A new jaw-dropping outfit every week ... Bowery; left, in one of Lucian Freud's paintings

Sex, sin and sausages

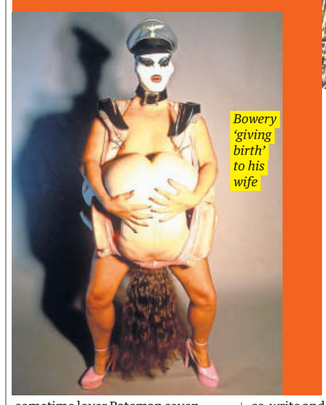
Leigh Bowery was a 1980s nightclub legend whose shocking shows thrilled – and appalled. Two decades after his death, why is his influence still so pervasive? **Lauren Cochrane** *talks to those who knew him best*

He was painted naked and sprawling by Lucian Freud. He "gave birth" to his own wife on stage, using sausages as an umbilical cord. And he was the star turn in Taboo, perhaps the most debauched nightclub Britain has ever seen, hosting the revelry with his face painted blue, his nose and nipples pierced and his outfit as intimidatingly outlandish as possible. But there was much more to Leigh Bowery than sheer outrageousness – and his range, daring and influence are being appreciated by a new generation.

Perhaps the most prominent sign of this reappraisal comes from Australian choreographer Andy Howitt, who is bringing Sunshine Boy, a new show about the nightlife legend, to the Edinburgh fringe this summer. "I was at the National Gallery in Melbourne and there was a big sculpture that said, 'By Leigh Bowery from Sunshine'," he says. "I was like, 'That can't be the Leigh Bowery from the 80s dance scene.' It sparked me on a journey to find out about the man."

Bowery did indeed hail from Sunshine, a suburb of Melbourne with around 10,000 inhabitants. Howitt visited it and spoke to his family, as well as to those in London who had known him. "You have to remember his backstory," says Howitt. "He only lived in London for 14 years. He sold up shop at 19 or 20 and went straight there and became the icon." Howitt fed his findings into Sunshine Boy, telling the story of Bowery's life through dance, spoken word passages, music – and those showstopping costumes. The performance ranges from his childhood to the Taboo years and then to his death from Aids in 1994 at the age of 33.

As Sunshine Boy suggests, Bowery remains a larger-than-life persona in underground culture, even 24 years after his death. What made him so different from the other 80s club kids? Partly his looks, which are still strikingly original. As the impresario of Taboo, he wore a different, jaw-dropping outfit every week. There was the shiny PVC mask and matching catsuit, with one larger leg as if in plaster. There was the polka dot suit worn with polka dot face. There were the lightbulbs he'd wear on either side of his face, the coloured drips that would cover his bald head, the merkin he'd place over his genitals. And then there was his wife, Nicola Bateman, worn naked and strapped upside-down to his chest. (Although Bowery described himself as gay, he married his longtime companion and sometime lover Bateman seven months before his death.)



Bowery 'giving birth' to his wife

But Bowery's creativity was not confined to clubs. He worked with the dancer and choreographer Michael Clark, creating costumes and co-starring in his performances. He appeared in the windows of the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, wearing a different outfit each day of the week. He fronted a band, Minty, and – perhaps most famously – modelled nude several times for Freud. On the back of the Freud connection, Bowery hit the mainstream from various directions. He appeared in a Pepe Jeans commercial and guested on The Clothes Show on BBC One, taking tea in Harrods dressed in a succession of astonishing get-ups to the soundtrack of his hero, the drag star Divine.

Bowery also engaged in more conventional creative work. He was an art director on the 1991 video for Massive Attack's Unfinished Sympathy, a stylist for Rifat Özbek, a costume designer for Culture Club (Boy George would co-write and star in a successful musical about Bowery). His career resists categorisation. Asked what he most deplored in others by the Guardian in 1993, Bowery replied: "The urge to categorise: if you label me, you negate me." Perhaps Boy George came up with the most accurate description when he described Bowery as "modern art on legs". He turned himself, his body and his image into an art object, one that walked among us as well as appeared on stages and in gallery windows.

