

JOHNNY ROMEO



**KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER**

*NEW PAINTINGS*

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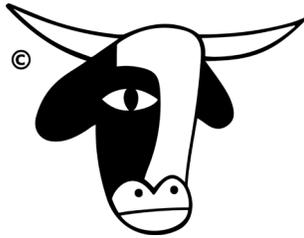
## JOHNNY ROMEO

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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# KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER

## *New Paintings*

Internationally acclaimed Australian Pop painter Johnny Romeo makes his thunderous debut in New Orleans with his latest series KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER. Romeo's new collection of original works sees the world-leading Kitsch Pop provocateur at his most bombastic and brazen, fusing together the irresistible pop hooks of the New Romantic movement with the majestic regalia of traditional royal portraits and the invigorating bullishness of Cubist masters Pablo Picasso and George Condo. Exhibiting at Graphite Gallery on Royal Street in New Orleans' French Quarter, Romeo evokes the area's regal and romantic connections to Paris while paying homage to the restless punk energy that burns at the heart of New Orleans and continues to make it a centre of boundary pushing creativity. With KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER, Australia's leading Pop artist has delivered his most breathtaking distillation of Kitsch Pop slickness and Cubist expressiveness to date, envisioning a rich, neon-drenched world where beasts run the show and punks are the new royals.

Taking its title from Adam and the Ants 1980 anthem of the same name, KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER is a gloriously Technicolour foray into the realm of royalty that explores what it means to be a 'new royal' in a world that has largely done away with traditional notions of nobility. The series brims with bright, bubble-gum colours, delightfully chic rulers and a vibrant flair for theatricality that evokes the spirit of the New Romantics movement of the early 1980s. Characterised by their love of regal costumes, larger-than-life personalities and slick Pop melodies, the New Romantics took the energy of punk and fused it with the futuristic synthesisers of New Wave and the fabulous schlock of glam rock to create a potent youth movement that revolutionised Pop culture and turned traditional notions of masculinity and gender on their head.

Romeo gleefully re-appropriates the traditional austerity of royal portraiture to create rogue rulers, dandyish dukes and elegant earls that embody the gender-bending stylishness of the New Romantics. The paintings powerfully envision a new wild frontier of self-made punk nobles who have ascended to power not through royal blood but by tearing up the rulebook and fighting their way to the top. Striking a brilliant balance between the sophisti-pop of Roxy Music and the propulsive, tribal rhythms of Adam and the Ants, the series is an unapologetically brash celebration of the fearless vision of the New Romantics and the self-made new royals who channel their energy today. In KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER, Adam and the Ant's triumphant declaration 'of a new Royal family/ A wild nobility/ We are the family' becomes a statement of intent where the elitism and oppression of old royalty gives way to a world where anyone can take a shot at the throne.

The theme of breaking with tradition and seeing the world from new, exciting perspectives is further explored through Johnny Romeo's dazzling fusion of portraiture and Cubism. *KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER*, the artist brings the influence of Cubist master Pablo Picasso and the frenetic expressiveness of neo-Cubist provocateur George Condo to the forefront of his practice, and in doing so has crafted some of his most bold and bombastic works. Jagged, geometric fragments powerfully disrupt the sleek sheen of Romeo's Pop royal portraits, lending the works a palpable physicality that evokes the signature garish make-up of New Romantics and Cubism's radical approach to re-envisioning perceived realities. Long inspired by the works of Picasso, the artist has skilfully appropriated shapes and figures from his own past works into his latest paintings, twisting and angling them into spirited configurations that breathe new life into his depictions of commanders and rulers. On a more emotional level, Romeo's frenzied and distorted portraits interrogate the complex states of mind experienced by royals who have clawed their way to the top, recalling the psychologically fraught imagery and raw irreverence of George Condo.

