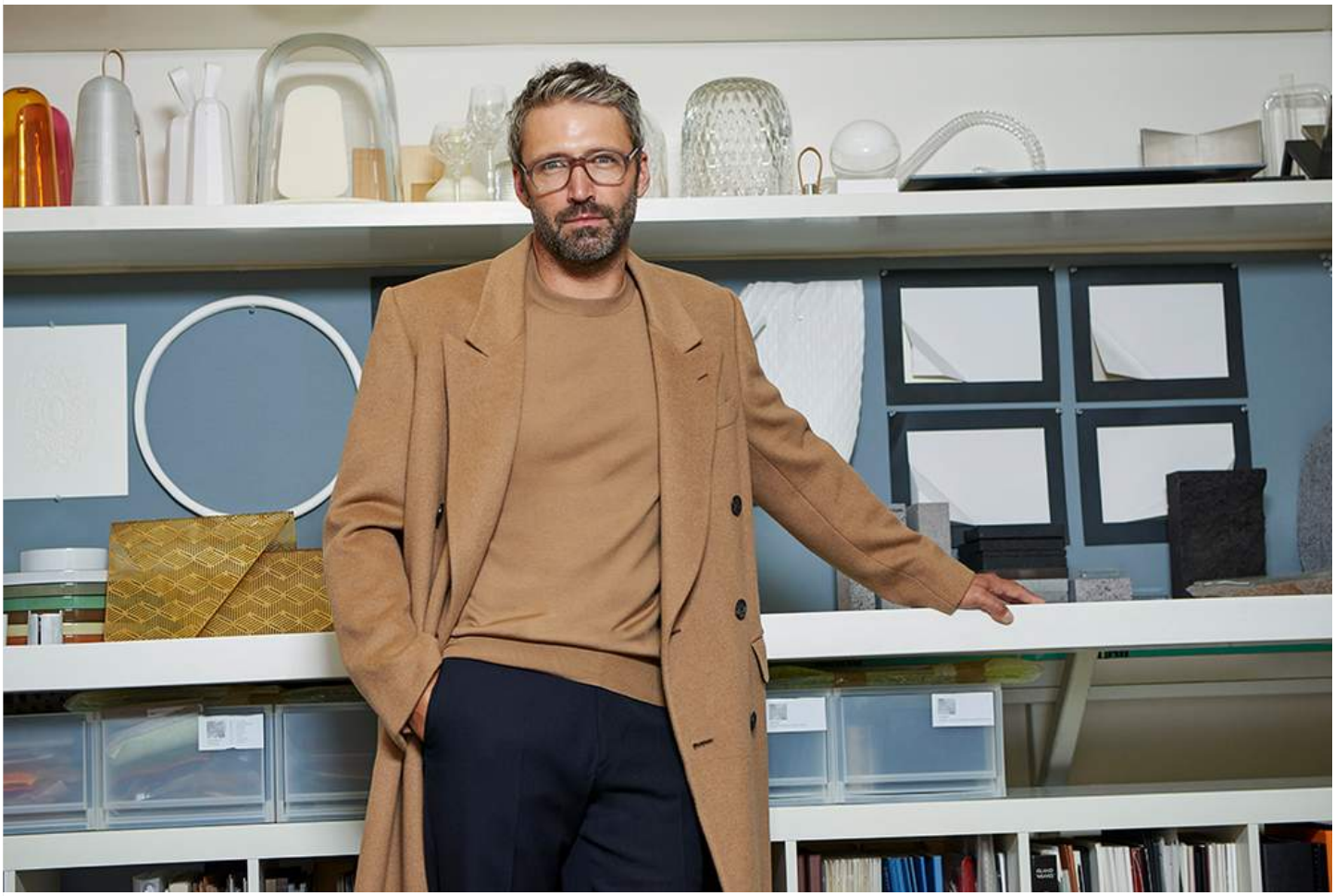
MY SPACE

IN THE STUDIO WITH INTERIOR DESIGNER MR NOÉ DUCHAUFOUR-LAWRANCE

As Brioni returns to MR PORTER, we meet the man who embodies its aesthetic



Words by Mr Oli Stratford

Photography by Mr Martin Bruno

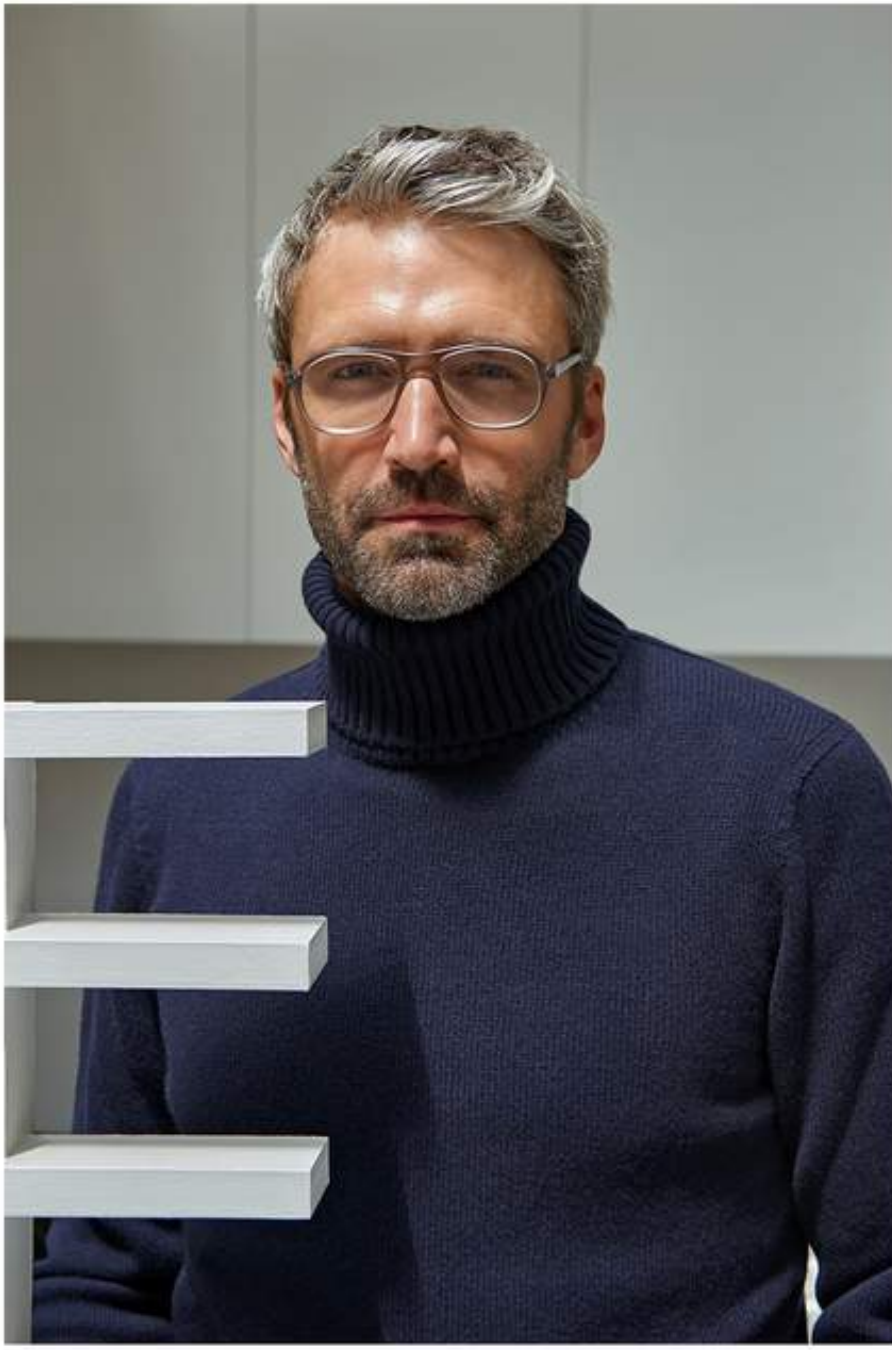
Styling by Mr James Sleaford

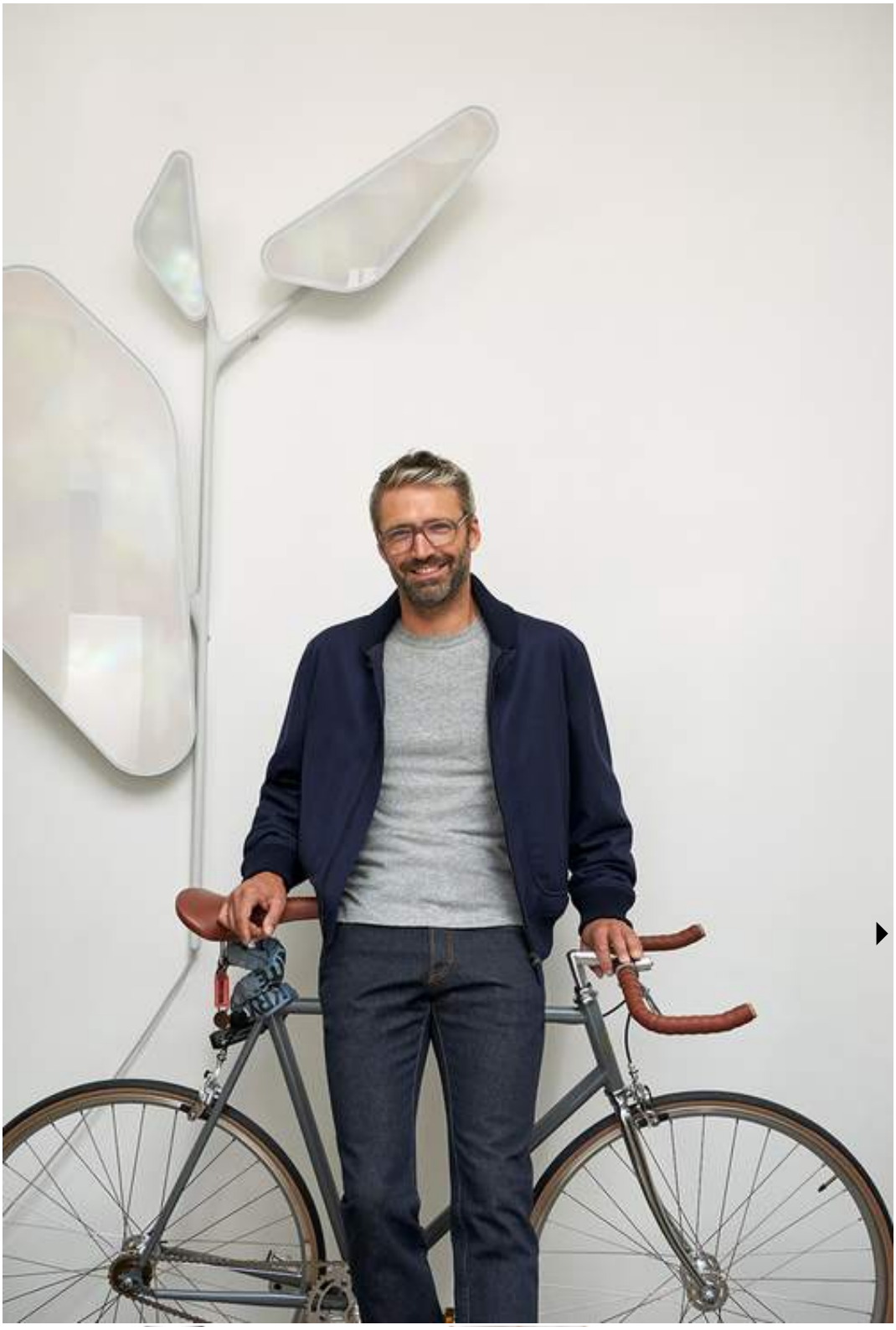
Quartier Sainte-Marguerite in Paris's 11th arrondissement was traditionally home to the city's furniture makers. It is apt, then, that it should be here where the 43-year-old French designer Mr Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance runs his interior architecture and design practice, tucked away on a concealed courtyard off the charmingly titled Passage de la Bonne-Graine.

