

JOHNNY ROMEO



NED KELLY REVISITED

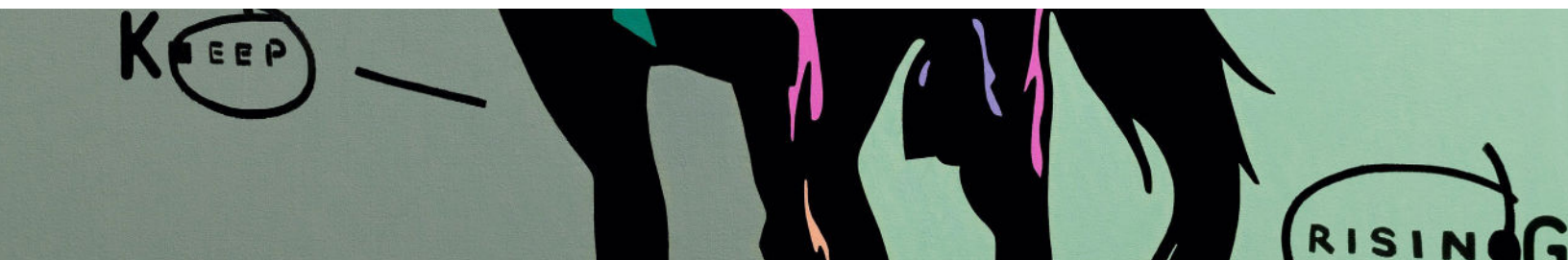
NEW PAINTINGS

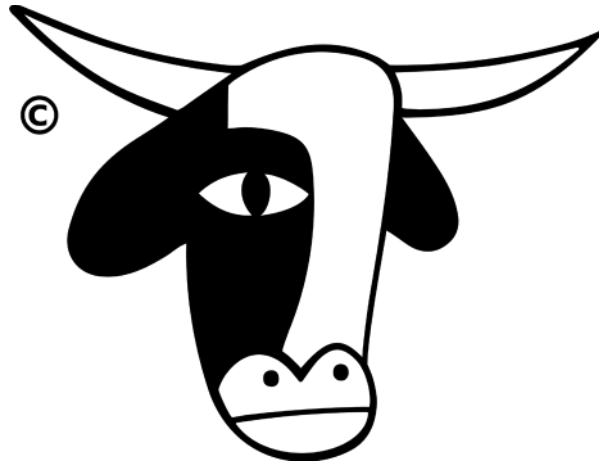
SEPTEMBER 17 - 30TH



JOHNNY ROMEO

Johnny Romeo is an Australian contemporary pop artist. His works infuse the aesthetics of print-based Warholian Pop with a street-art speed and grit, all executed through some strange on-canvas alchemy in acrylic and oil. The works heavily reference recent and current popular culture, unabashedly harvesting politicians, celebrities, pinups, and comic book heroes and villains, as protagonists. Rendered in muted pop hues, like high vibrancy paint applied thinly over stubborn grey concrete, these recognisable personalities often juxtapose witty stenciled wordplay, some letters scratched out to create unlikely double and triple entendres out of previously stale slogans and rehashed platitudes. Through that graphic style Romeo equally engages in, and simultaneously critiques consumer culture and branding in relation to the construction of personal identity. The artist exposes the childishness of our apparent ideals and elucidates what western culture has found to replace its heroes. Australian, lives and works in Sydney and Los Angeles.





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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"The legend of Ned Kelly has always fascinated me. Ever since I did my Cop Killer series back in 2012, I've been interested in revisiting Ned Kelly, and wanted to explore how colourful the Kelly narrative has become over time. With my latest paintings I was drawn to further examining Ned Kelly through the lens of being a cop killer and looking at how this angle of the Kelly myth has sparked Australia's deep fascination with true crime and gangsters. Using Cop Killer as the visual and conceptual backdrop for my current series, NED KELLY REVISITED, I wanted my new renditions to be even bolder and brasher than my paintings from 2012 and represent a fusion of my older comic-book inspired style and the pure Pop approach I'm known for today. In particular, I was inspired by the golden age of Marvel and DC comics and wanted each of my works to evoke the larger-than-life power of iconic comic book covers. At the same time, I envisioned Ned Kelly in these new works as Australia's original gangster and had a lot of fun embellishing these paintings with references from true Australian crime, Pop culture mobsters like 'The Sopranos', and the hustler mentality of gangster rap".