Showcasing his mastery of mashups, Johnny Romeo ruptures the muscular, angular heft of his New Royals with a healthy injection of Kitsch in the form of cute animals. In the paintings, Romeo's kings of the wild frontier are depicted clutching a wide range of creatures, ranging from piglets and lambs, to fuzzy felines and koalas. The clumsy awkwardness of their poses imbues them with a relatable sense of humanity, calling to mind the classical portraits of nobility as filtered through the hilariously awkward shots of royal visits gone wrong taken for tabloid magazines. Echoing David Bowie's New Romantic-inspired anthem 'Teenage Wildlife' (1980), the cute creatures offer a disarming sense of tenderness to the works while also tapping into our more primal and animalistic instincts as we venture into the wilderness of the new frontier.

A glorious cocktail of vibrant colour explosions, slick graphic imagery and Cubist bullishness, *KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER* is an electrifying homage to the daring spirit and fierce flamboyance of the New Romantics movement from one of the world's leading voices in Kitsch Pop. In Romeo's new wild frontier, royalty is not something you're born into, but a state of mind that calls us to embrace our inner wild child and become the rulers of our own reality.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

"I've always been drawn to music with a strong visual identity. The New Romantics movement for me was a perfect blend of slick Pop songwriting and larger-than-life personalities. I was always so fascinated by the daring fashion-sense and cocky dandyism of early 80s bands like ABC and Adam and the Ants, who really embodied Pop music's ability to transport you from the hum-drum banality of everyday life. These well-coifed visionaries, with their garish make-up, attention-grabbing androgyny and sophisticated synth pop, always seemed so regal in my mind, and were a huge inspiration on my latest body of work. I was particularly influenced by the punk-edged attitude of self-professed dandies Adam and the Ants, and their proclamation of a 'new royal family and a wild nobility' in the song 'Kings of the Wild Frontier'. There was something just so powerful about the Burundi beats and bold vision of the band that I wanted to capture in a series. It's been great to channel the spirit of the New Romantics with my latest works and play around with classic royal portraits to subvert the way that we see royalty in a world where traditional notions of nobility are slowly dying. I also wanted to use my new body of work to further dig into my love for Cubism, and in particular the works of greats such as Picasso and George Condo. The interplay between the vibrant portraiture of the royals and their cute pets, and the frenzied energy of the Cubist elements in these paintings, gives these works a real sense of depth, where we get to enter into the very minds of royals in a surreal and unexpected manner".