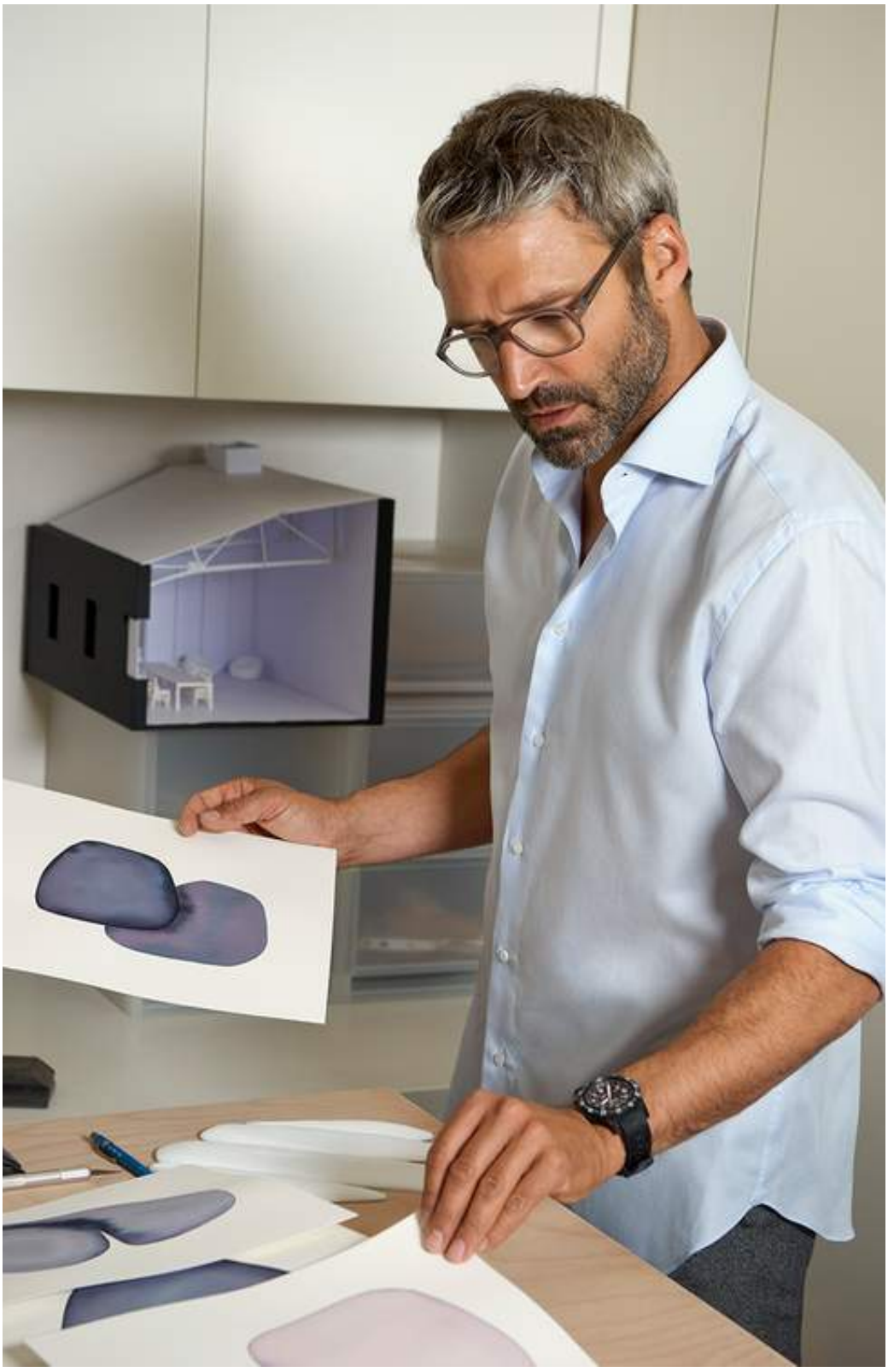
"Until two years ago, one of the city's best wooden furniture makers was still based in our courtyard," says Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance, who has worked in this area of Paris for the past 18 years. "It's the usual story of gentrification, however, and much of that craft has left the area. Instead, we now have a lot of restaurants. Good restaurants, though."

