



words RACHEL WEINBERG

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images courtesy LANE & ASSOCIATES

# Avoid Your Lane

David Lane dials in from a park bench. He is wearing a blue and red cap and holds his iPhone just below his chin, so all that is on view is his almond-shaped brown eyes, stubbly facial hair and a slither of the scene behind him: a rainy sky, typical of a London summer day, green shrubbery on the verge of flowering, and the sounds of children cackling like a gaggle of sheep. I'm not surprised that Lane calls while he is on the move. I had read how busy this man is; he is notoriously known for balancing a delicate load of sturdy tasks: creative direction, editing, business ownership, brand consulting, project management, fatherhood and humanity. It's an understatement to say that Lane wears many hats—he enacts a plethora of roles with a plenitude of acquired and intrinsic skills. He is someone who does *not* stay in his lane.

This idiom—"stay in your lane"—is often used to caution people to stick to one path; it is a term of admonishment or counsel directed at those who venture opinions or insights on subjects of which they lack adequate knowledge or sufficient ability. In a physical sense, the idiom is used as a parameter to prevent any wrongdoing. Athletes who race in marked-off lanes, such as swimmers or sprint runners, are urged to keep to their confines to avoid disqualification, confusion or mess. In the arts, however, mess is encouraged. Artists are expected to muddle their traits to create the most refined, sophisticated product. Lane has built a career abiding by this notion. As if a duckling gliding in a dewy pond, he moves across disciplines without a single ripple left behind. Throughout his many endeavours, he proves that versatility and depth can coexist when you have a strong idea and can execute it with the right people. Here, he reflects on the title of creative director, the notion of concept over pure aesthetics, and shares advice for lighting your creative spark. A hint: it can't be done on the computer.

RACHEL WEINBERG Hello, David. How are you?

DAVID LANE I'm good, thank you.

RW You seem to be walking, is now a good time to talk?

DL It is. I hope you don't get dizzy with the world spinning behind me.

RW No, it's perfect. While researching your creative direction work, I discovered that you also edit the magazine *The Gourmand*.

DL Yes, we haven't produced *The Gourmand* for quite a few years though. We've been working on the books.

RW Why did you transition from magazine to book publishing?

DL The magazine faced numerous challenges and obstacles—COVID and Brexit were but a few of the many factors that posed logistical production obstacles. Magazines also have a difficult shelf-life. Even if you make a magazine that's designed to be timeless, after six months, it gets taken off the shelf and returned. The book, on the other hand, lives forever. When it sells out, it's just reprinted. It's not a huge amount more effort to make for something that lives forever. I mean, I love magazines. I love the pace of them, and I sometimes get frustrated with the pace of making books. People in the book industry can be quite slow—painfully slow.

RW Would you ever circle back to *The Gourmand* and work on another issue?

DL We're not against setting it up again,

but we've got quite a lot on. It was always something that supplemented the other parts of our lives. The stars would have to align for us to do it again.

RW Reflecting on 'busyness', you've often been described as a notably active figure. You lead David Lane & Associates, a London-based creative studio known for producing "original, emotive, and timeless work" for some of the world's most innovative clients. From 2016 to 2021, you served as the creative director of *Frieze*. Alongside these roles, you're a visiting lecturer, writer, designer and director—not to mention a father and partner. This impressive 'busyness' seems to stem from your ability to channel your talents across multiple domains, embracing a broad range of creative roles. To what extent does this interdisciplinary approach drive your work, and how does the term itself resonate with you?

DL There is the phrase: 'Jack of all trades, master of none'. I used to think that it was a mistake not to focus on one thing. I now think it is beneficial to understand many fields. Most projects involve multiple categories and touch on multiple disciplines. If you're creating an event, there might be a printed component, or entertainment, or a spatial aspect, or a digital campaign. If you're making a book, you need photography, writing and marketing. If you're making a film, you need to work with writers

and photographers. I think it's beneficial to understand how to work with different disciplines as it helps create a product that is bigger than the sum of its parts. That being said, I think there can be collateral damage done when you try to do too much at once. There's a difference between doing too much and being able to do lots of different things.

