

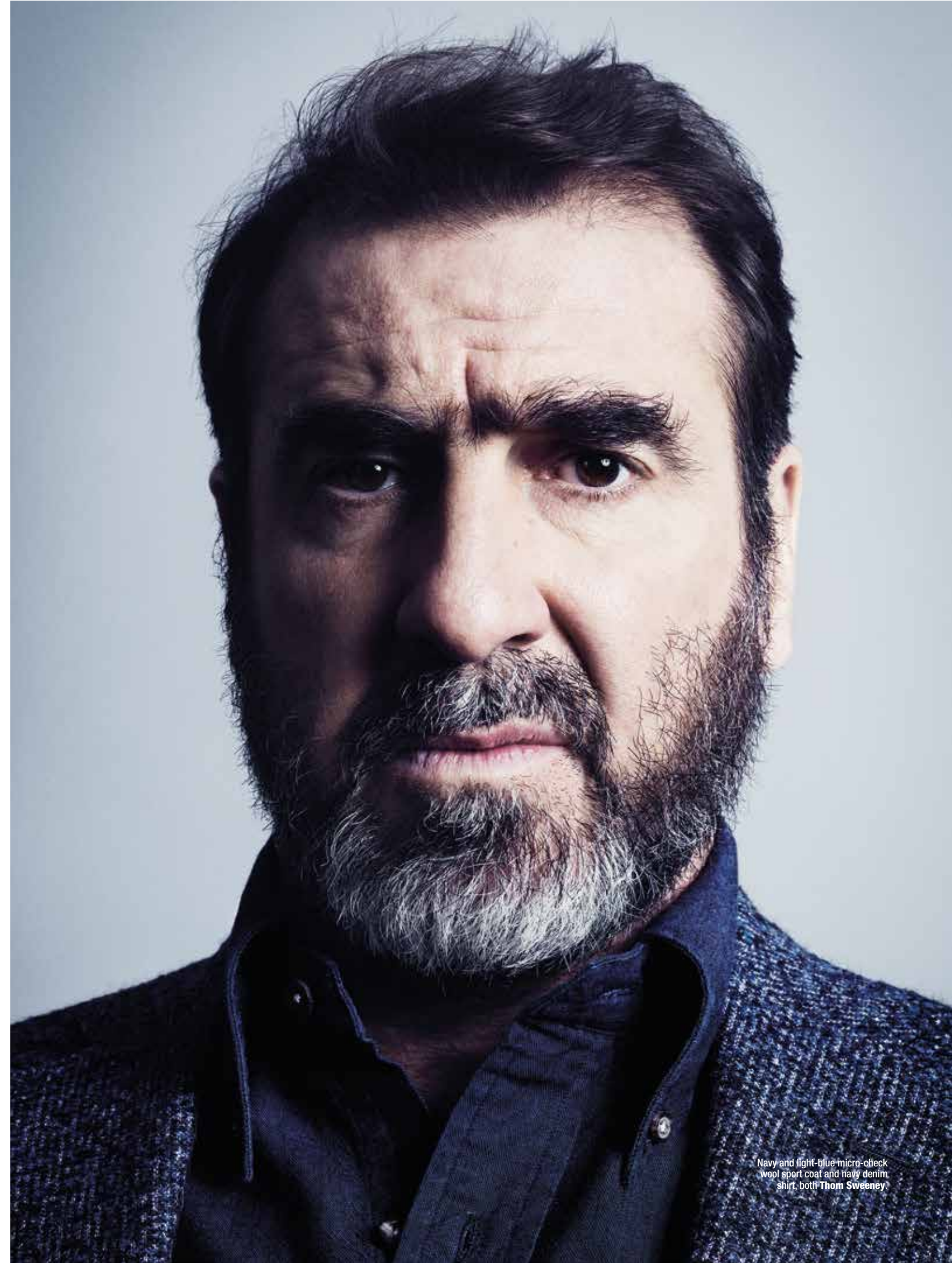
LE BEAU JEU... DE LA VIE

Eric Cantona's greatest fear is stagnation. In the two decades since he retired from top-flight football, the actor, poet, painter, photographer and philosopher remains a paradox: incensed yet full of joie de vivre; doggedly sincere yet quietly self-deprecating; a cultural polymath who is also an ex-footballer ... Can anyone get to the heart of him? On a cold spring day in Paris, NICK SCOTT gave it a try.