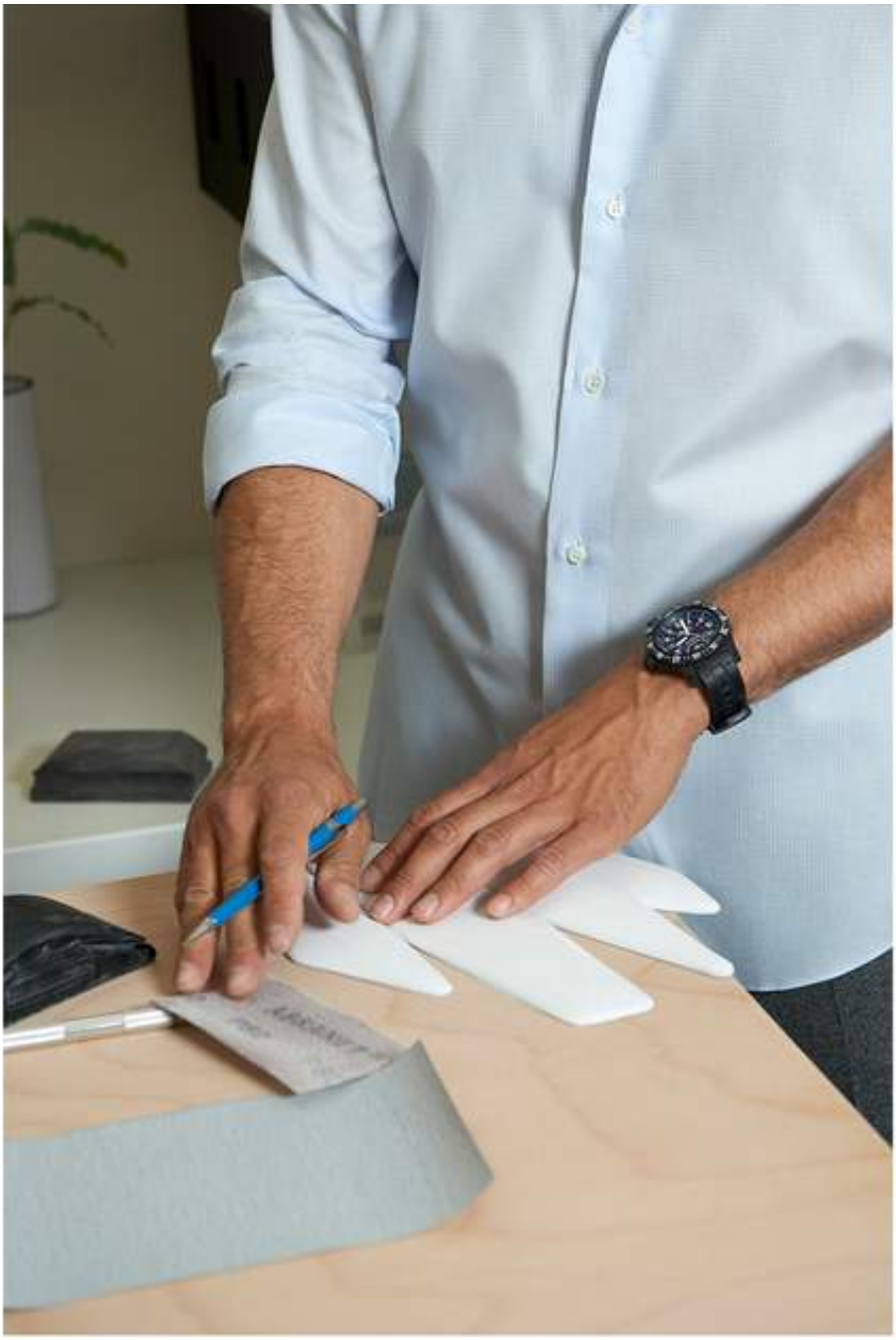
Amid the flux of his neighbourhood, Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance's design studio is something of an oasis. "I wanted a space that was very pure," he says. And so it is. The ground-floor studio has white walls that are clean and sparse, a high, white ceiling and dove-grey wooden floors. It is an aesthetic expression of the simplicity that Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance is to in his work. "I'm really classic and I prefer a quiet design environment," he says. "I need somewhere that is not overbearing because a lot of contemporary design dates after a while."

Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance aspires to effortlessness. He creates furniture whose forms are primarily derived from nature. His Borghese sofa for French brand La Chance, for instance, has a segmented back that looks like leaves rising up from the sofa's base structure on thin metal tendrils. A beautiful thing.



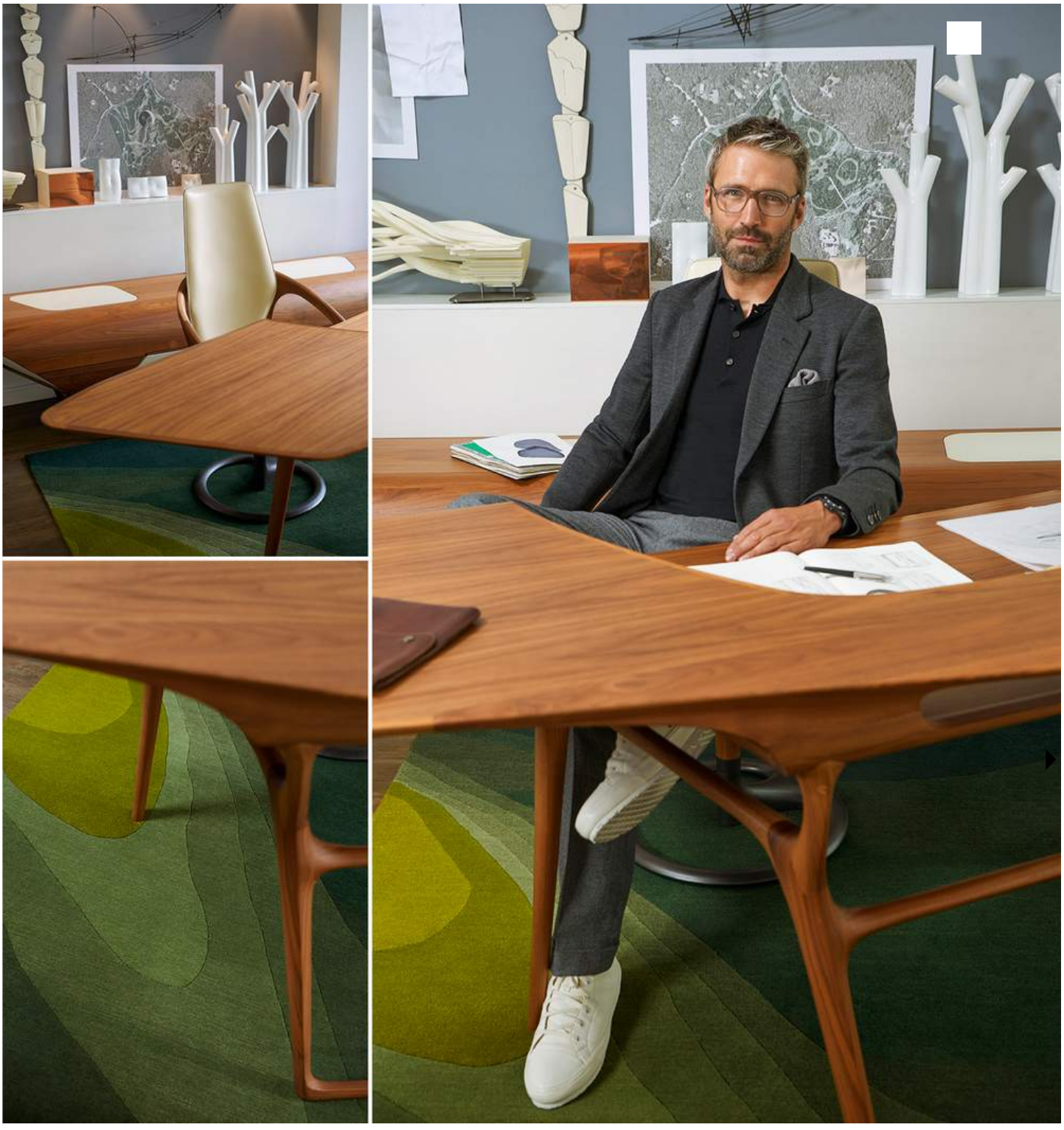






For the portraits accompanying this article, Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance was photographed in classic Roman tailoring from Brioni. All the garments are taken from Ms Nina-Maria Nitsche's debut collection as the house's creative director. "I love the idea of having something you can wear for years and don't like something only being suitable for one season," says Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance. "Iconic design pops up and grabs you. When you look at it for the first time it's like candy, but the problem is that after six months you've had too much candy. I prefer something humbler – design where someone really believes in what they're doing."

