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the Legacy of Leigh Bowery

King of Queer

by: bamber delver



**”Thank you for creating this
about Leigh.”**

Bronwyn Bowery-Ireland

“Idon’t **W**anna be
Remembered as
Someone with **A**ids,
but as **S**omeone
with **I**deas.”





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An Introduction to Leigh Bowery, the ShapeShifter

Leigh Bowery was an Australian-born artist, performer, and fashion designer, who made a name for himself in London's club scene in the 1980s and early 1990s. Born in 1961 in Sunshine, Australia, Bowery moved to London in 1980 to pursue a career in fashion. He quickly became a fixture in the city's nightlife, known for his outrageous outfits, and flamboyant persona. Bowery's art was characterized by his willingness to experiment with different forms of expression, including painting, sculpture, and performance. His fashion designs, in particular, were groundbreaking, challenging traditional gender norms and pushing the boundaries of what was considered acceptable in terms of clothing and appearance.

Bowery's ideas about fashion were informed by his own identity as a queer man, and he often incorporated elements of both male and female clothing into his designs. He embraced the term "genderqueer" long before it became part of the mainstream lexicon, using fashion as a tool to challenge the rigid categories of gender and sexuality.

During his time in London, Bowery became a regular at clubs like Taboo and Kinky Gerlinky, where he would often perform in elaborate costumes and makeup. He was a beloved figure in the city's club scene, and his influence extended beyond the fashion and art worlds.

In 1993, Bowery traveled to the United States to appear on the Joan Rivers Show and to collaborate with the New York Club Kids, a group of performers and artists who shared his love of over-the-top fashion and performance art. Tragically, Bowery died of AIDS-related complications in 1994, at the age of just 33. Despite his short life, his influence on the worlds of art, fashion, and performance was profound, and his legacy lives on to this day. Many of today's most innovative designers, including Vivienne Westwood, Boy George, Walter van Beirendonck, Jean Paul Gautier, and Alexander McQueen, cite Bowery as a key influence on their work. Pop star Lady Gaga has also cited Bowery as a source of inspiration, and his legacy continues to be celebrated by queer artists and performers on social media platforms like Instagram. In many ways, Bowery was ahead of his time, using his art and fashion to challenge societal norms and to create space for queer expression in a culture that was often hostile to it. His work continues to inspire new generations of artists and performers, and his influence can be felt in everything from music videos to high fashion runways. In the end, Leigh Bowery's life and work serve as a testament to the power of creativity and self-expression, and to the enduring legacy of queer art and culture.

Timeline 1961-1994

March 26, 1961 - Leigh Bowery is born in Sunshine, Melbourne, Australia.

Bowery grows up in a working-class family. His childhood in Australia was marked by adversity and challenges that would shape the rest of his life. In her book writer and friend Sue Tilley provides insight into Bowery's early years, describing a childhood characterized by difficult family dynamics and a sense of isolation. Bowery showed an early talent for creativity and self-expression. Tilley notes that he was fascinated by the glamour and spectacle of Hollywood movies and would often dress up in costumes and perform for his family.

Bowery's childhood was also marked by a sense of otherness and isolation. As a child, he struggled with his weight and was frequently bullied by his peers. Tilley writes that Bowery often felt like an outsider and would seek solace in his imagination and creative pursuits. Leigh spent much of his youth devouring the British fashion magazines that inspired him to move to London

In the early 1980s, Bowery moves to London to pursue his artistic career, together with friends Ann Holt and Peter Koutsoumbas.

In London, Bowery becomes a prominent figure in the emerging club scene and nightlife culture. Bowery is known for his provocative and flamboyant costumes, makeup, and performances, which challenge gender norms and societal conventions.

In 1985, Bowery opens nightclub, Taboo, which began as an underground party in London's Leicester Square, which becomes a hub for the city's avant-garde and creative scene. He becomes its main ambassador. Taboo is the place for the extreme; extreme fashion, gender and personalities. Every person attending Taboo in an elaborate and over the top look; as Bowery's dress code is: "Dress as though your life depends on it, or don't bother." However the party never really starts until Bowery arrived in a never seen before look. Unfortunately, Taboo is closed after a year from allegations of drug soliciting, but its legacy is still alive (Bowery's friend, Boy George, wrote Broadway musical Taboo, based on the club in 2004).

1988 Leigh designs costumes for the Michael Clark Dance Company. When that company performs at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1987, Bowery wins a Bessie Award for his work on No Fire Escape in Hell.

1988-1992. Bowery becomes a muse for painter Lucian Freud and poses regularly for Freud over a four year period. Freud's first painting of him are Leigh Bowery (Seated) 1990 (private collection). To accommodate and emphasize Bowery's enormous scale, it is one of the largest paintings Freud has ever made (2437 x 1830mm). In an even larger painting of Bowery, Leigh Under the Skylight 1994 (2972 x 1207mm). Freud says of Bowery: "I found him perfectly." Bowery says of Freud: "I love the psychological aspect of his work – in fact I sometimes felt as if I had been undergoing psychoanalysis with him ... His work is full of tension. Like me he is interested in the underbelly of things." Paintings are to be seen in The Tate Gallery.

1988 Bowery performs at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London, where he creates a controversial installation that features his body being painted and transformed over the course of several days.

In the early 1990s, Bowery's work gains international recognition, and he begins to exhibit his art in galleries and museums around the world. As a fashion designer, Bowery has several shows exhibiting his collections in London, New York and Tokyo.

