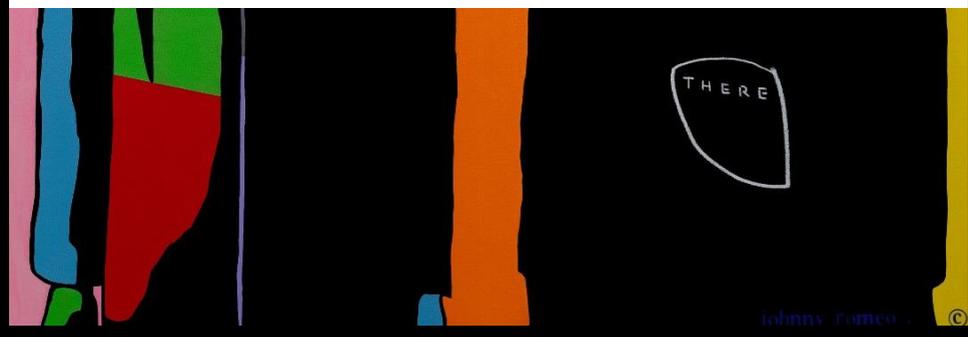




# JOHNNY ROMEO

## DREAM-LAND

Internationally acclaimed Australian Pop painter Johnny Romeo makes his triumphant return to 19 Karen and the Gold Coast with his hypnotic new exhibition, DREAM-LAND. He takes a deep dive into the realm of the subconscious to create mind altering, kaleidoscopic new works that explores Surrealism's fascination with dreams.



# ARTIST STATEMENT

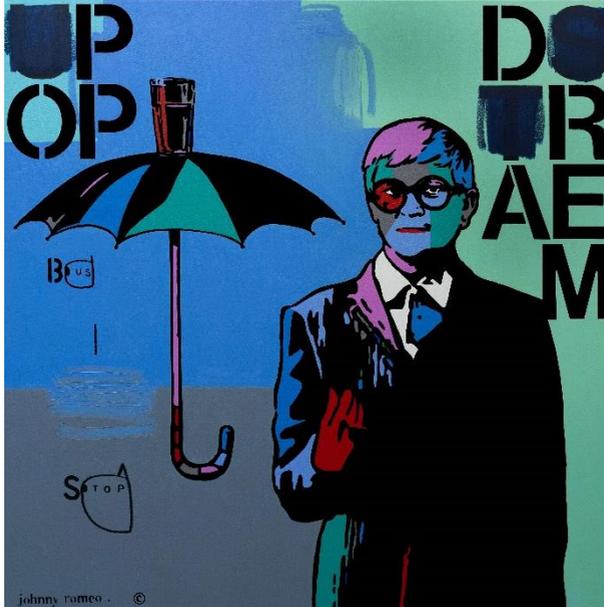
“Surrealism has always been a major influence on my practice. With my latest series, DREAM-LAND, however, I wanted to bring that inspiration to the forefront of my work, in particular drawing from the Surrealist imagery of Rene Magritte. When it came time to curating my latest exhibition with Terri Lew from 19 Karen Contemporary Art Space, her suggestion to make a body of work inspired by the paintings of Magritte and his fascination with dreams made a lot sense to me.

I’ve been a long admirer of Magritte’s ability to subvert everyday objects such as apples or hats, and transform them into surreal, often unsettling and unconventional compositions that have been inspired by his dreams. I feel that my art-making practice draws from the same well of absurdity as the Surrealists, but approaches it from a pure Pop context. In this sense, I wanted to pay homage to Magritte while aiming to merge the worlds of Surrealism and Pop Art, using my art as a way to navigate dreams and examine the intersections between the real and the imaginary.

While developing DREAM-LAND, I was inspired a great deal by music. The dreamy melodies and swirling walls of sound found in psychedelic rock acted as both the visual and textual foundations for a lot of the paintings in the series. The Beatles’ seamless blend of pop hooks, psychedelia and trippy lyrical excursions were especially influential on Dream-Land’s vibrant and psychotropic aesthetic, pushing me to bolster the absurdist edge of my work while refining the slick Pop imagery that I am known for”.