RW Where's the line for you?

DL I could work on a film, an event and a book, as long as I give each the time it needs. As long as I have and hold onto my idea and be a gatekeeper to that idea, then it is fine. I have to know the content better than anyone else, and make sure that all the people who are looking to me for guidance can feel confident to come to me with questions. I think a few changes have occurred in the industry, specifically within fashion, that have reassured people that being able to do lots of different things can be beneficial and bring new perspective. I suppose you should try and have a point of view and a signature across many mediums.

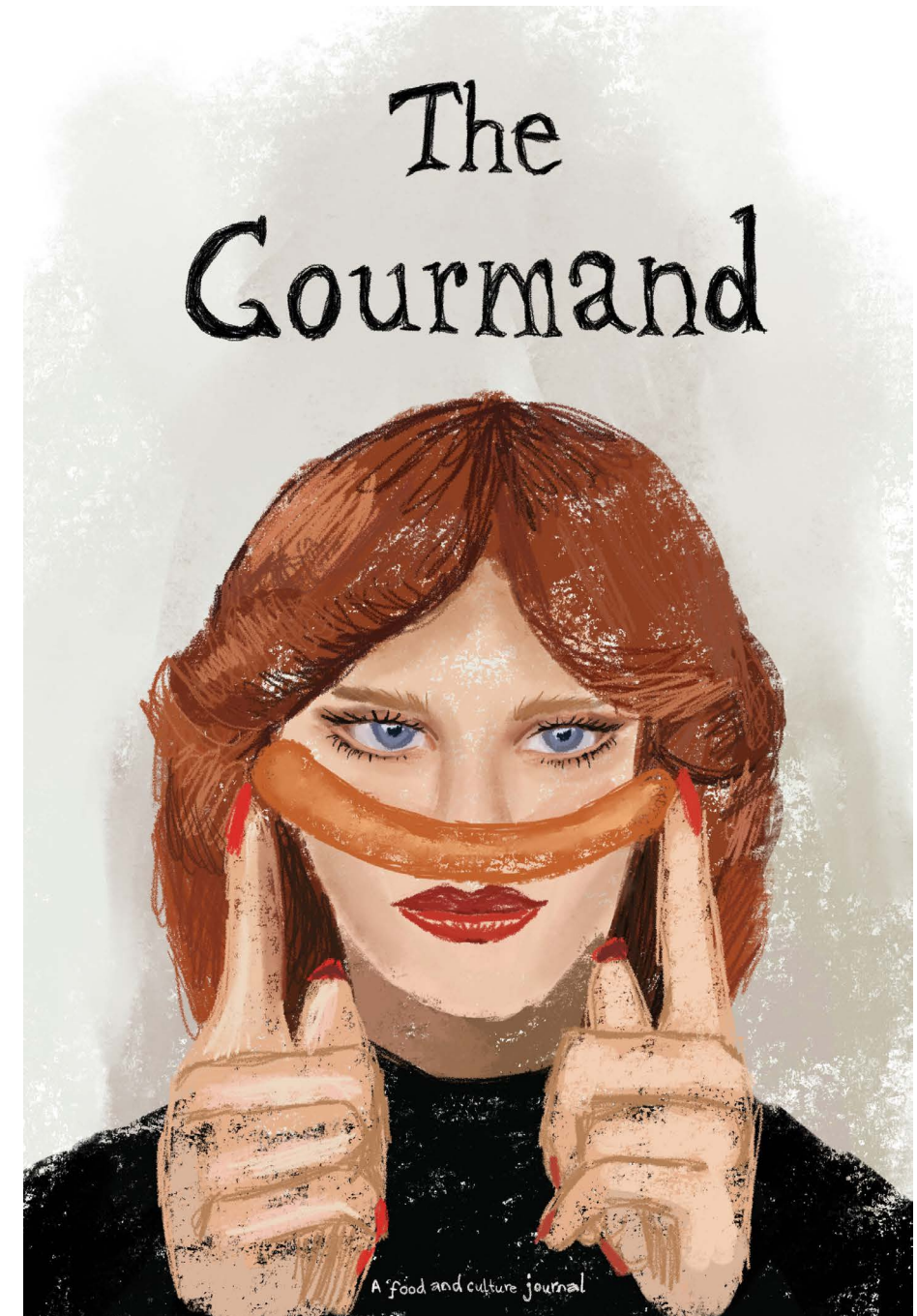
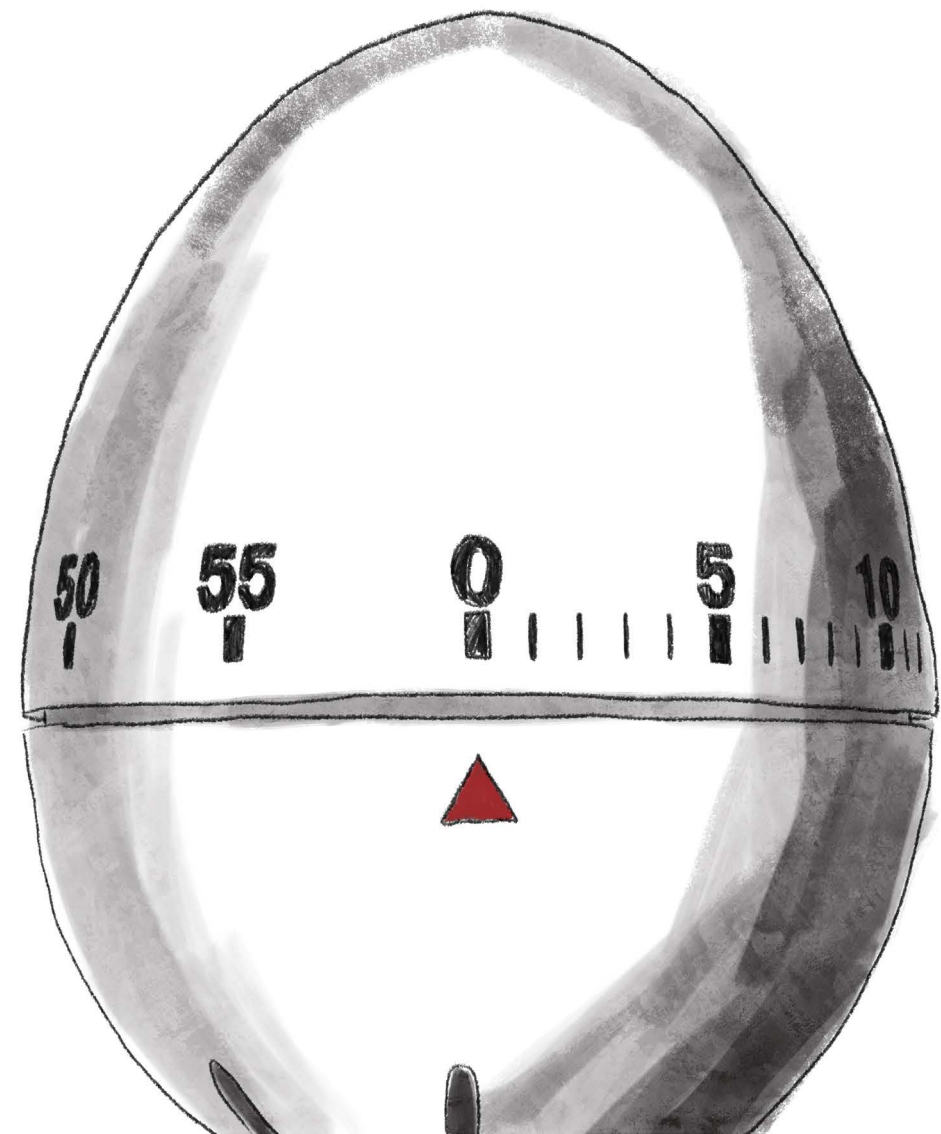
RW Yes, and a line through everything. Your voice should come through your work.

DL Yes, definitely. I don't know if I could define what that voice is, but I think it's there, and I think it's important. The medium is less important than the idea.

