

The Great Unknown Melburnian

A tribute to the prodigious Leigh Bowery

By Michael Winkler

Sixty kilometres from Melbourne there is a quiet cemetery guarded by tall eucalypts. In a far corner is a big rock-rimmed grave, marked with a quote from Sophocles and a gracious sandstone sculpture called 'Togetherness'.

The serenity is all-pervasive – and, quite appropriately, completely anomalous for the inhumation of one of the most outrageous citizens Melbourne has ever produced. Appropriate, because Leigh Bowery spent his career confounding expectations and deliberately inverting norms. And appropriate, too, because the anonymity of this bucolic resting place matches the level of general recognition of Bowery in this country.

When Bowery died of an AIDS-related illness on New Year's Eve 1994, his passing was marked by a huge obit in *The New York Times*, in all the London broadsheets, and in numerous Japanese newspapers. Since then he has been celebrated in three books (two biographies, and a collection of photographs); in a documentary movie by American filmmaker Charles Atlas; in video form as part of U2's PopMart show; in retrospective exhibitions in New York and London; and now on the West End stage, in Boy George's musical 'Taboo'. The current Lucian Freud retrospective at the Tate Gallery also features two huge nudes of Bowery, and another of Bowery and his partner Nicola.

Not bad for a kid from Sunshine. Bowery spent the first nineteen of his thirty-three years in a triple-fronted brick veneer home near Kororoit Creek. He left Melbourne as an unknown, but over the next fourteen years carved an indelible reputation in the fields of fashion, design, music, dance and performance art.

Theoretically, you might think this level of eminence would make him a hero in the city that produced him – but few Melburnians outside the art and design cognoscenti know much about him.

There are no Bowery pieces in the National Gallery of Victoria. (*NB: This information was provided to me at the time by the Gallery, but it was incorrect. The NGV does indeed own several Bowery pieces.*) The Atlas film has not found local release. A quick check of leading local outlets reveals that none of the Bowery books is available in Borders (South Yarra), Readings (Carlton), or the city stores of Dymocks or Angus and Robertson.

Bowery's sister Bronwyn is ambivalent about the lack of recognition. "There's two sides to it," she says. "On one hand I think that's what he'd prefer, because that's why he left Australia – he didn't think Australia was ever going to be able to deal with what he wanted to do. His family was here, but he had no other strong. But it concerns me and annoys me that I now see people using a lot of his techniques or his design style in what they're doing without giving him credit.

"Leigh always seemed to be many years ahead of what was happening in Australia, and I think that Australia was a bit affronted by what he did. When he went over to London nobody ever followed his career or took any notice of what he was doing. As time goes by I've seen some increase in interest in Leigh here in Australia (but) he's not really understood here."

The failure of Australia in general – and Melbourne in particular – to applaud Bowery does not reflect well on us, according to Anne Marsh, head of the Visual Culture Department at Monash University.

“It’s the tall poppy syndrome,” she says. “It also has to do with his art form, which is still radical. It crosses the boundary between high and popular culture – performance art and high fashion meet a post-punk aesthetic. He was also very out there as a gay man, and Australian culture still has some problems with this, I think.”

“Leigh’s whole life was about testing the norms, and so he wanted to test life – what it was about, test that he could do anything,” Bronwyn says. “He had a whole range of futures. I could see that as he got older he’d become quite an expert in his own area, and he was quite diverse, in that he went into music, he was lecturing in architecture in London, and he had a great knowledge of all forms of art. I think that over time he would have become better and better at understanding and articulating that. He would have become more widely known and respected. He did love to shock people, but I strongly believe there was so much more to it than that, so many more layers which other people have overlooked because of that shock value.”

Dr Peta Tait of LaTrobe University’s Department of Theatre and Dance has also studied the Bowery story. She believes that his “transformative imagery” challenged core ideas of the male body. Beyond that, he also challenged sexual norms – including homosexual norms.

Asked why he hasn’t become an icon in Australia, Dr Tait says, “The gay and lesbian worlds may not have claimed him expressly because he does not quite fit neatly into gay culture. But does he fit into bisexuality? Perhaps there is no obvious cultural place for such a unique individual.

“Bowery’s performances became a defiant celebration of shamelessness. I argue that shamelessness (rather than conventional categories of gender or sexual identity) is a more useful way of approaching transgressive expression since it is active and ongoing, and while it implies queer, it is actually more expansive.” In Bowery’s transgressive displays, “the separations between on- and off-stage ceased to exist. These were ‘body shows’ which transform street or public behaviour into performance.”

So, who was Bowery and what did he do?

Boy George provided the simplest and best definition when he called him ‘modern art on legs’. He was a fashion designer who made costumes for Boy George and The Fall and Michael Clark’s dance company. He was a musician with his own group, Minty. He was a stage performer. Most of all, though, he was a walking talking piece of art. He contorted, carried and clothed himself as an aggressively avant garde art object.