Johnny Romeo
2022



NED KELLY REVISITED

new paintings

Internationally acclaimed Australian Pop painter makes his triumphant return to the Gold Coast with a truly special event and new body of work, *NED KELLY REVISITED*. The collection of six original paintings sees Australia's King of Pop revisit one of his most beloved and popular subjects, the notorious bushranger and folk hero Ned Kelly. To celebrate the launch of *NED KELLY REVISITED*, Johnny Romeo and 19 Karen Gallery, Gold Coast have invited collectors to an exclusive preview dinner at Room 81 at The Sofitel Gold Coast on September 17. Inspired by a fiery combination of comic book villains and true crime gangsters, *NED KELLY REVISITED* sees Johnny Romeo at his most confrontational and high-octane as he explores the Kelly legend in all its colourful brutality and mayhem.

As a world-renowned artist at the forefront of the contemporary Pop Art scene, Johnny Romeo has cultivated a large and devoted collector base. *NED KELLY REVISITED* will kick off with a special cultural event where highly valued collectors are invited to dine with Australia's leading Pop artist as part of a VIP preview dinner. The intimate gathering will feature a lavish three-course dinner at the French-inspired Room 81 at The Sofitel, Gold Coast, and will give collectors the unique opportunity to secure pieces from Romeo's latest exhibition before it launches.

NED KELLY REVISITED is Johnny Romeo at his electrifying and riotous best. Brimming with exhilarating imagery, explosive colour arrangements and undeniable attitude, Romeo's rollicking renditions of Ned Kelly are ballsy and unapologetic, capturing the notorious outlaw as a truly towering and dangerous figure in Australian folklore. Picking up where his celebrated Cop Killer exhibition left off in 2012, Johnny Romeo ingeniously appropriates some of his older works to create impassioned Kitsch Pop visions of Ned Kelly. Romeo uses unconventional angles to evoke the thrills of violence and turbulence, while vibrant colours and blood-stained pistols slash across canvases with whiplash velocity, dragging audiences directly into the raging melee of clenched fists and flying bullets. At the same time, the recurring motif of the war horse symbolizes freedom, triumph and heroism, virtues which have also come to characterize the legend of Ned Kelly.

For Johnny Romeo, revisiting Ned Kelly is not just reflected in his subject matter, but more notably in his return to the Pop-inflected comic book aesthetics of his earlier works. In contrast to the clunky, trench-cloaked bushranger depicted in Australian folklore, Romeo's Kelly is a sleek, muscular vigilante from a dystopian future that evokes the adrenaline-fueled action of classic Marvel and DC comic books. Decked out in superhero spandex, wielding over-the-top firearms, and draped in dramatic lighting, Ned Kelly is the consummate comic book villain hell-bent on exacting vengeance and wreaking havoc against the establishment. Each of the paintings buzz with a frenetic energy and drip with dramatic, narrative flair that recalls the larger-than-life power of iconic comic book covers wrought in vibrant Kitsch Pop Technicolour. The compositional finesse and bold graphic slickness of Romeo's latest series masterfully fuses together the feverish intensity of his past comic-book inspired work with the more polished, pure Pop flavour that he is celebrated for today.