1993 pop/theatre group Minty is formed by Leigh Bowery and Richard Torry. In the early 1990s Bowery has been involved in two musical outfits, The Quality Street Wrappers and Raw Sewage (both essentially the same band), but Minty is a much more serious attempt to be taken seriously. Soon the duo becomes a group, including amongst others Matthew Glamorre and Nicola Bowery. Minty quickly gains notoriety for their abrasive theatrical performances, the highlight of which is when Leigh "giving birth" to Nicola on stage - she is concealed upside-down underneath his costume and emerges when Leigh goes "into labor". Such is their notoriety a Minty club residency in Soho is deemed indecent by Westminster Council and shuts down.

In this initial incarnation, Minty records one single, Useless Man (a chart hit in the Netherlands), before Leigh's death in 1994. Minty forms a collective in tribute to

Leigh Bowery, known as The Offset. Members includes Kinky Roland, Aiden Shaw (pornographic film star), Donald Urquart (poet), Sexton Ming (transvestite recording artist) and Add N To X.

Although Bowery was known to be and always described himself as gay, he married his long-time female companion Nicola Bateman on 13 May 1994 in Tower Hamlets, London, in "a personal art performance".

1994 Bowery creates his final performance piece, "Exquisite Pain," which involves his body being pierced with needles and hooks while he is suspended from the ceiling.

1994 Bowery is diagnosed with AIDS, and his health begins to decline rapidly. Bowery dies on December 31, 1994, in London, at the age of 33. He is buried together with his mother Evelyn Joyce Bowery, Macedon Cemetery, Victoria, Australia. His advice what to be told after his death was: "Tell Them I've Gone to Papua New Guinea."



Image: Trevor Messersmith

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See for yourself

Content

- 12 **An introduction to the shapeshifter**
- 17 **See for yourself: content**
- 19 **"Growing up with Leigh just felt normal." Foreword by Bronwyn Bowery**
- 22 **"Leigh was immediately a kindred spirit.". Memories of friend Ann Holt**
- 30 **The day I met Leigh Bowery**, living in the eighties/nineties. Author
Bamber Delver
- 50 **The original interview - London summer 1988.** "Of course my ideas will
never get a follow-up in fashion."
- 70 **International artists pay their tributes to Leigh Bowery**
- 72 **Luis Peralta** – U.S.A., New York. "So, this is how Leigh felt!"
- 82 **Paola Idrontino** – Spain, Barcelona. "Leigh brought an extraordinary
moment."
- 92 **Luke Slyka** - U.K., London. "Leigh Bowery was the predecessor. The first."
- 102 **Diederik Verbakel** - The Netherlands, Raalte. "Leigh's absence of shame!"
- 112 **Brendan de la Hay** – Australia, Sidney. "Leigh was living proof to lead an
outrageous life."
- 122 **Le Pustra** – Germany, Berlin. "Leigh Bowery is called an performance artist
but I prefer the term living work of art."
- 132 **Kat Joplin** – Japan, Tokyo. "Leigh Bowery's originality deviated him from
the others of his time."
- 144 **Ryan Burke** – U.S.A., New York. "Without social media, Leigh was rare and
seen by few in comparison to performers these days."
- 156 **San Kim** – South Korea. "Leigh's work led me and gave us artists huge
courage."
- 170 **Venus Envy** – U.S.A., Orlando. "Inspiration comes from all over, while the
original sources are often unknown."
- 184 **Jacob Smith:** "I would have loved to spend even a second in Taboo!"
- 188 **The Huxleys** – Sidney, Australia: "Leigh unlocked many doors."
- 198 **Leigh never left the building:** his legacy. **Timeline.**
- 204 **The Bowery Theatre**
- 206 **Bowerytopia**
- 208 Must Read. Must see. Must Listen. About the author.



“Growing up with Leigh just felt normal.”

Foreword by Bronwyn Bowery, Leigh’s sister

“Growing up with Leigh just felt normal, as it is not until later in life on reflection that you start to realize that perhaps it wasn’t quite the norm that most families experience. But you could also say that that is the definition of family. Leigh was a combination of shy and flamboyant, energetic, and reflective, insightful, and controlling, shocking and hilarious. At home Leigh continuously pushed the boundaries as our family life was a strange contradiction of messages achieve greatly but conform massively. Leigh and I had to navigate each day through these messages. As a result, we created our own inner sanctum, where we could be who we needed to be with each other.

It was around midday on a Sunday. Our parents were both at church and Leigh had turned World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) on tv. He was fascinated by the performance and after watching it for a while and laughing, he told me it was all real. He said that the guys were really punching and kicking each other and throwing each other around and their moans came as a result of the pain of the wrestling. He then jumped up from his comfortable, reclined position and grabbed me and began to throw me to the floor, thumping his foot over and over moaning and groaning. He was bringing WWE into our living room, and I had suddenly become his opponent without even realizing it. I should have known better as this was quite a common occurrence. I was hoping that his close thumps and groans didn’t actually make contact, but one was never too sure. Then he grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder. As he did so we accidentally knocked my mother’s chandelier that swung violently from the ceiling and a small piece of crystal fell to the ground.

We stopped dead in our tracks, freaking out, screaming at each other, and then slowly designing a plan together. We hide the broken piece as we were pretty sure our mum wouldn’t notice the breakage. We both agreed that it would be a few months before she climbed up on a stool to clean the chandelier again and so when she did, we would just look surprised when she announced it was broken. We returned to our moaning and thumping and Leigh throwing me around, omitting screams of terror and laughter.

My parent’s car suddenly appeared in our driveway. As fast as lightning we turned off the tv, swung around to the piano, Leigh taking a seat on the stool, me standing beside him and we quickly agreed to sing ‘There’s a Place for us’ from Westside Story. Leigh ran his hands so freely and flamboyantly across the keyboard and we were in full swing when the front door opened and our parents entered, wearing their Salvation Army uniforms. They smiled at us in the way proud parents do. Leigh turned away from our parents and looked at me and winked.”