While the London nightclub scene was his usual art gallery, he received mainstream recognition when the prestigious Anthony d’Offay Gallery asked him to dress and preen behind a one-way mirror in a successful performance piece/installation. Bowery was, “a mirror in which others saw their conscious and unconscious thoughts,” according to gallery owner Anthony d’Offay.

Recognition and respectability are not, in this case, compatible concepts. Dr Marsh says that, “The paradigm of the beautiful body was totally undone and remade by Bowery.” Poet Angus Cook noted that Bowery wanted to “give an electric shock to people” because “it was alive-making”. His ‘looks’

were often very uncomfortable to look at. He usually went through some physical pain in wearing his creations; there was a corresponding pain for the viewer.

While his stage props included every bodily fluid (his most famous performance piece saw him ‘give birth’ to his naked partner Nicola, with lavish use of appropriate fluids), the clothes were always the crucial component. “I don’t want the things I make to be merely flamboyant,” he said. “That’s been done before. I want them to have that edge, to be absurd or ridiculous. That’s why I want to make humorous things; as a reaction. Clothes should be either threatening or challenging, and should make people think.”

“The extraordinary thing was that it was never drag – it was really costume,” said William Lieberman, former chairman of 20th Century Art at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. “I mean, he wasn’t trying to imitate or personify anyone else. He was simply creating a new being.”

That act of self-creation was to the fore in Bowery’s latter years. He vaulted the gulf between Sunshine and London purely by re-imagining himself, and fashioning his new image according to one dictate only: his personal vision.

While there has been considerable documentation of the last fourteen years of Bowery’s life, far less examination has been given to the first nineteen.

When Bowery was born in 1961, Sunshine was a working-class suburb full of cheap housing and post-war migrants. It’s not so different today. The suburb named after a combine harvester is part of the metropolitan fringe, but psychologically it is closer to its western neighbour Lara than to the swank and chic inner suburbs.

His parents worked for the Salvation Army, and they lived in a little house opposite Bowery’s maternal grandparents’ home. This was not the sort of solid-but-moribund suburbia that inspired Howard Arkley, but something more peripheral, more overlooked. It was semi-rural in outlook and style, with its grain terminal and quarries and the open paddocks not far away. Perhaps this setting provided a geographical confirmation for his teenage feelings of outsider-dom.

(It should be noted that another confronting performance artist who has expressed himself through the medium of the body, Stelios Arcadiou – better known as Stelarc – also spent formative years in Sunshine. Maybe there’s something in that Kororoit Creek water...)

The young Bowery attended Sunshine Primary School and Sunshine West High School. He was academically able, gifted in music, and decidedly unusual in his interests – which included crochet and tatting. But he stayed out of trouble, was sociable and a keen swimmer. Come Year Nine, he switched to Melbourne High School – a haven, in those days, for the creative and off-beat. While the formidable creativity that marked his later life was already nascent in the boy, it is easy to imagine that Melbourne High helped open his eyes to wider possibilities, and helped make the improbable seem suddenly possible.

“Melbourne High School in those days was a school that supported and tolerated all sorts of deviant behaviour both among students and staff,” says Peter Ross, then Director of Music at the school. “It was a very exciting environment to be in – a lot of quite eccentric people, and a lot of talented and intelligent people – which made it a very productive environment to work in.

“The kids were all very talented, and Leigh was part of that milieu. He always struck me as being different. He had this look, a knowingness about him, some slight twist in his mouth that made him look mildly amused, as if he was happy to join in but at the same time he could see through all the bullshit.

“He sat in class and knitted, but this sort of eccentricity was not regarded as terribly uncommon at that school in those days; personally I think it was Melbourne High’s strength. I didn’t see at that stage any sign of the notoriety that was going to come. The school had a lot of gay boys, and some of them were demonstrating their sexuality a lot more overtly than Leigh was. Of course, he went on to become positively outrageous in his gayness, which I found surprising.”

It begs the question: How does a kid from the Wild West who travels by train to and from school each day and is interested in knitting stop himself getting his head kicked in?

“Leigh was too smart to be bullied,” his sister says. “He would manipulate people. I saw him verbally execute someone at school. He was very good at verbalising and picking up on other people’s weaknesses – he could do it within about 30 seconds of meeting someone. And if he thought there was an imbalance – or if he felt like a bit of sport – he used that.”

Bronwyn Bowery-Ireland speaks softly, but it is obvious that she possesses the quicksilver mental agility of her elder sibling. “I think he was an amazing person,” she says. “A huge pain in the arse, but also an amazing person. I’m always in awe of what he achieved, the way he went about it. I think he was just brilliant, and it’s so important to me he’s recognised for what he did. Often people put aside what he did because it was outrageous, and that makes it easy to devalue it.”