Conceptually, Ned Kelly's darker, more murderous side is further explored through Romeo's clever references to true crime, and gangster TV shows such as 'The Sopranos' and 'Underbelly'. A pitch-black sense of humour pervades the works, as Romeo explores the hammy execution style of mobsters wanting you to 'swim with the fishes' in works such as 'Too Tough Luck', and the iconic gun poses of notorious Australian gang lords like Chopper Read in 'Bullet Proof Hustle'. Romeo also cleverly weaves in the street-hardened braggadocio and swagger of classic gangster rap into his latest works, alluding to the high-rolling hustler mentality of rappers such as Nas and Fat Joe. In doing so, Romeo cleverly taps into our collective fascination with outlaws and crime stories and positions Kelly as not just a cold-blooded murderer, but Australia's original gangster.

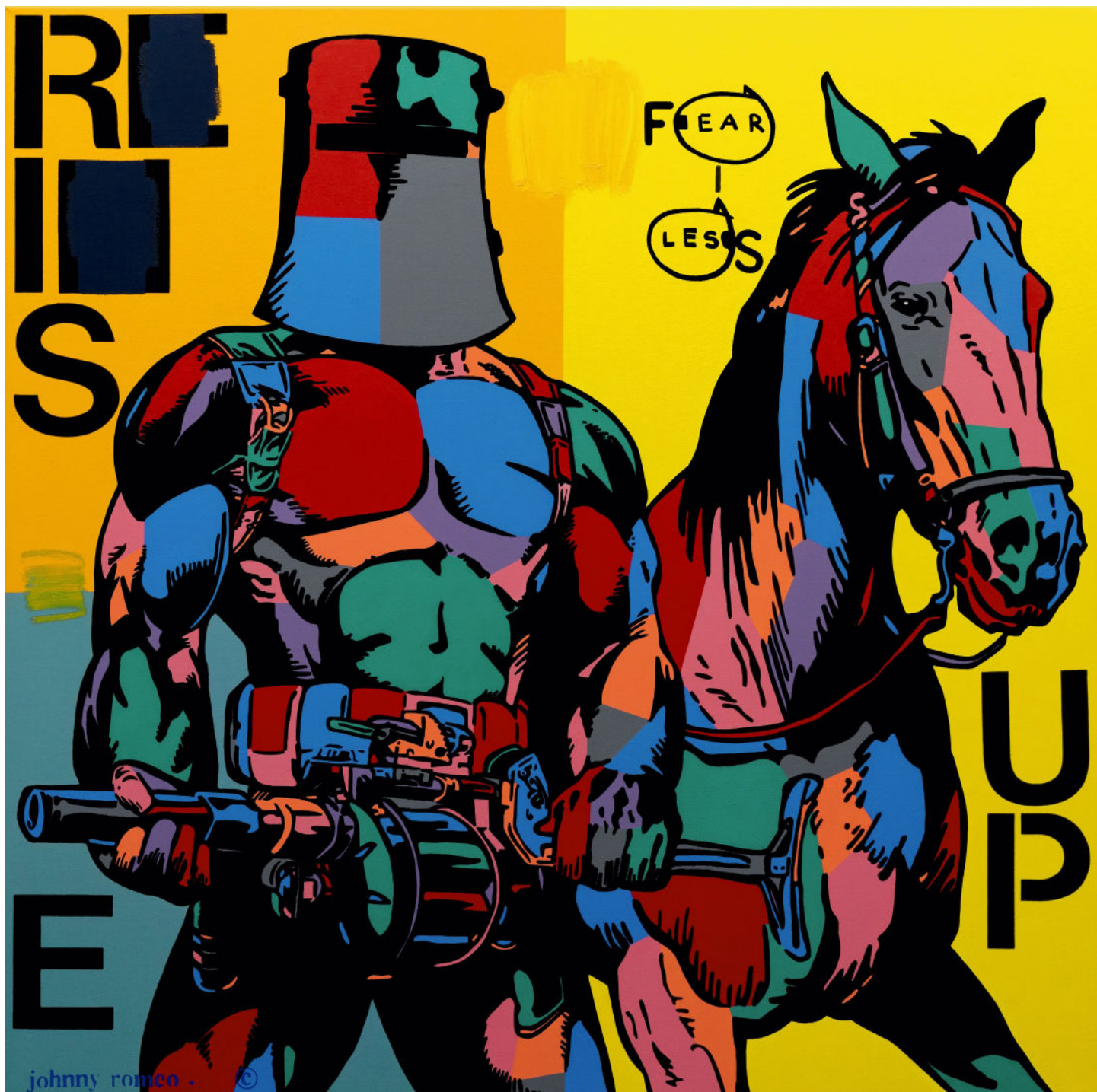
Charging towards the audience with the ferocity of a Technicolour raging bull, *NED KELLY REVISITED* showcases Johnny Romeo at his boldest, brashest, and most bombastic as he pays homage to the complex and storied legend of Ned Kelly, the folk hero and murderer.