photographer **simon emmett** fashion direction **sarah ann murray**

*"When the seagulls follow
the trawler, it is because they think
sardines will be thrown
into the sea."*

Eric Cantona



Navy and light-blue micro-check
wool sport coat and Italy denim
shirt, both Thom Sweeney



This page:
Dartmouth-green suede
bomber jacket, cream
cotton polo T-shirt and
khaki cotton trousers, all
Gieves & Hawkes; tweed
flat cap, Lock & Co; brown
leather brogues, Santoni.

Opposite page:
Dartmouth-green suede
bomber jacket, Gieves
& Hawkes; moss-green
tweed flat cap, Lock & Co;
HL ti 01 Atelier limited
edition, titanium timepiece
with black alligator leather
strap, Hautlence.



Settling his six-foot-two-inch frame into a sofa, in a suite on the first floor of Le Bristol hotel in Paris — claustrophobia prevents him taking lifts — Éric Daniel Pierre Cantona wants to talk about the French philosopher Edgar Morin. “He writes a lot about metamorphosis, and that’s my vision of life,” Cantona says. “It applies to everything. You’re in love with somebody, you’re not in love with somebody, you use this experience to keep growing... This vision and philosophy takes in life in a very positive way and helps me a lot with everything. I really believe in it.”

Cantona’s philosophical leanings became common knowledge in 1995, when he furnished football folklore with that sardines-and-seagulls analogy (more on which, inevitably, later). Right now, though, he’s waxing metaphysical in relation to a watch he recently designed, the Vortex Primary, for the avant-garde Swiss company Hautlence, with whom he has a partnership (see panel, page 117). “Design isn’t all about aesthetics — I like it when it means something, opens some doors,” Cantona says. “So I started from this idea of a grid, a cage, which reminds us that we can be prisoners of time if we don’t embrace the concept of metamorphosis. The three primary colours represent freedom, because from these you can make any other colour, and any day on Earth is all about colours. So the watch is about prison and freedom, death and life.”

However much thought and zeal he puts into it, design will never be the discipline for which Cantona is primarily known. Nor will his acting, poetry, art, political activism, intellectual leanings, and certainly not the wry self-awareness to which

many people — especially those who have chosen observation as a career, curiously — continue to appear wilfully oblivious. The segment of his life that made Eric Cantona a household name dominated nearly three decades of his five on the planet, and began in the late sixties in his place of birth, Les Caillols, in the 12th arrondissement of Marseille.

Legend has it that Cantona grew up in a nine-square-metre hillside cave. The reality is more prosaic. His grandmother discovered the grotto in question, nicknamed it La Chambrette, and decreed that it would be used for shelter while her husband, a Sardinian immigrant and a stonemason, built the house that now nestles among the pines on the hill above it (Cantona’s maternal grandparents were also immigrants — Catalan exiles from Franco’s Spain, who crossed the Pyrenees on foot).

It was on the rugged gradient stretching down from this self-built family home that the young Cantona honed his skills, playing football compulsively with his brothers, Joel and Jean-Marie, encouraged by their father, Albert, himself a useful goalkeeper. According to the French football journalist Philippe Auclair’s book *Cantona: The Rebel Who Would Be King* — one of the most exhaustive and deft sports biographies you could hope to read — so devoted to the game were the brothers that whenever a misdirected kick went hurtling down the hill, they’d crumple old newspapers into a sphere and carry on until the ball was bowled back up by a neighbour.

Cantona has described the exceptional football career that unfolded later on as an attempt to recapture the moment his infant hands first plucked a ball from the gravel and weeds of



This page:
Grey-blue wool three-piece suit and grey brushed cotton shirt, both **Thom Sweeney**; charcoal-grey beaver-fur fedora, **Bates**; HL ti 01 Atelier limited edition, titanium timepiece with black alligator leather strap, **Hautlence**.

