



Bowery, Leigh (1961-1994)

by Shaun Cole

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Leigh Bowery.
Image is a detail from a promotional photograph for the documentary *The Legend of Leigh Bowery*.

Club host, fashion designer, face about town, and artists' muse, Leigh Bowery transformed his body into a centerpiece of his performance art.

Bowery was born on March 26, 1961 in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine. In October 1980, he moved to London, drawn to the city by the articles he read about London's punk scene and club nightlife. He quickly established a name for himself on the London club scene and was soon himself frequently featured in the "style" press that he had read in Sunshine.

In 1983, after returning from New York where he was involved in a series of fashion shows that promoted British fashion design, he began to concentrate on making himself into the product of his own designs, using the nightclub as his stage.

In 1985 Bowery was invited by club entrepreneur Tony Gordon to host a new club night, Taboo. The club became notorious for its outrageousness, and Bowery infamous as the most outrageous fixture on the London nightclub scene.

Bowery had always been out about his sexuality. He was a constant face on London's gay club scene, using his increasingly bizarre and distorted looks to challenge the conformity of dress and body image that was becoming increasingly prevalent among gay men.

Attracted to Bowery's non-conformist appearance, the *enfant terrible* of the dance world, gay British dancer and choreographer Michael Clark invited Bowery to design costumes for one of his ballets in 1984. This collaboration was the beginning of a long and productive relationship in which Bowery became not only costume designer but also performer in many of Clark's pieces.

By 1988 Bowery had come to think of his performances as a form of art as much as a form of entertainment. The result was a show at the d'Offay gallery in London and a subsequent series of performances in which Bowery "disfigured" and revealed his body.

Leigh Bowery constantly reinvented himself by distorting his body shape and changing the proportions of his body. While many people use their clothes to hide physical defects or blemishes, Bowery embellished his, transforming them into the centerpiece of his art. Bowery used his "looks" to become something other than himself.

Bowery's performances became increasingly extreme as they played with notions of sexuality and aspects of sadism and masochism. In 1993 he played the role of "Madame Garbo" in Copi (Raul Damonte)'s 1971 play *The Homosexual (or the Difficulty of Sexpressing Oneself)*.

In 1988, the artist Lucien Freud saw and was impressed by Bowery's performances at the d'Offay Gallery. In 1990, Bowery began to model for Freud.

Freud painted Bowery, whom he believed to be "perfectly beautiful," completely naked. The paintings celebrated Bowery's massive physical frame. Posing nude for Freud provided Bowery an opportunity to examine what he had made of himself in his distortions and alterations of his body, as well as to assess how his body actually looked without artificial distortions.

In 1988, Bowery discovered that he was HIV-positive, a fact he kept secret for a number of years from everyone except one friend. Although Bowery had never hidden his homosexuality and had frequently regaled his friends with tales of his sexual encounters, in May 1994, just six months before his death, he married his long time friend, lover, and collaborator Nicola Bateman.

Bowery died of AIDS-related meningitis in November 1994.

Bowery's life is the subject of a recent musical, *Taboo*, with a score by Boy George (George O'Dowd).

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About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).