Johnny Romeo  
2021

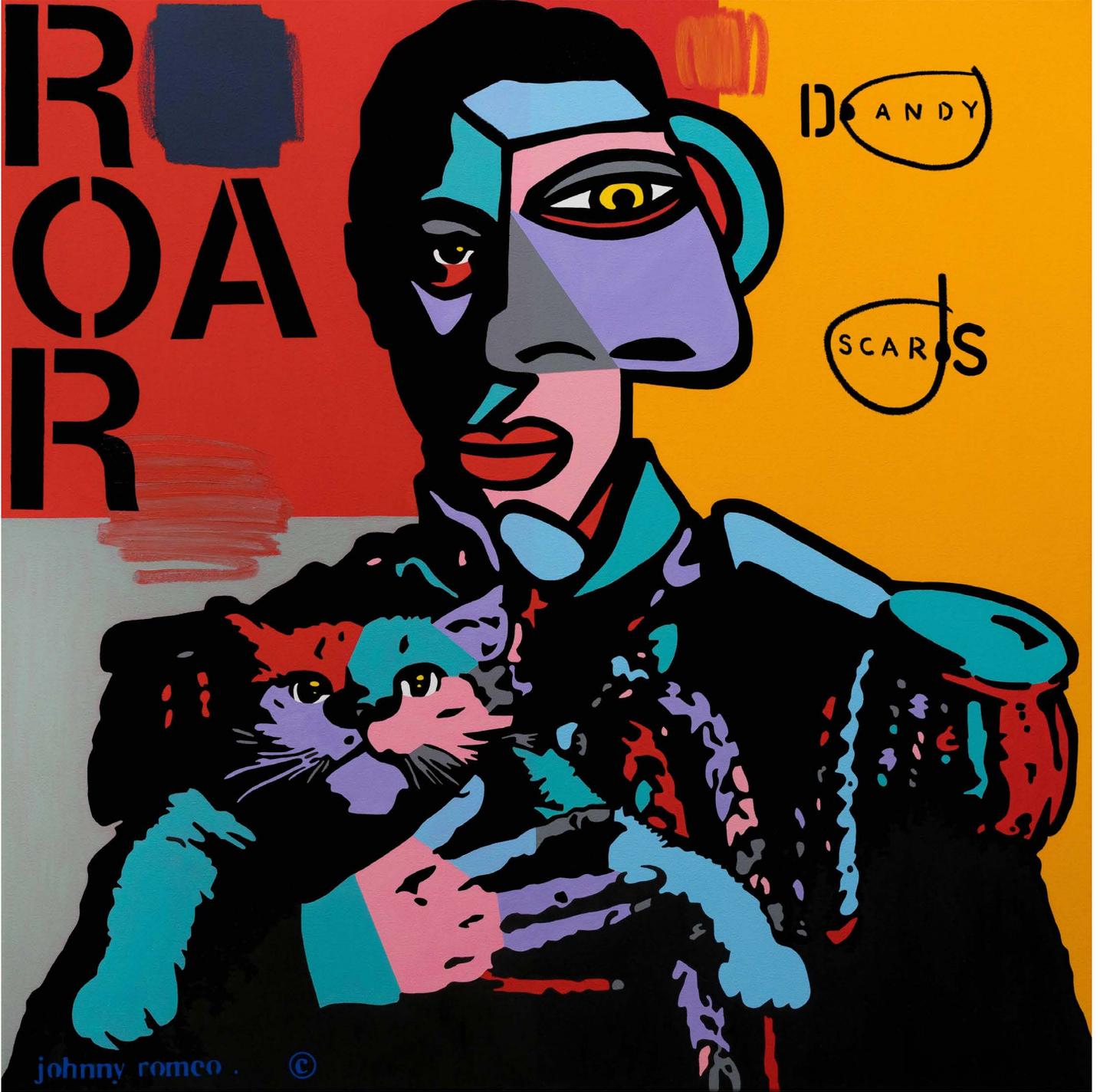




Johnny Romeo, *Battle Dance*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# BATTLE DANCE

As the wheels of war grind to a halt, it's time to pull out your dancing shoes and bust a move. Battle Dance is a neon-drenched exploration of the aftermath of conflict, where survivors can finally breathe a sigh of relief and celebrate the spoils of their victory. In the work, Romeo depicts a young commander lovingly grasping a pet rabbit as a symbol of good luck, the jagged contortions of his Technicolour face recalling both the scars of battle and the raw neo-Cubism of George Condo. Brimming with slick imagery and a delightfully upbeat, candy-coated colour palette, the painting filters the grittiness of war through the garish sartorial-sass and stylish synth-pop of the New Romantics. The allusions to battle subtly pay homage to ABC's slickly combative 1982 single 'Poison Arrow', while the figure of the smiling commander as battle survivor echoes the seductive throb of Roxy Music's single 'While My Heart Is Still Beating' (1982). Ascending to royalty with some killer moves to boot, Romeo's cheeky manipulation of text posits his rabbity royal as a 'Foreign' power who claws his way through the ravages of war and lives to tell the tale as the dancing 'Sovereign' relishing in the success of battle. Romeo further plays on the theme of dancing and conflict through the title Battle Dance, with its witty nods to breakdancing and the early days of hip hop.