"People are always telling me about the time they saw him," says Sue Tilley, Bowery's friend and the author of Leigh Bowery: The Life and Times of an Icon. "It was probably only once, but he made such an impact they have never forgotten it." DJ Princess Julia met Bowery in the early 80s, both part of a crowd that included artist Cerith Wyn Evans, Boy George, Clark, and Bowery's friend and frequent co-star Trojan. Julia says Bowery, who started off working at Burger King to make ends meet, quickly became a fixture on the scene: "He was very influential because he was very inventive. He was always coming up with ideas."

His looks, she says, were often inspired by what was happening in wider society. "The dot face, for example, was a comment on Kaposi's sarcoma" – the cancer which caused the facial lesions that struck many Aids sufferers in the 80s. "His work was about things like body image or illnesses – and those things haven't gone away. It confronts you and frightens you and makes you think. It's very disruptive, to use a word of the moment."

There is a clear line from Bowery to the performers and punters exploring extreme looks today. Glyn Fussell is the founder of Sink the Pink, a playground for the artistic side of drag culture. He says that while the twentysomethings who come to the London club probably haven't heard of Bowery, his influence is present. "You see it in fashion, you see it in the underground, you see it in mainstream culture, in RuPaul's Drag Race."

His band Minty's residency was cut short after Bowery 'vomited' vegetable soup into his wife's mouth on stage

It is in fashion that Bowery's influence is most explicit. Rick Owens' "human backpack" collection in 2015 was a tribute to Bowery carrying Bateman like a papoose. Menswear designer Charles Jeffrey runs a club called Loverboy that stages shows verging on performance art, much like Bowery's. And, with his floral gowns and matching face masks, Richard Quinn, the young London designer who had the Queen in attendance at his February show, has clearly been inspired by Bowery.

For Gareth Pugh, Bowery is a consistent reference. The designer first learned about him in Fergus Greer's 2002 book Leigh Bowery Looks: "If you go into any suburban art college you'll always find that book in the fashion section." Bowery is inspirational, he believes, because he "created his own language. That's the golden fleece for any fashion designer: to find something they can be known for 30 years down the line – and for it to be so iconic."

Of course, some elements of Bowery's work haven't aged so well, driven by his relentless desire to shock. One of his most infamous looks was called "Pakis from Outer Space", inspired by the Asian communities near where Bowery lived in the East End and involving blue faces, bindis and nose rings. He made blouses out of material bearing swastikas, used rags stolen from Jewish artist Freud's studio to make an image of Hitler and appeared, naked, in makeup similar to blackface, for a Minty publicity photo.

This preoccupation with the extreme offended plenty of people. Clark stopped working with Bowery when he insisted on wearing a costume with "a cunt" written on it. Minty saw their residency at the Soho club Freedom cut short because of a show that involved Bowery "vomiting" vegetable soup into Bateman's mouth.

Perhaps Bowery's work was radical satire, all part of a life lived without taboos. Shocking people – and perhaps waking them up – was the ultimate aim. Speaking about a show at an Aids benefit, in which he had an enema on stage that sprayed the front row, he said: "I was quite pleased with the hostile reaction. If I have to ask, 'Is this idea too sick?' I know I am on the right track."

"The idea," says Pugh, "was to wilfully do things that get a rise out of people. He had this idea of something that is bereft of control, for good or for bad."

"I don't think he was setting out with a racist heart," says Fussell. "He was challenging the status quo. It was about challenging what he was seeing on the streets and making it hyper-realised."

Howitt's 40-minute show will cover Bowery's triumphs, disasters and premature death. Bowery found out he was HIV positive in 1988 and died six years later, not long before combination therapies greatly prolonged the lives of those with the disease. "A lot of people say that if he had survived another month, he would have been OK," says Howitt.