RW Looking back to the early days of your career, did you ever encounter resistance to this conceptual, ideas-based approach?

DL Actually, I experienced the opposite—





I was guided into that conceptual approach. I studied at Central Saint Martins, where the focus was heavily on ideas over practical application. While studying, I worked as a graphic designer at a studio where the team (also Central Saint Martins' graduates) were relentless about everything being unique and conceptual. They prioritised originality above all, regardless of complexity, cost, or even client needs. If something resembled existing work or lacked a strong idea, they wouldn't pursue it. It was an incredible foundation to build on, and I carried that framework into my later work. Since starting my own studio though, I'd say I've relaxed a bit. With experience, I've come to trust that originality emerges naturally through the process—it's ingrained.

I also find it uninspiring when a project becomes purely about aesthetics. Working solely on appearance is challenging without a core idea to guide decisions. Without a conceptual reference, things can easily become convoluted. If a brief lacks clear restrictions, I think it's essential to set some yourself. I always establish a set of internal rules, even if they're not visible to the public, as it helps both me and the team stay focused. To me, having a conceptual foundation should be a given—it shows there's been thought behind it. While some may prefer things that are not overly thought-out, I think every project still needs a hook, an idea, or a point of reference.

**RW** When you say “point of reference”, are you referring to external resources like books, photography and artworks, or more to the internal principles you establish for a project?

**DL** Whether you're making a film or a book, you need a key set of ideas and principles to refer back to. There's going to be hundreds of people asking you questions all the time, and you need a rationale to answer them quickly and confidently. Having an idea and a concept behind your work is very important. Those ideas become your reference point, as opposed to saying to your team, “Here's a nice picture I found, let's recreate this.” I think reference is a necessary part of anything, but more to explain an idea to somebody than as the idea itself.

**RW** It's a delicate balance. I often feel that to launch a project, I need to present a mood board and show other people's work. There seems to be an emphasis on external points of reference.

**DL** The speed at which things move has, in many ways, forced people's hands. There's also a somewhat limiting culture within brands where decision-makers often demand a perfect visual reference to gain approval. Ideally, those making these calls should have a strong grasp of the creative vision and be able to convey it to higher-ups who may not be creatively inclined.

It shouldn't be necessary to provide an exact image and say, “It will look like this, but with our clothes on.”

Even a simple scribble or sketch can effectively communicate an idea, allowing others to understand and refer back to it during execution—much like they would with a reference image. Sharing a reference can be limiting; while you may see it for its concept, others might focus on different aspects, like the casting, lighting, styling, colour palette, print quality, or even arbitrary details like the sky's colour or the number of trees in the background. What truly matters is the message the image conveys.



Relying too heavily on an image reference can be risky—it tends to anchor people to specific details, which can make the concept feel static or lifeless. This is particularly noticeable in still-life photography, where trying to recreate an image exactly like a reference can affect its energy. That said, there's a place for pastiche; for instance, Harley Weir's campaign for Byredo, which reimagines Madonna's 'Frozen' music video, is a clear homage. 'Frozen' is an incredible piece that deserves that kind of celebration.

**RW** That ties back to appropriation, a longstanding tradition within the art historical canon. For decades, artists have drawn inspiration from others' work,

adapting and reinterpreting it to inform their own practice.

**DL** There are these blogs and Instagram posts that line-up work side-by-side and say, “Look how similar this is to this.” You could do the same with Renaissance paintings or scenes from a film. I think appropriation doesn't necessarily take anything away from work. Rather, it's about the context you put it in and how it is treated. I mean, obviously, if there were two images created at a very similar time in a very similar space, doing a very similar thing, and one is a cheaper version of the other, then there are issues with that. But you can break apart any great works of art and find visual threads to other ones.

**RW** Do you think it is still possible to produce original work?

**DL** Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think it's possible to have an original point of view, an original voice. I think it was much easier to be original when I started working because we weren't looking at Instagram, Pinterest and blogs. In truth, there's an illusion of infinite resources online. You only have to look in a book to realise that there's not a huge number of resources on the internet. I was looking at some Helmut Newton images the other day, and I had an image in my mind that could only be found in a book—it didn't exist online. A few years ago, we were working on a magazine piece about food shops in Soho from a generation ago, but we found almost nothing online. So, we turned to the Soho archives, where we discovered boxes upon boxes of photographs, interviews and newspaper clippings. It was a bit of a wake-up call.