Johnny Romeo, *Bullet Proof Hustle*, 2022, acrylic and oil on canvas 153cm x 153cm (60" x 60")

BULLET PROOF HUSTLE

Australian Pop culture has long had a grim fascination with gangsters and the dark underbelly of crime. In *Bullet Proof Hustle*, Johnny Romeo ingeniously jams together two of Australia's most notorious outlaws as he re-envisioned Ned Kelly as the infamous underworld crime boss Chopper Read. Romeo's tough-as-nails Technicolor rendition of Kelly is a self-assured gangster dripping with undeniable swagger and a menacing attitude wielding two hybrid glocks in a crossed formation that evokes Chopper Read's infamous gun pose. The connection between Kelly and Chopper is further established through the word assemblage 'Real Bopper Chopper', a powerful statement of intent that posits Ned Kelly as Australia's original gangster. Clever references to lawlessness can be seen in the term 'bopper', an American slang term for a 'a hip, self-assured person' that was often used to describe early rock'n'roll as outlaw music. From here Romeo links the criminal reputation of 50's rock music to the streetwise gangster rap of hip hop legend Nas. The title *Bullet Proof Hustle* pays homage to Kelly's iconic armour, while subtly tethering the iconic folk hero to Nas' concept of the hustler, who's 'job ain't done until he's king'. In doing so, Romeo transforms Ned Kelly into a bullet proof battler, an intimidating combination of beggar and king, hero and villain, whose revolt against Victorian authorities represents the full realization of Nas' hustler king.



Johnny Romeo, *Fear Less*, 2022, acrylic and oil on canvas 122cm x 122cm (48" x 48")

FEAR LESS

The legend of Ned Kelly has many faces. From armour-clad folk hero to murderous thug, the folklore surrounding the iconic bushranger has made Kelly one of the most fascinating and misunderstood figures in Australian history. Perhaps the most enduring image of Ned Kelly, however, is that of the unflinching rebel. In *Fear Less*, Johnny Romeo depicts Kelly as a ripped, masked crusader brandishing a machine gun while reining in his warhorse. With his resolute stance and steely control of his steed, Romeo's Kelly is the consummate enforcer of vigilante bush justice, a gangster with a cause ready to revolt against authority without a moment's hesitation. The spirit of revolution is highlighted in the painting through the word assemblage 'Reins Rise Up', a clever play on words that recalls the split moment where we take a pause to breathe and make sense of the situation before rising up to strike. Staunch and unwavering, Romeo's Ned Kelly is a poster boy for empowerment who encapsulates the rugged individualism and brave adventurousness of the Australian spirit. This is perfectly reflected in the work's title, *Fear Less*, a simple yet powerful call to arms to stand up to our fears and never back down from our convictions.