Tilley often finds herself wondering what Bowery might have achieved had he lived longer. "He had a lot of irons in the fire, but he died before anything properly happened," she says. Bowery may, she muses, have gone "down the path of reality television". After all, she concludes: "He would have been brilliant on Big Brother."

Sunshine Boy is at Dance Base, Edinburgh, 21-26 August.

'People never forgot him' ... Bowery at home in 1984

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Design a penthouse – then feed the pigs

Why is this architecture firm so successful? Maybe it's because chicks, lambs and pigs are part of the team. **Oliver Wainwright** *reports*

Off to the pig palace ... the practice's HQ at Oasis Farm Waterloo; below, feeding time

Lambs are bleating, pigs are snuffling and a chicken is wandering about between planters spilling over with tomatoes and courgettes. All this is just a short walk from the teetering towers of Southbank Place, where £10m apartments are rising behind the London Eye. But there's a different type of regeneration going on in this city farm, which sits on a sliver of land in Lambeth, between the tangled tracks of Waterloo station and the slabs of St Thomas' hospital. Today the animals are going about their business while young architects are toiling away in a studio at the other end of the site from a great wooden barn.

"The name Lambeth originally means 'landing place for lambs,'" says architect Fergus Feilden. "So it's sort of fitting that we've brought them back here." Many architects have a yearning for the primitive hut, but few can boast pigs outside the window of their office. "It does lead to some awkward phone calls," Feilden adds. "Clients ask what the grunting noise is in the background."

His practice Feilden Fowles, which he founded in 2009 with Edmund Fowles, is one of London's rising stars with a portfolio that spans schools, Oxbridge colleges and a new visitors' centre for the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, as well as a factory for Charlie Bigham's ready meals – recently voted Riba South West building of the year. That's quite a crop to emerge from a farmyard, yet the unlikely setting of their HQ has helped: it would be hard for any prospective client to visit the studio and not be seduced by this pastoral utopia.

The architects began working pro bono on plans for London's most central urban farm in 2013, when Feilden's brother was planning an outpost for his charity, Jamie's Farm, which takes disadvantaged city kids on residential trips to farms in the countryside. Teaming up with the charity Oasis they secured the plot on a "meanwhile lease" from Guy's and St Thomas' charity. The architects became so enveloped in the project they decided to move their office to the half-acre site.

The result is a radical realisation of "mixed use", a slippery term that all too often means a Tesco Metro with flats on top. But here it means a studio of well-dressed young designers just a plywood wall away from a dungheap, with a chance to do some weeding and check on the chicks during coffee breaks. Client meetings are sometimes disrupted by armies of children in hi-vis, popping over from the local primary school.

Oasis Farm Waterloo is a world away from the usual city farm scenes full of shipping containers and gazebos. A low wall of rusty red sheeting runs along the facade of the firm's office, conceived as a mixture of artist's studio and farm shed, with tilted north-lights and a mono-pitched roof. Next door stands the "pig palace" and chicken coop, along with raised accessible flowerbeds, an outdoor kitchen and a composting toilet, all arranged around a path that culminates in the barn.

Drawing on the tradition of stately tithe barns, it is a simple wooden-framed structure with an imposing presence. Great zinc doors slide open to reveal a church-like interior, with a central nave marked by rows of columns and criss-crossing trusses, while the side aisles are strewn with straw bales. In a poetic flourish, a mulberry tree pokes through the floor.

The power of coming across this unlikely oasis in one of London's most overheated enclaves of riverside property speculation is made all the more poignant by its imminent destruction. The charities signed a five-year lease in 2014, which means it expires in January next year. Before the farm came along, this land had been a dumping ground. It has since become a thriving community asset. With the temporary lifespan always in mind, all of the structures have been designed with bolted joints, allowing them to be relocated, but much of the cost has been in its construction – and it won't be easy to find a similar site for free within earshot of Big Ben.

Guy's and St Thomas' charity will likely sell the site for development to generate much-needed income for the hospital. But, while there are no concrete plans, it would be a tragedy if the farm was razed and the site became a fenced-off dump for years, waiting for the developers to arrive.

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