Opposite page:
Navy and light blue micro-check wool sport coat and navy denim shirt, both **Thom Sweeney**.

his childhood home — “Maybe... the sun was shining, people were happy, and it made me feel like playing football” — and his career certainly wasn’t short of Proustian flashbacks to that moment. Having made his debut at local club Auxerre aged 17, Cantona arrived at Manchester United eight years later — via Martignes, Marseille, Bordeaux, Montpellier, Nimes and Leeds United — and promptly sparked the most successful period in the club’s history.

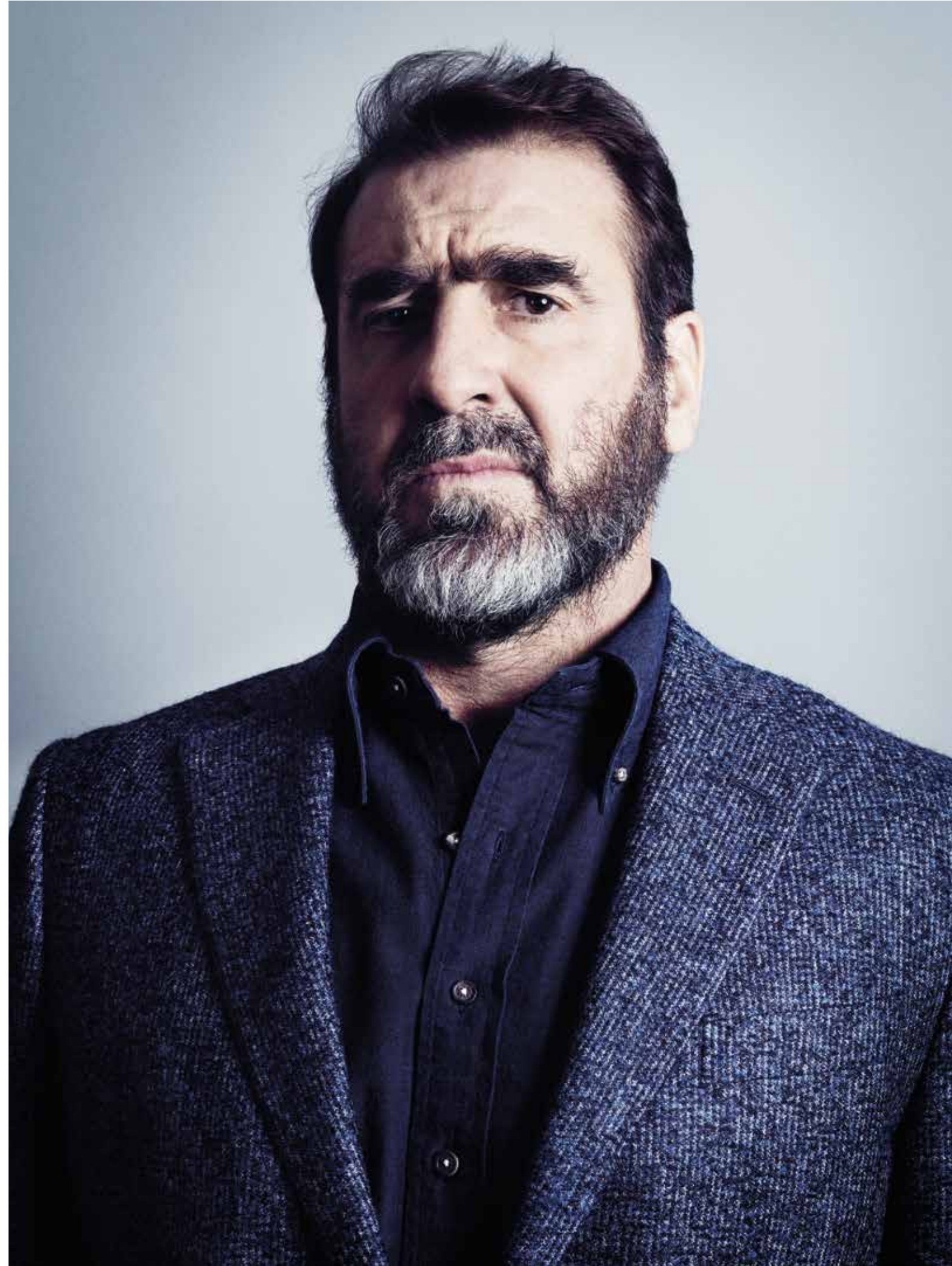
Strong and graceful, with almost supernatural vision, he opened up defences so effortlessly that United’s manager of 27 years, Sir Alex Ferguson, nicknamed him the Can Opener. Cantona’s bluster, imperviousness and creativity infected a generation of young players — Paul Scholes, David Beckham and Gary Neville among them — and United won four titles in five years. He became a near-deity, and his goal celebration — one arm thrust aloft, fist clenched, collar upturned, chest inflated — is etched more deeply than ever on the memories of a beleaguered United fanbase currently reliant on nostalgia.

