

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.