Johnny Romeo, *Hill Top Hood*, 2022, acrylic and oil on canvas 153cm x 153cm (60" x 60")

HILL TOP HOOD

Ned Kelly's infamous final standoff against Victorian police at the Glenrowan Inn is today the stuff of legend, a turning point in Australian rebellion that continues to inspire and divide opinion in equal measure. In *Hill Top Hood*, Johnny Romeo reimagines the Glenrowan Siege as a spaghetti western shootout in a futuristic comic book dystopia. The painting depicts Ned Kelly as a ripped, iron-clad vigilante brandishing a rifle and machine gun whilst his horse rages in distress behind him. Kelly's cool yet imposing demeanour, in contrast to the frenzied nature of his steed, reflects the notorious bushranger's fearlessness in the face of imminent capture and death as he squares off with Victorian police. Standing his ground to the bitter end, Romeo's comic book crusader is ready to blast away in a blaze of glory, a point highlighted with electrifying energy in the word assemblage 'Blast Last Stand'. Conceptually, the painting is the last work of the series as it culminates in Kelly's capture and subsequent execution. The title *Hill Top Hood* pays homage to Ned Kelly as Australia's own 'hill top' Robin Hood, while also injecting a dose of street grit in to the painting by referencing the popular Australian hip hop crew Hilltop Hoods.



Johnny Romeo, Keep Rising, 2022, acrylic and oil on canvas 122cm x 122cm (48" x 48")

KEEP RISING

In Australian folklore, Ned Kelly stands tall as the consummate rebel. *Keep Rising* masterfully fuses together rugged Australiana with iconic Wild West imagery as Johnny Romeo re-imagines Kelly as a gunslinging cowboy looking down from his trusty stead. Channeling the swagger of classic Western star John Wayne in the 1950's film 'Rio Grande', Romeo's rendition of Kelly is a towering Technicolour symbol of the Aussie battler who possesses an unwavering sense of self-confidence and self-belief. Kelly's epic, elevated pose on his horse compliments the sentiment of the title *Keep Rising*, a call to action to never lower your beliefs and always rise up to life's challenges. Romeo's penchant for clever word play is displayed in the text passage 'Never ~~Abate~~ Hesitate'. The calm and composed nature of the painting speaks to the idea of 'abating', of easing off and becoming less intense. However, by erasing key letters to create the phrase 'Never Hesitate', Romeo transforms Kelly and his relative stillness into a figure of immense power and self-assuredness whose battle with adversity is as much mental as it is physical. Poised to strike at any moment, Romeo's rollicking rendition of Australia's most notorious bushranger will never lower himself, never hesitate and never surrender.



Johnny Romeo, *Never Run*, 2022, acrylic and oil on canvas 122cm x 122cm (48" x 48")

NEVER RUN

Australian folklore has long had a fascination with larrikins and firebrands, but no figure has captured our imagination and embodied the spirit of Australian anti-authoritarianism quite like Ned Kelly. In *Never Run*, Johnny Romeo portrays Kelly as the ultimate gunslinging outlaw, his dual pistols pointed towards the audience and ready to blast us away in a blaze of glory. Bridging the gap between comic book anti-hero and classic Spaghetti Western cowboy, the artist masterfully channels the tension and frenetic energy of classic Wild West shootouts through the lens of his feverish, Technicolour Kitsch Pop style. There is a steadfastness to Romeo's Kelly, a resolute refusal to back down that imbues the painting with an empowering, punk rock energy. The title *Never Run*, therefore, becomes a powerful statement of intent to never back down from a challenge, but rather stand your ground and shoot it out. This sense of 'sticking to your guns' is reinforced in the word assemblage 'More ~~Rustle~~ Hustle', a potent reminder to always keep up the grind and never stop taking actions into your own hands. The erasure of the word rustle, meanwhile, cheekily refers to the rustling of paper (money) and the act of rounding up and stealing livestock, further connecting the Kelly legend to the unforgiving Wild West.