Johnny Romeo, *Dandy Scars*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# DANDY SCARS

In the new wild frontier, to be a royal is to be fabulous. Inspired by the glorious gender-bending of glam rock, the New Romantics fabulously bucked convention and played around with our notions of gender by making the feminine masculine. Dandy Scars is a vibrant sugar rush of confectionary colours, sleek fashionable imagery and Cubist chutzpah that pays homage to the daring Dandyism of the New Romantics, with their penchant for over-the-top make up and outrageous, often regal outfits. Romeo eschews the overt masculinity of traditional royal portraiture for a flamboyant, crimson-lipped prince decked out in the finest regalia looking demurely at the audience as he awkwardly clutches a cat to his heart. Shards of the prince's face, which have been distorted and appropriated from Romeo's previous Picasso-esque works, are here twisted into jagged shapes that call to mind Cubism's fascination with movement and the angular make-up often donned by the New Romantics. This subversion of what is considered 'kingly' or 'manly' is taken to absurdly humorous heights in the juxtaposition between the fuzzy feline and the word assemblage 'Roar', a word typically associated more with a lion or a tiger. More than just a cute face, however, the cat has its paws exposed and is ready to draw the Prince's blood, as alluded to in the crossed out word '~~Scar~~' (a play on 'sore') and the 'Scars' taken from the title. The rhythmic pulse of Adam and the Ant's 'Kings of the Wild Frontier', with its refrain of 'down below those dandy clothes, you're just a shade too white', becomes a call to action in the title Dandy Scars, a statement of intent from the New Royals who are willing to suffer to be comfortable in their own skin.



Johnny Romeo, *Early Dawn*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# EARLY DAWN

Chaos reigns and lawlessness abounds in the jungles of the new wild frontier. In *Early Dawn*, Romeo playfully subverts our understanding of royalty as inherently dignified and noble, transforming royalty into something more primal and animalistic. The painting portrays a commander gazing forward with a resigned expression as a monkey cheekily slinks on his shoulder, his face wildly contorted into expressive Cubist fragments that recall the exhilaratingly grotesque madness of American Cubist George Condo. Romeo gleefully ruptures any semblance of poise or dignity in his portrait, instead imbuing his work with a colorful sense of pandemonium that is embodied in the mischievous figure of the monkey. A clever nod to the song 'Teenage Wildlife' from David Bowie's New Romantic-inspiring album 'Scary Monsters' (1980), the monkey symbolizes the joyous freedom of anarchy in the wild frontier, where the animals roam the land and become the new royals. On a darker level, Romeo examines the way in which our obsession with power corrodes our sense of self and reduces us to a pack of animals devoid of loyalty, a point captured with masterful pithiness through the erasure of 'loyal' to form the word 'royal'. The titular *Early Dawn* may shine in the new kingdom, but it also spells the twilight of the soul.



Johnny Romeo, *Ground Control*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# GROUND CONTROL

With his penchant for larger-than-life theatrics, garish costumes and sophisticated pop songwriting, legendary rockstar David Bowie was not just a major inspiration on the New Romantic movement, but in many ways its patron saint. In *Ground Control*, Johnny Romeo tips his cap to Bowie's influence on the New Romantics with an electrifyingly vibrant portrait of a royal with his trusty owl perched on his shoulder. Both the commander, decked out in high-ranking military garb, and the beast look towards the audience with a steely resolve that evokes both the regal poses of generals from ages past and the bombastic dandyism of Bowie's glam period. The spirit of Picasso permeates the painting, as Romeo injects the classical realism of traditional royal portraiture with a refreshing neon-drenched Cubist twist that contorts the commander's face into that of a bull-eyed warrior driven by an unquenchable thirst for power. This desire to rule through might is captured with sly wit in the word assemblage '~~Sword~~', which has been crossed out to form the word 'Lord'. Romeo continues the exploration of power and command through the title *Ground Control*, while also cleverly circling back to David Bowie with its reference to the singer's iconic 'ground control to Major Tom' refrain from 1969's 'A Space Oddity'.