Eventually, though, those nuggets of déjà vu began to lose their lustre, and a week after lifting the Premier League trophy at Old Trafford in 1997, following a Champions League semi-final defeat to Borussia Dortmund — a bitter blow to him — Cantona announced his retirement just short of his 31st birthday, with a year left to run on his contract. Forays into beach football and a brief spell as the New York Cosmos’ director of soccer (which ended in a legal dispute over unpaid wages) followed, but today, Cantona’s interest in football is only a passing one, to say the least. We were tipped off by the publicity team that organised

our photoshoot and interview that grilling Cantona on the subject would yield little; during banter with our photographer he expresses a keen admiration for Manchester City’s Spanish midfielder David Silva, but otherwise shows little interest in, or knowledge of, the modern game (I have to tell him who manages Tottenham Hotspur these days).

There is just one football-related topic he will happily expound on, but not until a few weeks after our interview, and when moved to do so by some painful news. In 1971, sat atop his father’s shoulders watching Ajax beat his hometown team 2-1, Cantona was so intoxicated by the opposition’s mercurial display, spearheaded by the Dutchman Johan Cruyff, that he went on to support the Netherlands in international competition over his native France. Via email, following the news of Cruyff’s death in March, Cantona tells *The Rake*: “I was lucky enough to meet him a few times, and I cried as much when I heard of his death as when Holland lost in the World Cup final in 1974, when I was eight years old. At both Ajax and Holland, he created a revolution in football: it was all about anticipation, creativity and movement. When he became manager for Barcelona, he made another revolution — the way Barcelona play today is all because of Cruyff: they are all his spiritual sons. No one has given more to football and its history.” If he gives this summer’s European Championship much attention, it’ll be an Eric Cantona laden with sentiment who is quietly ruing the Netherlands’ absence from the tournament.

So why did the King abdicate so early? Essentially, says Cantona, when the interview brushes cautiously against the subject of football back in that Parisian hotel room, because the



game carried no more potential for self-expression. “People who work too hard are afraid of emptiness,” he says, “and maybe I am afraid of it, too. My work is all self-expression. I think that my father gave my brother and me a sense of observation, a hunger to observe the world; to try to appreciate light, and colours, and people, and their reactions, and society — everything. And then when you are observational you can create something special.”

Cantona’s love of art, according to Auclair’s book, was also learned from his father. A painter himself, Albert favoured vivid landscapes in the ‘gourmet of colour’ style of local artist Pierre Ambrogiani. “He didn’t sell his canvases,” says Cantona, “but when he worked I could see, when I watched him, that he was happy; he felt something special because he had the chance to express himself.” It is perhaps also from his father, by osmosis, that Cantona learned to be so potently emotive an individual: “He explained some things to you and then he would start to cry,” Cantona told *L’Équipe* magazine in 2007.

When it comes to his own artistic efforts, Cantona is cagey: “It’s different, and influenced by a wish to make art differently,” is all he’ll reveal. But he’s forthcoming on the subject of his tastes. He speaks highly of the work of Zoran Mušič, a Slovenian painter who depicted his experiences of the terror at the Dachau concentration camp, as well as that of the Catalan sculptor Antoni Tàpies. “I have a lot of street art, and other more conceptual contemporary art, in my own collection,” he says. “I like people who try to find a way to make

a piece of art different. In the past, you had canvas and colours, but now more artists try and find their own individual way. I have two pieces by [the Moroccan artist]

Hicham Berrada, who uses chemistry. The products he puts on the canvas react when hot, and it has a heater in front of it, which comes on for five minutes every 10 minutes. And when it becomes hot the canvas turns from white to blue and pink, like the sky at the end of the day. Then they turn the heater off and the colours gradually disappear. I love this kind of artist. There is a great gallerist in Paris called Kamel Mennour. He’s a very good adviser for me, and a long-time friend.”