Johnny Romeo, *Too Tough Luck*, 2022, acrylic and oil on canvas 153cm x 153cm (60" x 60")

TOO TOUGH LUCK

Beware of the man in the iron mask, because his face is the last, you'll ever see. Johnny Romeo ramps up the murderous mayhem of the Ned Kelly mythos with frenetic glee in the painting *Too Tough Luck*. In the work, Romeo transforms Kelly into a cold-blooded gangster, evoking the most nefarious linchpins of Australia's seamy criminal underbelly as he points his gun menacingly down towards the audience without a hint of remorse amidst a sea of fiery, crimson hues. As you stare up the barrel of Kelly's cocked pistol, Romeo's grindhouse gore hound taunts the audience as if to say, 'tough luck, not only are you gonna die, but you're gonna die with this fantastic view.' The sentiment is driven home in the title *Too Tough Luck*, a phrase often used to deal with the cards you've been dealt with in life that recalls Kelly's own infamous epithet 'Such is life.' A glorious mash up of mobster boss and cartoon caped crusader, Romeo's reinterpretation of Ned Kelly transforms the bushranger into history's very first Iron Man, a pioneer in an iron suit who was a comic book anti-hero before they even existed.

BIOGRAPHY

Johnny Romeo is an internationally acclaimed Australian painter. Considered Australia's leading Pop artist, Romeo is spearheading the global Neo-Expressionist Pop movement with his electrifying collision of rock'n'roll swagger, comic book aesthetics and street art. Described by GQ Magazine Australia as 'part punk, part pop', Romeo's Kitsch Pop works are explosive sugar rushes of Technicolour imagery and urban grittiness that are turning heads worldwide.

Armed with tongue-in-cheek humour and razor-sharp social commentary, Johnny Romeo is today renowned as a world-leading culture jammer. His works explore the influence celebrity icons and brand-name heroes have on our contemporary identity. Romeo approaches his art-making practice like a television, broadcasting colourful Postmodern visions that re-contextualise and seek to make sense of the daily cacophony of images, ads and memes we are bombarded with in our Pop-obsessed culture.

Over the last decade, Johnny Romeo has enjoyed a successive number of critically acclaimed and sold-out exhibitions across Australia, New Zealand, and the US. Romeo has continued his dominance as a world-class Pop artist with acclaimed and sell-out exhibitions in Sydney, Perth, Auckland, Napier, Canberra, and the Gold Coast in 2021 and 2022, and most notably the Australian Consulate-General in New York (2018). He was a highly celebrated feature artist in Brisbane's Sign of the Times group exhibition, alongside street art juggernauts Banksy, Blek le Rat and Swoon. A major force in contemporary Pop art, Romeo is represented by many top galleries both in Australia and overseas.

Romeo has graced several prominent publications such as the Sydney Morning Herald, Vogue, Australian Art Review, Artist Profile and No Cure Magazine. Television features include the ABC 7:30 Report, Foxtel's STVDIO, and the ABC documentary 'Conquest of Space: Science Fiction & Contemporary Art', written and hosted by renowned art critic Dr. Andrew Frost.

On the international stage, Johnny Romeo is a Pop Art tour de force, with hugely celebrated exhibitions in the US, including, New York, Los Angeles, Pennsylvania, and Florida, and recently in Sweden. He has participated in several high-profile group shows across the US and Europe, including Language Art, alongside childhood hero and Pop Art icon Robert Indiana. Romeo made a massive splash as a celebrated featured artist in POP AUSTIN 2017, exhibiting with contemporary art powerhouses like Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Mr. Brainwash. Over the past three years, Romeo has made many standout appearances on US national television and universities. Since 2015, he has released three books examining his paintings and art-making practice: TV Land (2015), 10-year retrospective survey Plastic Fantastic (2017) and Pump Up the Jams: Culture Jamming in the Works of Johnny Romeo (2019).

As one of the biggest names in Pop art today, Romeo's works are highly sought-after globally, and are held in prominent Australian and international public and private collections. He has collaborated on many illustrious projects with the likes of leading US snowboarding company Gilson Boards, craft beer alchemists Zeroday Brewing Company, world-famous punk band Blink 182 and Lexus Australia.





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