Johnny Romeo, *New Royal*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# NEW ROYAL

The revolution is upon us, and you are all invited. In *New Royal*, Johnny Romeo envisions a colorfully vivacious new world where the old structures of power have been dismantled, where titles are rendered redundant, and we have all become royalty. Bursting with some of Romeo's most vibrant and explosive color arrangements to date, the painting depicts a Czar-like figure adorned with military regalia clutching his pet chihuahua in a pose that is at once both grandiose and side-splittingly hilarious. The stately canine, coupled with the work's zesty colour palette, lends *New Royal* a delightfully Kitsch and fun vibe that underscores the emotional austerity often accorded to royal portraits. A master of fusing together disparate Pop culture elements, Romeo's amalgamation of vivid Cubist portraiture, Czarist imagery and rich Soviet reds injects the painting with a frenetic, almost revolutionary zeal that calls on us to rail against the fakes, as highlighted in the erased word assemblage '~~Feign~~', and usher in the 'Reign' of a new type of royal. The slick sheen and kaleidoscopic hues of the work also recall the disco-inflected synth pop of the New Romantics, which is reflected in the title *New Royal* and its allusions to Adam Ant's triumphant refrain of 'we are the new royal family' in the iconic Adam & the Ant's anthem 'Kings of the Wild Frontier' (1980).



Johnny Romeo, *Rain Rich*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# RAIN RICH

Becoming a new royal can often be a hilariously awkward transition. In Rain Rich, Johnny Romeo depicts a fresh-faced commoner who has become an emperor, his subtle look of confusion playfully suggesting a disoriented sense of being a fish out of water. A clever commentary on the British royal family in light of the death of Prince Phillip and the controversies surrounding new royal Meaghan Markle, the young ruler's befuddled pose with a koala calls to mind amusingly cringe-worthy tabloid photos of royals posing with animals while on official visits. Romeo teases out the growing pains of being an 'emperor in new clothes' with further satirical aplomb in the text passage 'Esquire', which has been reconfigured to create the word 'Empire' to imply an elegant gentleman unexpectedly ascending the ranks to become a new ruler. With its bright bubblegum colours and thrilling mash-up of Kitsch Pop and Cubism, Rain Rich evokes the dashing dandyism of the New Romantics band Japan and their synth pop classic 'My New Career' (1980). The song's catchy couplet of 'a different walk of life, that I've come to know' takes on a farcical new life within the work as it paints the picture of a person fumbling their way to the top and questioning how they got there.



Johnny Romeo, *Space Song*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# SPACE SONG

In Johnny Romeo's *Wild Frontier*, royalty is not something you are born with, it is something that you forge and cultivate yourself. In *Space Song*, Johnny Romeo has crafted a hyper-coloured homage to the self-made modern day royals, those who have struggled against the odds to shine bright and carve a name for themselves amidst a hostile world. Standing with magisterial gait at the centre of the work, Romeo's dandyish count figure is an unapologetic symbol of power and opulence. The count's largely silhouetted velvet cape and extravagant regalia evokes the svelte sophisti-Pop of the iconic art rock band Roxy Music, whose elegant take on smooth, jazz-inflected synth Pop was a major influence on the New Romantic movement. Roxy Music is further referenced in the painting through the title *Space Song* and its sly allusions to the band's sleek single 'The Space Between' (1982). Despite its overt extravagance, Romeo ingeniously injects the painting with a disarming emotional core, as seen through the count's tender embrace of his cat. Furthermore, the sense of nostalgic yearning captured in the count's single tear cleverly nods to Picasso's 'The Crying Woman', while humanising the count and implying a past characterised by pain and adversity, in contrast to his regal stature today. The shifting of the word 'Golde' into 'Gold', therefore embodies the count's transformation, as it touches on the alchemical metamorphosis of the archaic term 'golde' from its Yiddish, German and Arabic origins into the gleaming word 'gold' that we know today.



