# The lasting legacy of Leigh Bowery at Tate Modern



[Photo: Fergus Greer/Tate Modern]

In October 1980, a pivotal figure in art and culture, Leigh Bowery, arrived in London from the Australian suburb of Sunshine, Melbourne, with little more than a portable sewing machine and a suitcase. His journey marked the onset of a creative evolution that would ultimately leave a lasting impact on the spheres of fashion, music, and performance art. The world would come to know him as an icon of outrageous self-expression, ultimately passing away in 1994 at the age of 33.

Bowery's early attempts at self-reinvention were documented through resolutions he penned on New Year’s Eve—alluding to his ambitions to lose weight, learn extensively, and establish himself in art or literature. However, it was his spectacularly unique approach to fashion and persona that would define his career. "Before he called himself an artist, he already was one," remarked his friend, filmmaker John Maybury, emphasising Bowery's artistic drive from the outset.

Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Bowery became a staple figure in London's nightlife, transforming himself into an embodiment of extravagant style. He collaborated with high-profile artists, including Lucian Freud, and worked as an art director for various music videos, like those of Massive Attack. His performances could be audacious, often featuring extravagant costumes created in collaboration with corset maker Mr Pearl, and were characterised by their unabashed flamboyance.

Bowery's fame remained largely cultish during his lifetime, rooted in a subversive aesthetic that shocked audiences. Public engagements on television often left viewers stunned. "He was brave. He had no fear," said DJ Fat Tony, reflecting on Bowery's confrontational style and refusal to conform. His appearances in London's gay clubs became his canvas, shaping a legacy that would endure through subsequent generations of pop culture—evident today in influences seen in shows like RuPaul's Drag Race and the theatrical styles of modern artists such as Lady Gaga.

A posthumous exhibition at Tate Modern, titled Leigh Bowery!, set to run from 27 February to 31 August, aims to celebrate his vast contributions to art and culture. Curator Fiontán Moran stated, "Just having Leigh Bowery’s work in Tate Modern rather than a fashion or design museum is a way of reimagining him.” This exhibition will delve into Bowery's self-reinvention, exploring themes of identity and performance art that remain pivotal to contemporary discussions of gender and expression.

A testament to the influence of his upbringing lay in the strict environment of his childhood in Australia. As noted by his sister, Bronwyn, “Leigh chose to react” against the expectations of conformity and respectability imposed by his conservative family. His bold acts of defiance began early, eventually leading him to discover his sexuality and, from there, enveloping himself in London’s vibrant yet volatile counterculture.

Bowery's life was marked by both celebration and tragedy, as he navigated the complexities of fame within a community that would soon be ravaged by the AIDS epidemic. With the passing of several friends and collaborators due to drug overdoses, including his best friend Trojan, the cocktail of excess and emotional turmoil shaped an era that was both exhilarating and harrowing. In the face of this darkness, Bowery maintained his creativity, perhaps as an act of defiance towards his circumstances.

His marriage to Nicola Bateman in 1994 was described as a "little private art performance," but it was also a significant emotional bond that highlighted the deep connections he formed with those in his life. It marked a fleeting yet profound partnership before his health declined, leading to his secret battle with AIDS that he had kept hidden from many.

During his life, Bowery's artistic endeavours were interlaced with performance and daily existence, as seen in his interactions with contemporaries and the public. Stories from friends, such as one shared by Sue Tilley, illustrated his penchant for creating moments of public absurdity and chaos, often blurring the lines between art and everyday life.

As Bowery's life and influence are revisited with the upcoming Tate Modern exhibition, his multifaceted legacy is positioned not only within the artistic tradition but also within the broader evolution of identity politics and cultural expression in the LGBTQ+ community. The complexities of his character, encapsulated through various creative roles, offer a lens through which to view the transformative power of personal expression in defiance of societal norms.

The exhibition promises to be both a celebration and a profound reconsideration of Bowery's place as an influential artist and cultural phenomenon, reminding us of the indelible mark he left on modern art and popular culture.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.biography.com/history-culture/a68258059/leigh-bowery> - This URL supports Leigh Bowery's biography, including his early life, career as a fashion designer and club promoter, and his impact on London's nightlife.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leigh_Bowery> - This Wikipedia page provides detailed information about Leigh Bowery's life, career, and influence on art and culture.
* <https://www.portrait.gov.au/people/leigh-bowery-1961> - This National Portrait Gallery page offers insights into Bowery's early life and career as a designer and performer in London.
* <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/leigh-bowery> - This Tate Modern exhibition page highlights Leigh Bowery's contributions to art and culture, as celebrated in the upcoming exhibition.
* <https://www.rmit.edu.au/study-with-us/creative-arts> - Although not directly about Leigh Bowery, this RMIT page mentions the institution where Bowery briefly studied fashion design.
* <https://www.lucianfreud.com/> - This is the official website of Lucian Freud, with whom Leigh Bowery collaborated as a model.
* <https://www.massiveattack.co.uk/> - This is the official website of Massive Attack, a band for which Bowery worked as an art director on music videos.
* <https://www.mrpearl.co.uk/> - This is the official website of Mr Pearl, a corset maker who collaborated with Leigh Bowery on costumes.