

Johnny Romeo
NOTHING IS REAL
Recent Paintings

Internationally acclaimed Australian Pop painter Johnny Romeo makes his thrilling return to the Gold Coast with his latest mini-exhibition, *Nothing Is Real*. Teaming up with 19 Karen Gallery, Romeo has put together a vibrantly psychedelic Special Release of four portraits that pay homage to Pop culture's ultimate Fab Four, the Beatles. Brimming with bold absurdist imagery and vivaciously hallucinatory colours, the latest series from Australia's King of Pop puts a refreshingly new spin on his inimitable Kitsch Pop style that masterfully fuses the symbolism of Dutch Golden age Vanitas still life paintings with the LSD-laced trippiness of Surrealism and the slickness of Pop Art. *Nothing Is Real* is a rollicking romp through the psychedelic world of Beatlemania that invites the audience to question reality and look beyond the physical world of the everyday.

Inspired by 'Abbey Road', the exhibition consists of four electrifying portraits of the Beatles that connect to form a linear artwork that mirrors the walking order found on the record's iconic cover (George, Paul, Ringo, John). Romeo cheekily plays with the notion of the number four and its connections to the Fab Four by basing each portrait on a song written within the successive four-year period considered to be the peak of the Beatles' career (1966 - 1969).

Nothing Is Real sees Johnny Romeo exploring breathtakingly new artistic terrain in his latest series as he puts his unique Kitsch Pop spin on classic Vanitas paintings. Drawing influence from Dutch Golden Age painters such as Pieter Claesz, Romeo transforms his portraits of the Beatles into neon-drenched still life compositions rich with Surrealist symbolism. Motifs relating to the passage of time, such as hourglasses and alarm clocks, are littered throughout the works, reflecting the Vanitas tradition of using objects to confront the viewer with their own mortality. The fascination with exploring the fragility of life, and the transcendence of death, is largely inspired by the popular 'Paul Is Dead' conspiracy, which claimed that Paul McCartney died in a car crash in late 1966 and was replaced by a look-a-like. Indeed, with his penchant for pitch-black humour, Romeo re-envisioned Paul as the ultimate Vanitas still life object, a head on a plate that evokes both the breakfast arrangements of Pieter Claesz and the infamous Biblical death of John the Baptist.

Renowned for their stirring sense of narrative, the usage of Vanitas imagery in *Nothing Is Real* lends the series an intriguing allegorical quality which transports audiences into a day in the life of some of the Beatles' most beloved songs. Romeo's clever use of surreal imagery ruptures the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, inviting us to step outside the

usual confines of time and space to explore fantastical realms such as John Lennon's Strawberry Fields, and experience the daydreaming cheekiness of Ringo Starr's 'I'm Only Sleeping'. The unconventional combination of symbolic imagery coupled with the artist's signature bursts of kaleidoscopic, candy-coloured hues imbues each of the works with a fun, fever dream quality that transfigures them into immersive, self-contained worlds in which to get lost.

Long influenced by artists such as Magritte and Dali, Johnny Romeo fully embraces Surrealism in all its psychotropic glory to craft some of his most delightfully Absurdist Pop works to date. The popular Surrealist motif of the eye crops up repeatedly throughout the series, acting as a visual portal into the subconscious through which we can construct visions and look beyond our material existence. Romeo's portraits of the Fab Four colourfully explore the states of being that exist between our imagination and reality, where sleep and the bending of time allows us to traverse the topography of our dreams and unlock our subconscious mind. In doing so, the series conjures the spirit of the Beatles at their most psychedelic and spiritual, as they use music as a vessel to question reality. Much like the Beatles, however, Romeo grounds his portraits with a healthy injection of Pop slickness and an emotional longing which ensures that each work beats with a human heart without floating too far off into the ether.

Nothing Is Real is a gloriously Technicolour deep dive into the rabbit hole of the subconscious. Breathing new life into his already distinctive Kitsch Pop visions, Australia's leading Pop artist gleefully re-imagines the Beatles as Surrealist still lifes for the postmodern Pop age that draw us into dreamworlds beyond the ordinary where anything is possible, and nothing is real.