Johnny Romeo, *Super Scream*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# SUPER SCREAM

The road to fame and riches is often paved with controversies that scar for life. Johnny Romeo explores the darker side of royalty in one of his most brazen and ballsy works to date, *Super Scream*. In the painting, a decorated general is portrayed clutching a rooster, his face distorted beyond recognition in a style that echoes the psychologically fraught neo-Cubism of celebrated American artist George Condo. Dripping with turgid greens and melancholic royal blues, Romeo's unsettling, grotesque portrait speaks to a tortured soul whose past sins have marred his very identity and continue to haunt him on his dark ascent to the top, as seen in the locket the figure wears in memory of his former self. Framed within a contemporary context, Romeo's tragic aristocrat symbolises our fascination with celebrity controversies and the way in which they can topple the reputations of even the most high-profile public figures. The media's role in amplifying news about celebrity controversies is humorously denoted through the rooster, whose piercing crow is echoed to comedic effect in the title *Super Scream*. The general's ignominious fall from grace is captured with razor sharp wit in the word assemblage 'Crown', which slyly conceals the archaic English term 'Adown', illustrating that the inexorable march to the throne may be the very road that leads to our own undoing. Despite its gloomy overtones, there is also an absurdist sense of humour to the work in the form of the rooster, whose presence undercuts the severity of the general figure and lends the painting a dose of Pop levity.



Johnny Romeo, *Teen Tears*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# TEEN TEARS

It can be lonely living at the top. Johnny Romeo explores the deep sense of isolation experienced by those in power with bold Cubist imagery and his signature penchant for tongue-in-cheek humour in Teen Tears. The painting portrays a young, dishevelled royal looking out into the distance with resigned longing as he carefully clutches a lamb in his hand. Subtle hints to the princely figure's past life are made through the word assemblage 'Towner', which has been slickly altered to create the word 'Tower'. Romeo's ingenious wordplay alludes to a high-flying city dweller who has abandoned the excitement of metropolitan life for the solitude of royalty within his stone-cold tower. Shades of ancient rulers such as Alexander the Great shine through Romeo's use of hyper-masculine, Picasso-esque imagery, but the mightiness of these conquerors is here tinged with a palpable melancholy. This sense of sadness is further echoed in the title Teen Tears, which thoughtfully evokes images of wearied souls pining for their lost youth while also referencing the iconic New Romantics tracks 'Tears Are Not Enough' (1982) by ABC and 'Because You're Young' (1980) by David Bowie. Romeo rounds-off the painting on a surprisingly tender note with the inclusion of the lamb, who symbolises not only the sacrifices one must make to live a life of greatness, but also the forgiveness it takes to make peace with what you have left behind.



Johnny Romeo, *Young Tame*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas 101cm x 101cm (40" x 40")

# YOUNG TAME

Life is tough for the young royal caught between youthful rebellion and royal distinction. Johnny Romeo explores this dichotomy with a hilarious eye for the absurd in *Young Tame*. Drawing inspiration from the animal imagery of David Bowie's song 'Teenage Wildlife', taken from his New Romantic-tinged album 'Scary Monsters' (1980), the painting portrays a young earl clasping a baby piglet, his face distended with a Cubist snout as the royal and the creature morph into one. A paragon of good fortune, the pig perfectly encapsulates the earl's love of affluence and largesse. There is an air of reticence in the young figure's stony expression, as he tries to suppress the inner wild child of his youth and embrace the responsibilities of being a distinguished noble. Despite his resistance, however, the earl cannot fully deny his more animalistic tendencies, a point comedically captured in the altering of the word assemblage 'gnarly' into 'earl'. Read within the context of the painting, the title *Young Tame* captures the experience of being caught between worlds, and in the words of Adam Ant, wanting to break free from 'centuries of taming' to become 'a wild nobility'.

# 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 in 2019 and 2020 with acclaimed and sell-out exhibitions in Sydney, Perth, Auckland, Canberra, the Gold Coast and most notably the Australian Consulate-General in New York. 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 a number of 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, Florida and New Orleans, 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.





NEW

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