Ask her about Leigh rejecting the religion of their parents and she scoffs: “Did he reject it? Did he ever embrace it! Like in any family, we had a religion; it was my grandmother’s religion and when she died my mother embraced it even more. But by the time we were teenagers Leigh had stopped going. What I think frustrated him – and myself – was that the church set up within our house values we didn’t agree with. It was fairly rigid. A lot of it was about guilt. We found that pretty hard.”

So, what was he like? “He was an Arian so he loved to be the centre of attention. He was always interested in fine art, he’d go to the (National) Gallery (of Victoria) and make sketches and drawings. He was interested in the dynamics of people. He was always intrigued by how people functioned together in their relationships. He liked classic old movies, but he was also interested in whatever was new. If there was something new, Leigh always knew about it. I never knew how he knew, but he always knew.”

As a kid he was obsessed with the beauty of Elizabeth Taylor. He also reportedly loved Busby Berkeley movies, the punk ethos, and Dame Edna Everage. Just as Barry Humphries’ satirical alter ego originally satirised and scarified 1950s Melbourne, so one aspect of Bowery’s work is an apparent perversion and reinvention of 1970s Melbourne.

“I do think that his genesis in Sunshine influenced him,” Dr Marsh says. “It made him tough and ambitious, and also gave him a wealth of looks and styles to appropriate and develop.” In her paper on the performance artist she notes that Bowery’s use of parody and humour gave his style, and image, a critical edge.

His use of clothes pegs, supermarket make-up, shop-wigs and curlers provides an ironic take on the day-to-day wear of the women he saw in his Melbourne youth. However more challenging – and problematic – is his relationship with Australian masculinity. After all, he went some way towards fulfilling the national ideal of maleness: he was tall, he was powerfully built, and he was unafraid. But rather than holding down centre half-back for an AFL side or stepping into the ring at Festival Hall, he exercised his courage by refusing to be bowed by public expectations.

Leigh's dad, Thomas Bowery, is a far more conventional version of the Australian male. He was born in the Mallee and grew up in Bendigo. He played footy, volunteered as a fire-fighter, joined service groups, and has spent the majority of his working life as a welfare officer for the Salvation Army. He has gentle eyes and a grey walrus moustache. When he smiles, his dimples are reminiscent of Leigh's cheek piercings.

He is a religious man whose 'family values' seem to be that he loves and values his family. His son defecated on stage, claimed to have had unprotected sex with one thousand men, and could use his scarring tongue to brutal effect. And yet the warmth that the parent feels for his lost child is palpable.

Ask Thomas if people tried to make him and his late wife Evelyn feel ashamed of Leigh's antics, and he is resolute. "No doubt people did (try to make us ashamed) but I thought, that's your problem. As far as we're concerned we're extremely proud of him – his achievements, all the creative things that he was trying to do, and all of those qualities that we knew of Leigh as our son.

"From Evelyn's and my point of view I think he didn't want us to be involved in those areas that would perhaps upset us. Evelyn was a sensitive girl, but we were far more resilient than what he might have given us credit for. And we weren't totally dumb – we had a pretty fair idea of what was going on; we just didn't know the specifics. Leigh would ring up, 'I'm going to Amsterdam for the weekend for a show.' Really, what are you doing? 'Oh, I haven't decided – I've got a few ideas in mind.' Oh, okay. I mean, you can't drag it from them."

Thomas remembers a boy who could show his Granny how to do a complicated crochet stitch. He recalls returning home to find that Leigh had rearranged furniture inside the house, or plants in the garden, according to his own aesthetic vision. He is proud of the Melbourne High student who memorised '76 Trombones', the set piece for the House Choral Competition, so that he could conduct it without sheet music. "He just had that artistic flair about him, and he was able to do things. He could put two sticks in a vase and you'd look at it and say, That's magic!"

When Bowery died, his international profile was very much in the ascendant. Less than a decade later it is possible to see traces of his vision in the work of other designers and artists. In art, it usually happens that the margins eventually become the mainstream. The difference between a misunderstood fringe-dweller and a hailed artist can be a matter of just a few years – or a generation or two. Consider Franz Kafka, Amadeo Modigliani – or Bowery.

It is interesting that he spent his peak years in Britain, just like high-profile ex-pat colleagues like Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries or Clive James. He was as savagely satirical as Humphries, as uncompromising as Greer, and as versatile as James. It would be unsurprising if his legacy as an internationally significant cultural figure lasts as long or longer than that of these household names.

And who knows? Perhaps in time the city where he was born will recognise his life and work. There might be Bowery costumes and photographs and videos and portraits in the National Gallery, and Bowery biographies in the bookshops, and some suitably discordant shrine in Sunshine.

Or perhaps he will remain a prophet without honour in this city. The magpies in the gum trees overlooking his grave cackle, laughing at the very thought of it.

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