

‘Leigh Bowery was his own private party’

Club kid, performance artist, muse... As a new retrospective looks at the life of a true one-off, **Caryn Franklin** recalls an afternoon tea to remember

Back in the 1980s *The Clothes Show*, the BBC’s primetime fashion programme, drew a large audience, peaking with weekly viewers of 13 million every Sunday evening. I was a co-presenter, as well as co-editor of the postpunk style bible *i-D* magazine. I saw it as my role to recruit some counter-cultural colour and charisma to the trad TV format, so I regularly reached out to a variety of creatives. Leigh Bowery was one such memorable guest.

A fashion magazine obsessive turned club promoter, he had arrived in London from the suburbs of Melbourne, where he’d found it impossible to fit in. Leigh was the pinnacle of everything that was exciting in creative culture at that time. And he was a perfect fit for *The Clothes Show*, which, despite its primetime slot, had a receptivity to individuality making it an open door to people like Leigh.

We had been friends of the clubland variety before the two of us were filmed sitting down for afternoon tea in the Harrods tea room in the name of Sunday night telly back in 1986. I can still recall the sight of him as he approached our table, treating onlookers who stared, mouths wide open, to an impromptu catwalk show of sorts. Such was his effect that, from a series that spanned 12 years, this is unsurprisingly one of the few surviving snippets online.

A big man — made even more enormous by the pair of chunky heels he was rarely seen without — Leigh sported a look that was typical for him at the time: a brocade bodysuit complete with balaclava-style face mask, theatrical eye make-up, gloves and thick tights over his ample legs.

Thinking back on the moment now, I remember the camera crew — mostly men, who had probably been working on a football game the weekend before — and their reaction to Bowery’s appearance on a show that covered everything from high fashion in Milan to crocheting in a back garden in Wigan. Leigh’s art mattered to him greatly but he never seemed to be confrontational with it. A fan of the double take, he gleaned joy from turning heads and raising eyebrows.

Look up our meeting on YouTube now and you’ll see that this floral-ensconced 6ft 3in superforce swaggering through the gilded halls of a bourgeois department store is as delightfully shocking in 2025 as it was all those years ago. Certainly it stands as proof of his long-term appeal and the reason Tate Modern is honouring his work with an exhibition simply entitled *Leigh Bowery*!, opening on February 27.

The retrospective tracks the short but colourful life of the artist turned fashion designer turned TV personality turned model (the list goes on). As well as examining his impact on the artists that came after him — it’s hard to believe the shock tactics utilised by the likes of Alexander McQueen and Lady Gaga cannot be traced back to Bowery — the show celebrates an artist who fearlessly forged his own path.

“I couldn’t do this anywhere else but in London,” he said, during our meeting in Harrods, his lavish body on a gilt chair while I poured Earl Grey.



Left Leigh Bowery Session III, Look 14, by Fergus Greer. **Below** A Polaroid of Bowery; a still from the film *What’s Your Reaction to the Show?*; Leigh Bowery Session IV, Look 30, by Fergus Greer



Above Bowery at the Limelight in the 1980s. **Right** On the catwalk in his own designs, 1986. **Opposite** Leigh Bowery Session I, Look 2, by Fergus Greer



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Clockwise from top left Leigh Bowery by Lucian Freud, 1991; at a party for Belinda Carlisle in 1988; having tea at Harrods with Caryn Franklin for The Clothes Show, 1986; with Boy George backstage at the Blitz fashion show, 1986; Bowery (centre with glasses) at a party in Paris, in the early 1990s



In that moment he was not referring to the garments he wore or the spectacle he presented. Instead he was referencing his relationship with his body and his preoccupation with unapologetic transformation. He was his own private party, but, more than that, he was a beacon of authenticity — and everyone was invited along for the ride.

For those of us dancing in the same circles as Leigh at the time, fashion of the nonconformist kind had become the norm. Appearance was our analogue social networking. In a silent performance of the self, our clothes did our speaking for us and nowhere more so than at Taboo, the weekly club night that was Leigh's pride and joy.

First held in 1985 at Maximus, in Leicester Square, Taboo was a nocturnal commune with a familiar congregation of nascent creatives, fluid and queer humans and oddball dressers. The DJs were Mark Lawrence and Jeffrey Hinton, while regular guests included Boy George, Judy Blame and the fashion designer John Galiano.

It was at Taboo that Leigh really shone. It was his space and everyone there fed off his energy. Despite the heat of the sweaty basement and the fact that the whole night was spent on the dancefloor, my memory of Leigh is that he was pristine throughout with make-up perfectly in place. It was remarkable to behold. Sometimes he'd be in a frock coat with thick leggings, other times he'd wear a corset.

He made clothes not just for himself but also established the label Spend Spend Spend with Rachel Auburn, catering to the club scene. These clothes were both

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striking and kitsch, but Leigh, seeking an even more flamboyant and spontaneous outlet for both costume and performance, was soon drawn to the international stage.

His trajectory would outgrow pedestrian club promotion. His collaboration with the Michael Clark Company would last almost a decade. Clark, a gifted avant-garde dance artist and choreographer, combined precision ballet with irreverence and tawdry glamour. Leigh starred in various get-ups, cavorting with purposeful impropriety.

There followed numerous and wide-ranging public appearances — a one-man installation at a London gallery, cutting-edge or shocking performances (depending on your position on enemas), a pop group called Minty and even commercials for brands such as Pepe Jeans.

Every transformation was a provocative manifestation of this man's compulsion to self-fashion. Yet, in an unorthodox twist, and shortly before his untimely death from HIV-related illness in 1994, some of the most famous depictions we have of Leigh are by the artist Lucian Freud, which exhibit his 6ft 3in, 17st physique completely naked.

Freud first met his muse at Taboo in 1988 and became fascinated with the way he used his physical appearance. "The way he edits his body is amazingly aware and amazingly abandoned," the painter said. How right he was — Leigh was a true one-off. ■

Leigh Bowery! is at Tate Modern, London, Feb 27-Aug 31, tate.org.uk