Growing almost as fast as his art collection is Cantona’s IMDb page. A movie career that began with a small role in the 1998 film *Elizabeth* has since led him to play a hard-bitten action-thriller cop (*Switch*, 2011), a prosthetically upgraded orgy guest (in the erotic French drama *You and the Night*), and a blackhat enforcer (in *The Salvation*, 2014). Typically, it’s left-field experiences of acting that appeal to him. “Last summer I had my first experience of working in a foreign language — one I don’t understand one word of,” he says of his role in the Croatian children’s film *Anka The Brazilian*. “It was filmed in Croatia — all the actors, all the crew, were former Yugoslavians, Serbs, Croats. It was a great experience. It took me two months to learn all the lines, as I needed to know them automatically — to not have to think about the words — to be free to use emotion. I did it for the experience. For two months I did four hours every day, and nearly became crazy, but it’s an experience. It’s good training, because it’s a completely different way to work.”

A former footballer aspiring to be a cultural polymath is a sitting duck for derision.

He’s equally effusive about his most famous role to date, the eponymous part in *Looking for Eric*, Ken Loach’s dark comedy, in which Cantona plays a chimerical version of himself, offering life coaching to a football-fanatic postman in an existential crisis. “Working with Ken Loach, the actors don’t know the script,” Cantona says. “The chronology is like it is in life — you don’t know what will happen tomorrow. The day before, you get the lines for the day after. Loach refers to it as ‘more reacting than acting’. He has some surprises prepared, and if anything strange happens, you just carry on acting. That’s why his movies look like documentaries. He gives actors the freedom to improvise.”

Cantona has an imposing screen presence and delivers lines deftly, but he is the first to admit that, but for his celebrity earned in another field, he probably wouldn’t be getting the chance to relish yet another outlet for his self-expression. Yet he takes it extremely seriously. “I try to understand what I read in scripts, interpret all the characters psychologically, then apply my own experience,” he says. “I think I’m not a bad reader, and I like to work also with young directors sometimes and discover their work. Some actors don’t want to take the risk of working with a young director, but I’m not afraid of that. I trust my instinct.”

Delphic utterance

A former footballer aspiring to be a cultural polymath is a sitting duck for derision, and one criticism frequently levelled

at Cantona — who has also tried his hand at poetry, film directing (the 2002 short *Apporte-Moi Ton Amour*) and stage acting (*Face au Paradis*, a play directed by his second wife, Rachida Brakni) — is

that he takes himself too seriously. And that Delphic utterance referred to earlier — his most famous quote to date, and one now etched on the brains of even the non-football savvy — had a kiln-like effect on the reputation he has, among more cynical observers, for humourlessly reverent intellectualism.

The moment came in a news conference at Croydon Crown Court, where he’d won an appeal against a two-week prison sentence and instead been sentenced to 100 hours’ community service. His crime, for those late to the party, was to retaliate to taunts from an opposing fan in the stands (having been sent off) with a nifty bit of taekwondo. For those on whose memories the whole quote isn’t scored indelibly, Cantona’s single gambit to the gathered journalists before leaving the room, ripples of bemusement in his slipstream, was: “When the seagulls follow the trawler, it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea.”

Perplexingly, many observers, including professional wordsmiths, couldn’t seem to decipher the metaphor (it’s actually pretty strong, although he’ll come up with one that’s equal to it before we part company today). Even more bizarre was how few people could see just how firmly Cantona’s tongue was placed in his cheek. Cantona knew he was hurling a vast, omega-rich treat for the Fourth Estate to feast on. Watch the clip: at one point he has to stop speaking, ostensibly to drink some water but in fact to prevent himself from corpsing. At least two of the many television



Clockwise from top left: Cantona during a game against Manchester City, 1993; with shaved head and upturned collar, 1996; alongside Mads Mikkelsen in *The Salvation*, 2014; the Hautfence Vortex Primary by Eric Cantona; playing Monsieur de Foix in *Elizabeth*, 1998; playing himself in *Looking for Eric*, 2009; on the set of *Anka The Brazilian*, 2015; and filming *Anka* in Croatia, 2015.

advertisements he's made since reference sardines or seagulls with witty self-deprecation, and Cantona's overlooked capacity for "auto-derision", as he puts it, also found voice in *Looking for Eric* with the line, "I am not a man, I am Cantona".