Johnny Romeo  
2019

## JOHNNY ROMEO - DREAM-LAND



**'BUS STOP' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD**

### STATEMENT

Sometimes the Surreal is experienced in the truly mundane and everyday. As one of the most celebrated artists of the 20th Century, David Hockney often painted scenes from daily life, such as swimming pools, home interiors, friends, and transformed them into colourful insights into the human condition. In 'Bus Stop', Johnny Romeo has crafted a portrait of David Hockney that playfully captures the intersection between the banal and the absurd. The painting depicts the iconic English artist dressed as one of Magritte's mysterious suited men, as an umbrella with a cup of water on top of it hovers precariously outside of his grasp, an allusion to Magritte's famous 1958 work 'Hegel's Holiday'. Romeo's quirky juxtaposition of everyday objects and figures in an incongruous manner imbues the work with a dream-like quality that transforms the familiar into something altogether more fantastical. The humdrum banality of the title 'Bus Stop', taken from The Hollies 1966 single of the same name, blurs the line between the real and imaginary with a brilliantly droll sense of humour. Inspired by the song's lyric 'Bus stop/Wet day/She's there/I say/Please share my umbrella', the symbol of the umbrella in the painting acts as a visual tether between the world of Surrealism and the everyday ephemera of Pop. Romeo continues to explore the imagery of water through his cheeky word assemblage 'Pop Dream'. Astute viewers will notice that the phrase 'Up Stream' has been scratched out, a cheeky reference to the line 'Stay in bed/Float up stream' from the Beatles 1966 single 'I'm Only Sleeping'. The song's shimmering melodies and hallucinatory, back-tracked rhythms act as the perfect soundtrack for Romeo's meditations on the coexistence between Pop and Surrealism, where a glass of water opens a window into the subconscious and floating up stream leads you towards the ultimate Pop Dream.

# JOHNNY ROMEO - DREAM-LAND



'DAY DREAM No.9' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD

## STATEMENT

John Lennon's 'Imagine' today stands as one of Pop culture's great testaments to dreaming. In 'Day Dream No. 9', Johnny Romeo ingeniously re-envisioned Lennon as the quintessential dreamer plucked out of the lyrics of 'Imagine'. The singer is portrayed with his iconic round-rimmed glasses, along with the bowler hat and apple immortalised in Magritte's 'The Son of Man' (1946). The title 'Day Dream' is drawn from The Monkees' 1967 smash hit 'Day Dream Believer', a tongue-in-cheek nod to the band's reputation as a second-rate version of The Beatles. The 'Day Dream Believer' reference, however, feels apropos given Lennon's glazed, drifting expression within the painting, his eyes looking on as if in mid-reverie. Known for his cheeky wordplay, the 'No. 9' in the title operates as a hilarious Surrealist pun, provoking the audience to question reality as they ask 'is it a number 9, or is there no 9?' The dream-like quality of the work is further evoked in the text passage 'Imagine', which features the scratched-out remnants of the word 'Tangerine'. The 'tangerine' in the work is rife with musical allusions to dreaming, recalling the 'tangerine trees and marmalade skies' of the Beatles 'Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds' (1967) and pioneering electronic outfit 'Tangerine Dream'. Despite the levity often associated with day-dreaming, there is a dark undercurrent coursing through 'Day Dream No. 9' that reflects Surrealism's penchant for unsettling psychological imagery. The darker colour palette of turgid greens and deep blue hues, coupled with Lennon's distant gaze, creates the impression of a figure resigning himself to his doomed fate. This point is brought home with lethal precision in the symbol of the arrow-pierced apple, a grim reminder of Lennon's infamous assassination in the Big Apple.

# JOHNNY ROMEO - DREAM-LAND



**'HERE THERE' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD**

## STATEMENT

What is real, and what is imaginary? Is the person that I see before me really who they appear to be, or simply a ruse masking their true identity? Surrealism has long had a preoccupation with appearance, and exploring that which lies beyond the visible spectrum, a point taken up by Johnny Romeo in his neon-drenched portrait of Andy Warhol, 'Here There'. In the painting, Romeo masterfully appropriates Magritte's 1966 work 'Transfer' to illustrate the dual nature of the Pop Art icon as a front-facing public figure, and a silhouette shrouded in shadow, with a pink bowler cap alluding to Warhol's flamboyance and flare for drama. The stark visual split perfectly captures the contradictory nature of Warhol as both a celebrity-obsessed Pop icon, and a deeply private man who was strongly guarded about his personal life. Taking its title from The Beatles' 1966 single 'Here, There And Everywhere', the painting has a vibrant, fever dream-like quality that evokes the song's woozy fusion of pop melodies and psychedelia while reflecting Surrealism's fascination with releasing the subconscious mind while. In this sense, Warhol, dressed as Magritte's mysterious suited man, is seen as being both here and there, and potentially everywhere beyond the pictorial plane. Romeo further blurs the line between reality and dreams through his clever shift of the word 'surreal' into the phrase 'So real'. Drawn from the title of Jeff Buckley's single 'So Real', taken from his 1994 album 'Grace', the text assemblage encapsulates the hazy reflections on a forgotten dream and sense of déjà vu expressed so poignantly by Buckley in the song. As a final stroke of Pop culture genius, Romeo masterfully weaves together the disparate Pop elements of the work through the year 1966. The slly connection can be seen through the fact Jeff Buckley was born in 1966, the same year that Magritte painted 'Transfer' and The Beatles released 'Here, There And Everywhere' as a single.