The illusion of the internet leads a lot of people to the same material, and you can see work becoming more homogenous because of that. The internet is funnelling people into smaller spaces. There are a thousand fashion images of people standing in front of objects that look like parachutes, and a thousand

fashion images of people on stacks of chairs. All these tropes keep perpetuating. I think that happens because there isn't a lot of time to create anymore. People need to come up with an idea on the day. The internet seems like a much quicker, more efficient way to research, but if people just went for a walk, they would probably come up with a much more unique idea.

**RW** A walk is your internet circuit breaker.

**DL** I don't know if I have any good ideas sitting in front of computers. I think I have good ideas when I'm doing other things, whether it's talking to people, walking or lying in bed, or I sometimes just wake up and have a solution to something. I think when your subconscious is

active, you are much more creative. Computers are right hemispheres. They're pragmatic. It's harder to just wander on the computer. But they're very useful. I spend literally all my life staring at them. But for that initial creative spark, it's beneficial to be elsewhere.

**RW** Do you typically initiate collaborations, or do others approach you? Could you walk us through your project process, particularly when working with a photographer or set designer?

**DL** I always ensure I choose the right people to bring ideas to life, largely based on the quality and style of their work. Equally important are their personalities and how they handle the complexities of certain projects. I also consider how well they'll collaborate as a team—a harmonious dynamic is essential. Ultimately, it's about the unique creative contributions they bring.

**RW** What about with your partner, Marina? What do you think makes that professional relationship so strong? Is it the personal understanding of each other?

**DL** We were together for years before we started working together. She first worked in hospitality and food. We started *The Gourmand* because food was a space that we were interested in. I think we work well because there's not a huge amount of crossover, except in terms of our taste and interests. This morning, she's gone to meet with the accountants and I'm talking to you. She wouldn't feel comfortable doing that. And with the books, I'd say she publishes them, although we're working with a publisher. She organises how it comes together. I trust her opinion. Often, I can get tied down in the details and she's a really good person to get a spontaneous opinion from. I can lose the sense of the viewer sometimes.

**RW** Do you often seek feedback to refine your work?

**DL** Sometimes I think I get more feedback than I'd like. Rather than working on making a project good, I spend a lot of time working on presenting the project to people at different stages. It can be frustrating, getting feedback. It can feel arbitrary.

**RW** What would you consider to be valuable feedback?

**DL** When I talk to Marina, she might say something like, “That's quite hard to read.” Advice that is really practical and useful is always great. Until you say ideas out loud, I don't think you really know whether they're good or not. Your mind can be quite a confusing