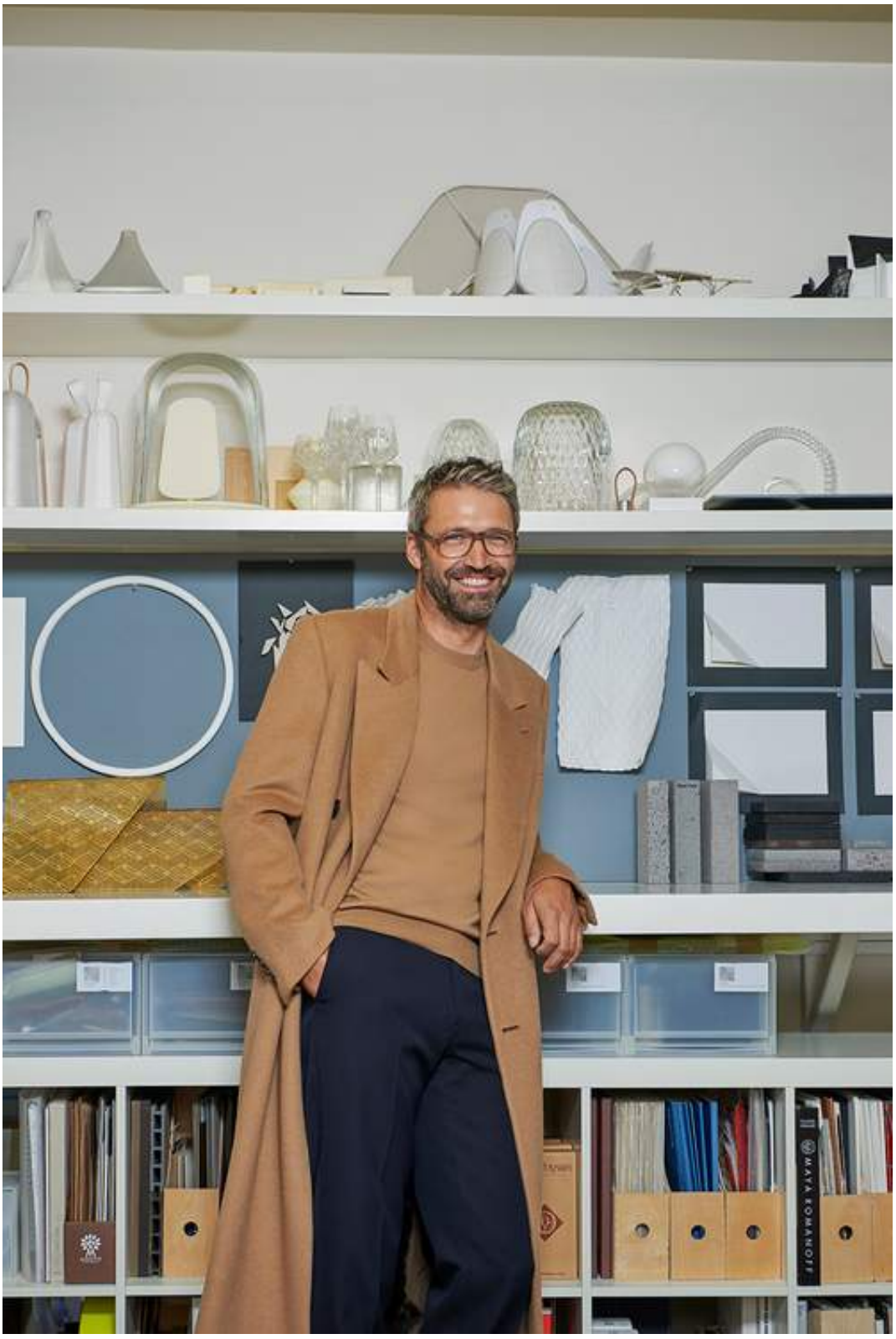
Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance's studio is rigorously organised. The space is built around a central console that contains printers, computer systems and perfectly organised pots of stationery. The quadrants surrounding this island have distinct uses: Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance's workspace, his assistants' desks, the studio's workshop and its material archive. Each area can be separated from the others by a white fabric partition enlivened by graphic perforation patterns. "We have our central element and then the rest is circulation," says Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance. "It's all quite pure and simple, like a white page in a sketchbook when I begin a project."