# JOHNNY ROMEO - DREAM-LAND

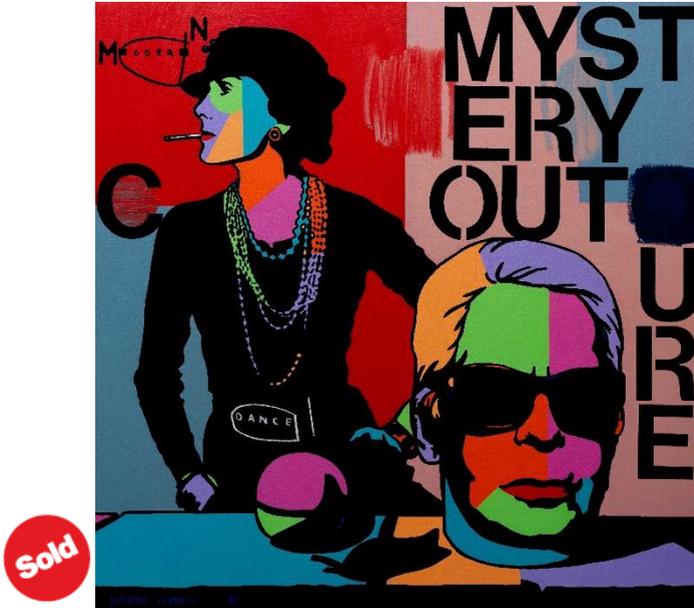


**'INFINITY ROOM' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD**

## STATEMENT

The notion of infinity, of capturing that which is limitless and indefinable, has long been an area of fascination for Surrealists. The mirror, in particular, has become a powerful visual device through which to reflect and refract our reality into the boundless terrains of the imagination. 'Infinity Room' sees Johnny Romeo explore the idea of the infinite through ingeniously re-envisioning Magritte's 1937 painting 'Not to be Reproduced (Portrait of Edward James)'. In the painting, celebrated contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama is seen staring at a mirror into her own reflection, her pose reminiscent of the mysterious faceless man in Magritte's work. Renowned for her dazzling distortions of time and space through the use of colour, light and mirrors, Kusama's 'Infinity Room' works are cheekily referenced by Romeo through the figure's polka dot suit, which riffs on the recurring motif of Magritte's iconic suited man. The rich use of shadows, coupled with Kusama's suit pattern, creates a seductive void within the centre of the composition that recalls Kusama's kaleidoscopic, dream-like installations. Eschewing the sinister overtones of 'Not to be Reproduced...', the confectionary sweet colour arrangements and inclusion of Kusama's pumpkin sculptures injects 'Infinity Room' with a vibrant exuberance that perfectly compliments the wide-eyed wonderment of her works. This sense of fun is also reflected in the painting's playful word assemblage, in which Romeo replaces the word Pop with 'Dotty' to pay homage to Kusama's obsession with using dots as a way to visualise the infinite recurring images we encounter in our dreams. The shift from 'Pop' to 'Dotty' nods to Kusama's her battles with mental health, while more notably acknowledging her role as a purveyor of a new type of Pop in contemporary art - where everyday realities are transported into the realm of the cosmic and Surreal.

