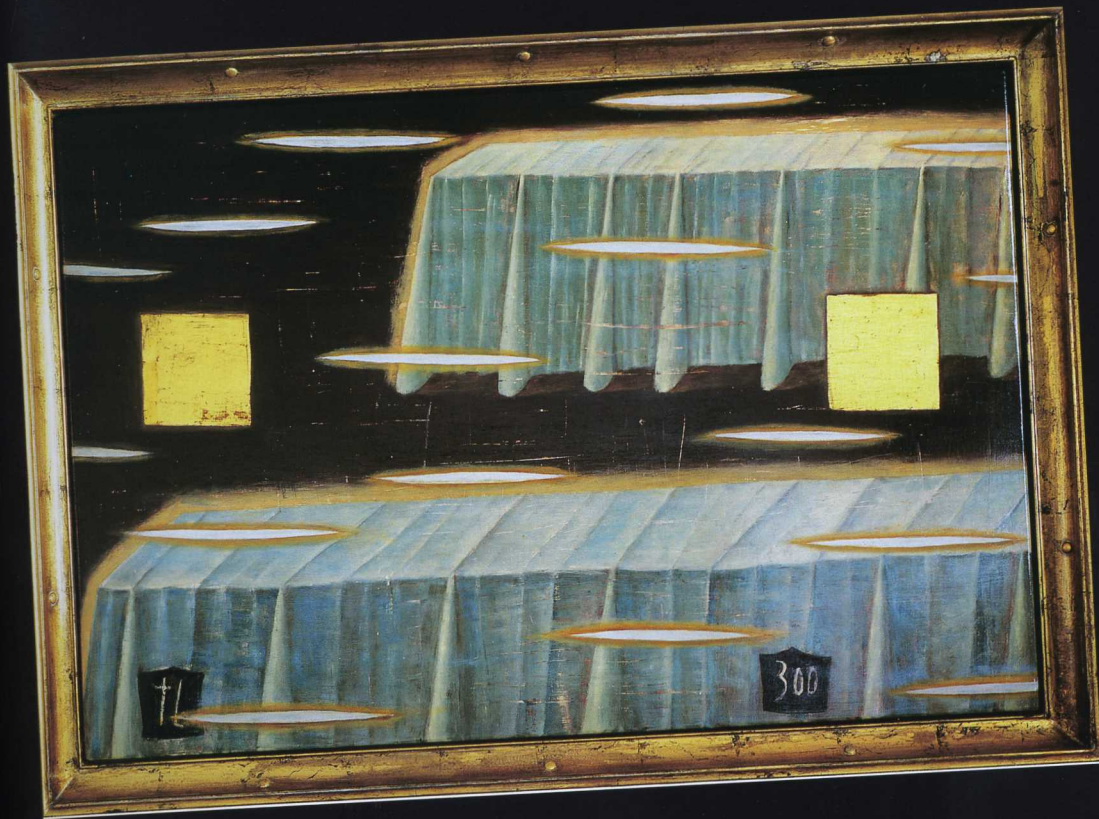
In recent years a new sparseness has entered Lane's compositions, along with strong theatrical light plays (seen in **Pedestal**, **The Saints**, and **Blue Veil**); a trope we first saw employed in the multi-panel fresco **Grace** (1989). Evident in three works from 2006, **In Time Like Glass**, **A Spanish Convent** and **Schwarzwald** is a lightened palette and the use of deeper spatial planes in composition.

Lane is a 'quiet' innovator; his paintings elucidate his unfailing wonder in the most common object and his belief in the potential of images to encourage insight. The next much-awaited chapter in his practice will undoubtedly be as illuminating.

Endnotes

- ^{1/} This title was struck c. A.D. 70 by Andronicus of Rhodes and refers to the collection of Aristotelian treatises dating from 300 years previous.
- ^{2/} Tony Lane quoted in Peter Allison, 'Scene Today', *Auckland Star*, 30 November, 1987.
- ^{3/} The translation of the Latin title is 'world axis', which can be interpreted as the centre of the world or the point of connection between heaven and earth. This idea is specifically referenced in a number of religions: including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, often identifying a particular place or site for the location for this point of connection.
- ^{4/} Greg Burke, exhibition brochure, *Tony Lane: Selected Works 1985-1989 with Commissioned Fresco*, Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1989.
- ^{5/} This work was shown in the traveling exhibition 'Distance Looks Our Way' organised by Lane and fellow artists James Ross and Gretchen Albrecht (which went to Madrid and Seville in 1992).
- ^{6/} Two recommendations: Lara Strongman's essay 'Miraculous Objects', in *Tony Lane*, Auckland: Ouroboros Publishing, 2002 and Peter Leech's text 'Stains, Emblems and Artifice', in *Distance Looks Our Way*, Wellington: Distance Looks Our Way Trust, 1993, pp.63-70.
- ^{7/} Mark Amery 'Painted offering for the higher beings', *Sunday Star Times*, 30 June 1996.
- ^{8/} Interview between Gregory Burke and Tony Lane, 1989, City Gallery Wellington exhibition archives.
- ^{9/} From a conversation with artist, 1 September 2006.
- ^{10/} Amery, *ibid.*
- ^{11/} Interview between Gregory Burke and Tony Lane, *ibid.*
- ^{12/} William V. Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991, p.11.
- ^{13/} Dunning, *ibid.*
- ^{14/} Interview between Gregory Burke and Tony Lane, *ibid.*
- ^{15/} Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1997, p.9.
- ^{16/} A 'hank' denotes a unit of twine or yarn that is coiled in form.
- ^{17/} Lara Strongman, 'Miraculous Objects', *Tony Lane*, Auckland: Ouroboros Publishing, 2002, p.11.
- ^{18/} Ian Wedde, 'Slipping Under the Fence', *Art New Zealand* 40, Spring 1986, pp.50-53.
- ^{19/} Ian Wedde, 'Views from a Stranger's Eyes: Tony Lane', review, *Evening Post*, 17 November, 1988.
- ^{20/} Strongman, *ibid.*, p.17.

Two Tables (In Memory Of) 2000
oil paint, gold leaf on gesso ground on panel
1130 x 1650 mm
Private collection



Three Stigmata 2000
oil paint, gold leaf, composition ornaments
on gesso ground on panel
1930 x 1440 mm
Private collection



The Hidden Hills 2000
oil paint, schlagmetal on gesso ground on panel
1750 x 1490 mm
Collection of G.R. Lane, Auckland



Terra firma 1998
oil paint, schlagmetal, gold leaf on gesso
ground on panel
998 x 1999 mm
Collection of Museum of New Zealand
Te Papa Tongarewa



Large Chair 2001
oil paint, gold leaf, silver leaf, composition
ornaments on gesso ground on panel
1720 x 940 mm
Private collection, Auckland