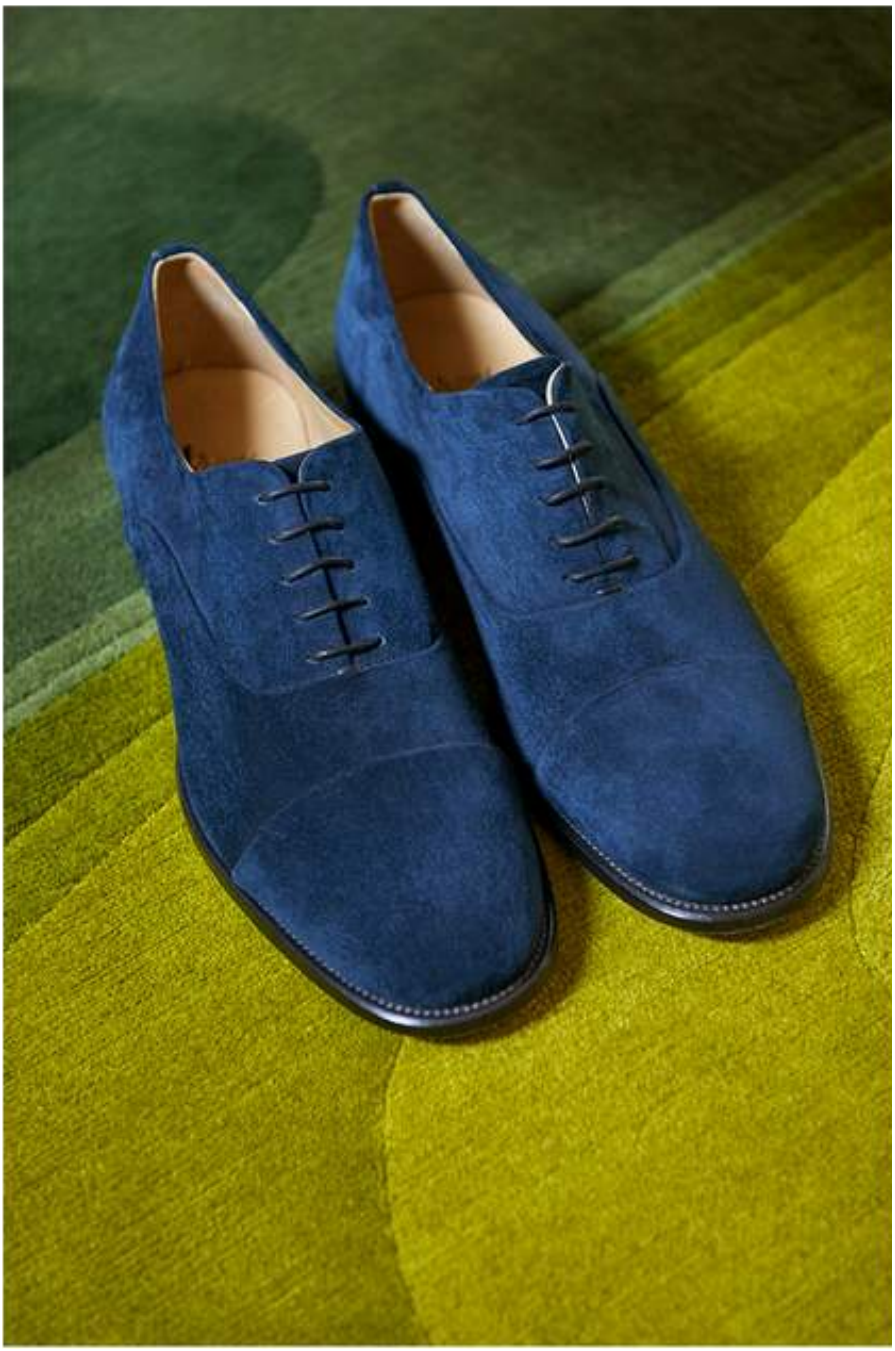


Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance in his office with: “Manta” for Ceccotti Collezioni armchair, desk and sideboard; “Roseau” for Ligne Roset vases; “Empreinte” for Designerbox sculpture; and “Designer’s Survey Belt” for Wallpaper*, handmade with Valextra

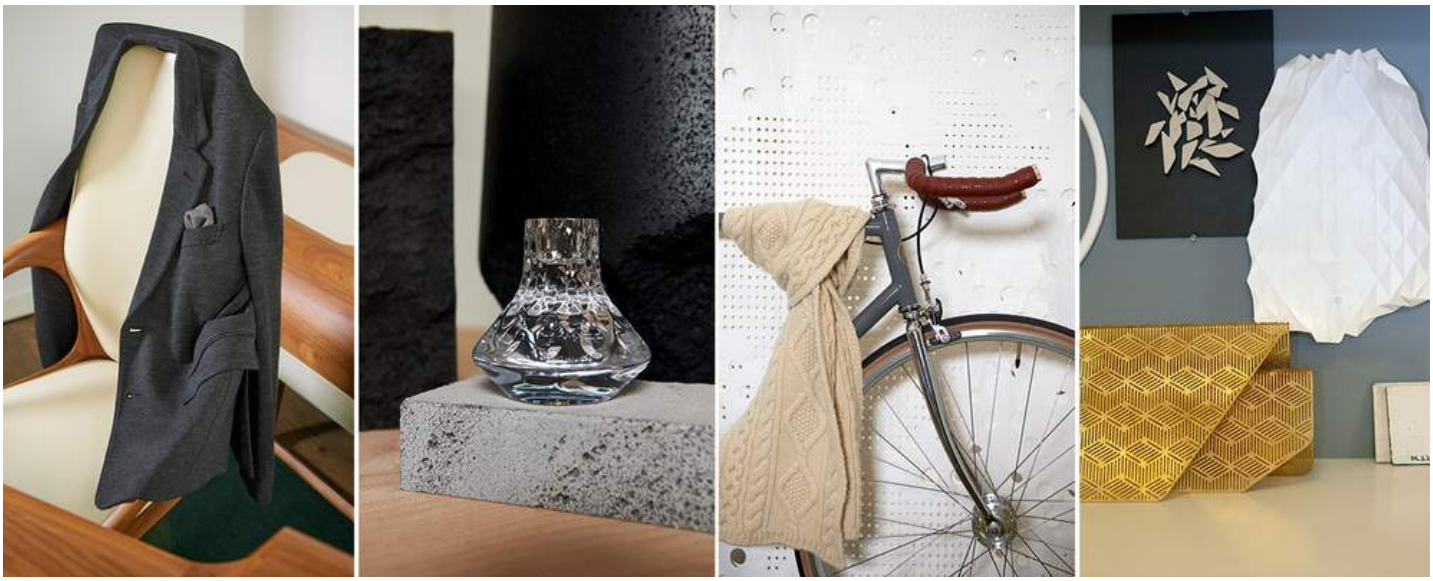
Scattered around the studio are mementos of the interiors and objects Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance has designed for luxury brands such as Montblanc, Ligne Roset, Saint-Louis and Hermès. Models, maquettes and numerous awards are arranged delicately on shelves alongside neatly filed folders bursting with samples and references. “It’s not an anonymous environment and it expresses the difference between working with an agency, which is a brand, and a designer, who is very personal,” says Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance. One small wall of the studio has been given over to a bricolage of keepsakes from Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance’s travels: postcards from New York and Berlin, printed miscellanea such as playing cards and a flier for Il Cocktail Moderno from Bar Basso in Milan, as well as a selection of his children’s crayon drawings. A small, polka-dotted porcelain gourd, designed by the Japanese artist Ms Yayoi Kusama, perches quaint and squat on one of the studio’s surfaces.