## JOHNNY ROMEO - DREAM-LAND



**'MODERN DANCE' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD**

### STATEMENT

When it comes to fashion, there are few names as iconic as Chanel. For over 100 years, Chanel has been a defining name in style, leading the way in setting trends and pushing the boundaries of what can be considered fashion. In 'Modern Dance', Johnny Romeo pays homage to two of Chanel's most prominent visionaries, founder Coco Chanel and the late Karl Lagerfeld. Drawing inspiration from Magritte's 1948 painting 'Memory', the work portrays an effortlessly chic Coco Chanel smoking a cigarette, as her successor Karl Lagerfeld looks on at the audience, a disembodied head decked out in wrap around shades. Romeo's use of potent, neon hues and unconventional arrangements imbues the painting with a frenetic, Surrealist vibe that conjures images of a sordid acid trip on the Parisian catwalk. The symbol of Lagerfeld's head acts as a darkly humorous visual pun on Lagerfeld being 'ahead' of the fashion game as he brought the Chanel brand from the brink, his creative vision here paraded as an ever-vigilant trophy sculpture looming over Chanel's legacy. Lagerfeld's role in moving Chanel into the modern era is reflected in the title 'Modern Dance', a track taken from Lou Reed's 2000 album 'Ecstasy'. Romeo's cheeky Pop reference is particularly apt, given the affinity between Lou Reed's band The Velvet Underground and high fashion. A complex public figure, Lagerfeld brought a sense of mystique and mystery to the Chanel brand that is cleverly acknowledged in the word assemblage 'Mystery Couture'. The heavy influence of The Beatles and psychedelia on the work, particularly their 1967 'Magical Mystery Tour', is humorously subverted here, highlighting the sense of magic and secrecy Lagerfeld brought to each of Chanel's collections.

# JOHNNY ROMEO - DREAM-LAND

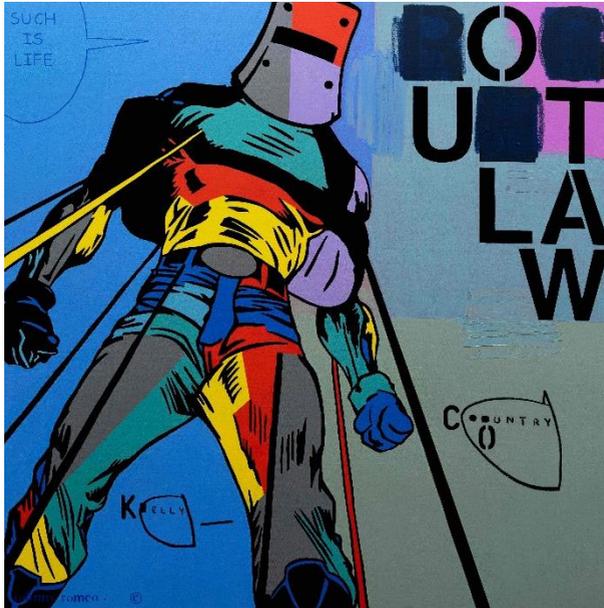


**'PIPE DREAM' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD**

## STATEMENT

The early days of punk, much like Surrealism, were galvanised by a sense of irreverence, of breaking free from convention and using art to shock audiences into seeing the world in a new light. 'Pipe Dream' fuses the boisterous anarchy of punk with the gleeful absurdism of Surrealism to create a Technicolour Pop dystopia in which the British monarchy is merely a relic of the past. In the work, Queen Elizabeth II is depicted as a crumbling, semi-nude bust from ancient antiquity, a hilarious nod to Magritte's tongue-in-cheek 1931 sculpture 'The Copper Handcuffs'. Romeo's mastery of wordplay sees the phrase 'No Sculptures', a nod to Banksy's 'No Ball Games' (2006), erased to form the phrase 'No Future', a scathing comment on modern day nobility as an institution that, like the opulent marble sculptures that once adorned palaces, is very much in decay. Inspired by the Sex Pistol's 1977 punk anthem 'God Save the Queen', the text assemblage 'No Future' elevates Johnny Rotten's snarling refrain of 'No future for you/No future for me' into a snotty anti-authoritarian slogan declaring the final days of royalty and the aristocracy. Once considered a pipe dream, the uncertainty over the future of the British royal family after the end of Queen Elizabeth II's rule has become a genuine point of conversation within Pop culture. Johnny Romeo hilariously hammers the point of the 'pipe dream' home both in the title of the work and with the image of Magritte's iconic pipe from his 1929 painting 'The Treachery of Images', which dominates the forefront of the painting. In a final, humorous send-up of Royal Britannia imagery, the arrangement of the smoking pipe, the Queen and the text bubbles creates a dysfunctional Union Jack formation.

## COMMISSIONED WORKS



Sold

'KELLY COUNTRY' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD



Sold

'ROYAL RIOT' - Acrylic and oil on canvas - 122 x 122 cm - \$7350 AUD

# 19KAREN

contemporary **artspace**

Johnny Romeo - 'Dream-Land' will run from 28<sup>th</sup> May until 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

For more information about Johnny's show or to make enquiries about his work or commissions please contact the gallery.

## **19 Karen Contemporary Artspace**

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