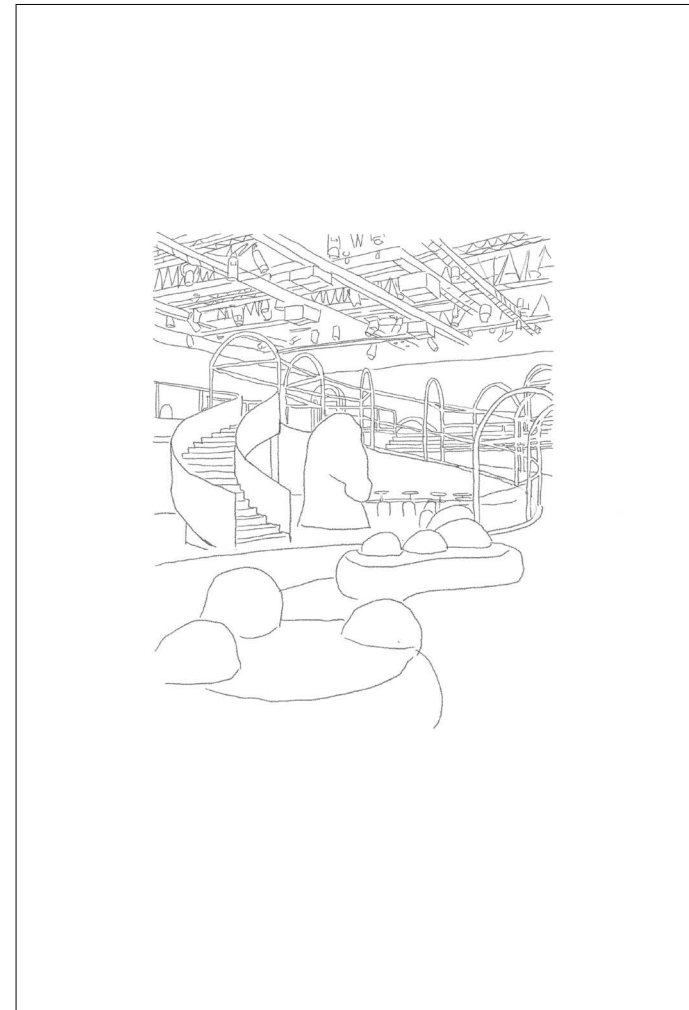
place. You can trick yourself into believing that something is good, but after talking about it with someone, you realise that it's not.

**RW** No man is an island.

**DL** Exactly.

**RW** How do you view the role of the creative director, and how do you think it has evolved over time? What do you envision it will come to represent in the future?

**DL** I don't know. I mean, lots of people prescribe the title to themselves nowadays. I sometimes get emails from people writing, “I've just graduated and I'm a creative director.” I felt like I couldn't call myself a creative director until someone else said it. I think creative direction



correlates to experience. You could be an art director, you could be a designer, you could be a film director, all these different things. I think creative director really just means that you have the experience to apply yourself to many disciplines. You have the experience and the confidence to work across different mediums and make decisions.

As we noted earlier, I've worked as an illustrator, and a graphic designer, and an exhibition designer, and a film director, and an animator, and in music. I've worked for an art magazine and designed records, and books, and worked in fashion and campaigns and stills and designed fashion shows. I think that's why I can

be approached with so many different projects and be confident that I know what I'm doing. And there are young people who I'm sure could bring a really fresh perspective and they should be given the opportunity to do that; sometimes having experience can be a hindrance.

The role also has different meanings in different fields. You could be the creative director of a fashion house and you're designing clothes. You could be the creative director of an advertising agency and you're a businessperson. You could be a creative director like me and come up with different ideas, realise them and pick the teams to make it happen. I think it is a funny one.

**RW** I'd like to ask about your relationship with Hermès. How have you supported their interest in utilising multiple mediums?

**DL** I've been collaborating with Hermès for nearly nine years, working across a wide range of projects. In 2023, I staged a major fashion show in Shanghai, collaborating with artist Sara Cwynar on a fifteen-minute performance that incorporated film, audio and dance. I also contribute to smaller projects, like animations and publications. The magazine project was a meaningful culmination of my work across Hermès' various métiers: Silk, Men's, Accessories, Women's and Home. It's one of the few company projects that represents all these areas. I felt well-prepared to take on the magazine when the time came. I had always wanted to, but I appreciated that they waited until I truly understood how everything fits together.

**RW** The magazine also embodies the concept of materiality, showing how history can be preserved more permanently and meaningfully through a physical, cumulative format.

**DL** Absolutely, and Hermès has a remarkable history to share. I collaborated on the publication with the director of their museum, drawing from their incredible archives. This rich collection is what enables them to pursue such a wide range of creative work while preserving their core identity. Visiting the museum, you gain a sense of where many of their ideas originate.

Hermès stands out as a company with a distinct set of visual and emotional codes that foster a diverse expression. While a brand like Chanel excels in producing work with a consistent look—which is valuable in its own right—working with Hermès is refreshing as they welcome an expansive creative output.

**RW** That description could apply to you as well—a creator known for a diverse and expansive output.

**DL** Thank you!

**RW** Thank you for your time, David.

**DL** Lovely to chat. [EXEUNT]