This personal touch extends to the placement of Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance’s work in the space. Perched high on the console above the entrance to the studio is a skeletal, white carbon-fibre desk, a student project from his time at l'École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. “I didn’t know where to put it because it’s so light and fragile,” he says. “But up there it looks like it’s flying.” Positioned to its right, in Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance’s work area, is its successor – the Manta desk for Italian brand Ceccotti Collezioni, an American-walnut desk that stretches out into sinuous flowing wings like the sea creature it is named after. “I wasn’t sure whether to use it in my own space because it’s a little bit show-off,” says Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance. “It’s a big desk, but it’s also a signature piece for me and I wanted it here. It’s really about the relationship between the object and the space that is defined by it.”


MAYA ROMANOFF



That space may soon change. Recently, Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance moved to Lisbon, and today he commutes between his home in the Portuguese city and the studio he maintains in Quartier Sainte-Marguerite. “It’s been easy so far,” he says. “Everything is about communication and we can do a lot of things through email and Skype.” In Lisbon, Mr Duchaufour-Lawrance says he has found the potential for a simpler, more direct way of life, something that will soon inform his design work. “My life is much easier than in Paris because you can feel the energy of being in a town in Europe, but you still have connections with real, simple things,” he says. “Everything I’m looking for in life – authenticity, movement and simplicity – is there in Lisbon.”



How long did it take you to get your space working as you wanted it?

Its character came with time. At the beginning it was only a white space, and it was a little bit too white, actually. What is white feels like it has to stay white, whereas our work demands that we move quickly and sometimes messily. At one point we had 15 people working in the office, which was terrible because I was always going from one meeting to another. The only way to escape was to go a nearby café, a nice Parisian brasserie with 19th-century décor, to sketch. Every morning, from 8.00am to 10.00am, I was in there drawing.

How do you work now?

I like to have a small team – eight or so is ideal. It lets you share things and have a good time, whereas when you're a bigger studio, you become more bourgeois in your way of work. You need two people to do something that you were doing by yourself before. When your studio is small, you can do crazy projects, but when you're bigger you lose that energy. Now I'm trying to get that spontaneity back. For instance, I'm now doing a huge architecture project in the Hamptons for a private client. I'm not an architect, so I could create a dedicated architecture team in the studio, but if I did that then I would be weighed down by the project without having created anything. You need freedom as a designer to express yourself.

What prompted you to move to Lisbon?

I wanted to live in a town that is connected to nature, although my house in Paris is next to Père Lachaise, a cemetery that is also the biggest park in Paris, and every window looks out onto the park. I need to be close to nature like that because if I stay in my studio all day, I feel suffocated. I'm more of an outdoor person and, in particular, I love to kiteboard. I want to kite at least once a week and because Lisbon is by the ocean I can do that. What I also love about Lisbon is that it's a city whose traditions are still alive and haven't just become folklore, as in other places. You can still see farmers coming in from the countryside with their trucks and handing over the vegetables directly to the store. It's real life.

Do you need to keep the Paris studio to provide stability?

I'm not yet ready for the big move, which would be to have my studio entirely mobile and virtualised. I still need a base. I work with material things, so I need a connection with material. I think it's important to have this studio as an anchor point, but feeling free from it is also interesting. I always say that people are born without anything and then we build walls around ourselves. But as soon as we have those walls, we want to escape from them. I had everything I wanted in this studio, but it was too heavy for me. Living in Lisbon, I'm somehow separated from that heaviness.

How do you balance yourself as a person with your professional life in the studio?

I don't have any rules. I used to try to keep those areas of my life separate, but I soon realised that the people working for me have to understand who I am. I can't hide myself because a design studio is not an anonymous environment. I like that my kids can come here, play around with a piece of material, sketch or try to understand something about design. I purposefully don't have a set routine any more. Every day is a new project and offers a new way of doing things. I'm lucky that I'm at a point in my career when I can do that. Last week, for example, I woke up at 5.00am and realised I wanted to paint, so I painted until noon and didn't open my computer at all. For a designer, routine is opening your computer. Emails kill creativity.

A lot of things now are just being made for effect, which I don't understand. If you do something, you should know it will last for a long time. I don't have the pretension to do things that will last for generations, but I do want to create things with passion, honesty, truthfulness and integrity. A lot of designers now are just creating to get press attention. We exist in a culture of consumption. As designers, we need to try to calm that down and come back to something real.