In other words, Eric Cantona is not as self-reverential as many seem to think. In his 1994 autobiography, *Un Rêve Modeste et Fou (A Humble and Crazy Dream)*, Cantona wrote: "When I see a bicycle, I'm sure I can beat the world record and win the Tour de France." And today, when I ask him if he still feels like this, he laughs uncontrollably for at least a minute before snapping his face straight. "With a tandem, maybe. With Lance Armstrong."

So is the invincibility he felt as a younger man really all but vanquished? "Yeah, I still feel it," he smiles. "I'm still exhilarated by danger and discomfort. I just feel lucky to have the power to express. There are many people who would love to and never have the opportunity, or didn't have the luck I had with my parents. It costs nothing to express yourself. You can do it with a piece of paper and a pen. There are some people who don't know how to because they didn't grow up around good influences. It's why art workshops, working with kids in poor areas, is very important."

Cantona's social conscience, like his tendency to laugh at himself, doesn't receive the attention it might. His political efforts are typically ambitious: in 2010 he advocated a co-ordinated mass withdrawal of savings to bring down the banking system, and two years later sought the 500 signatures necessary to stand for the 2012 presidential vote, in order to highlight the plight of housing for the poor. While exploits such as handing his Rolls-Royce Corniche II to New York-based graffiti artists JonOne (it subsequently fetched £110,000 at a homeless charity auction in 2013) grab the headlines, his work as a patron for the homeless charity Fondation Abbé Pierre stays under the radar. "Abbé Pierre was a great man," Cantona says. "The foundation is a very serious and strong one. They do everything they can do, but the work they do, there can never be enough. The problem's too big."

Those who would give rich ex-sportsmen with social consciences short shrift, by the way, might want to consider the fact that, when he lived in England, Cantona spurned the gated properties and McMansions favoured by contemporary footballers and instead lived with his first wife, Isabelle, and their two children in a semi-detached house, so that the family could integrate with the community.

Europe's refugee crisis is another subject that inflames him today. "France is a country of immigration," he says. "We all have our origins, and this country was built on that. All waves of immigration have given a lot. If some people don't have a heart, they only think about the economy, but immigration helps the economy. They do the jobs that nobody else wants to do. In France, in the 1910s and 1920s, you had people who were working in the mines from Poland. It's always been like this. People are despairing and desperate. So some of them will go and vote for right-wing extremists." He thinks deeply for a minute — Eric Cantona is not a man who finds long, profound silences between two strangers awkward — then his eyes widen and his brow

furrows. "I don't want to live in this country any more," he says. "I hate this country. Hate the arrogance of this country. We go to Syria, give our advice to the world, like we think we're the only ones in the world with the truth to share. In these kinds of times you need anticipation — you need very clever people in charge of countries. People like Churchill. People who think about our children and grandchildren, not just tomorrow or the five years they are in charge."

The nefariousness of the political status quo, he says, reflects a broader cultural zeitgeist. "We are a society that wants everything today, now" — he clicks his fingers — "and doesn't care about tomorrow. So with the media reflecting this, of course politics is like this, too. The last generation of politicians are representing the period [in which] we've had reality T.V. shows, and so on. Instant gratification and consumption. Thinking about the time they will be in charge. But politicians should be stronger and higher than how the system is." It's not surprising that social media is anathema to him. "Twitter and Facebook? I don't even know how they work. I like to feel free. I don't like the idea of illusions of freedom, and this is what Twitter and Facebook are. They're good for business, but for 95 per cent of people who go on them, it's just to exchange a plate of food, a selfie — like mobile phones, another illusion of freedom. Young people think posting stuff about dinner or the music they're listening to at night makes them free, but it will follow them for

ever... If I have my telephone with me, there are people who know where I am any time. I prefer to travel free, with nobody knowing where I am."

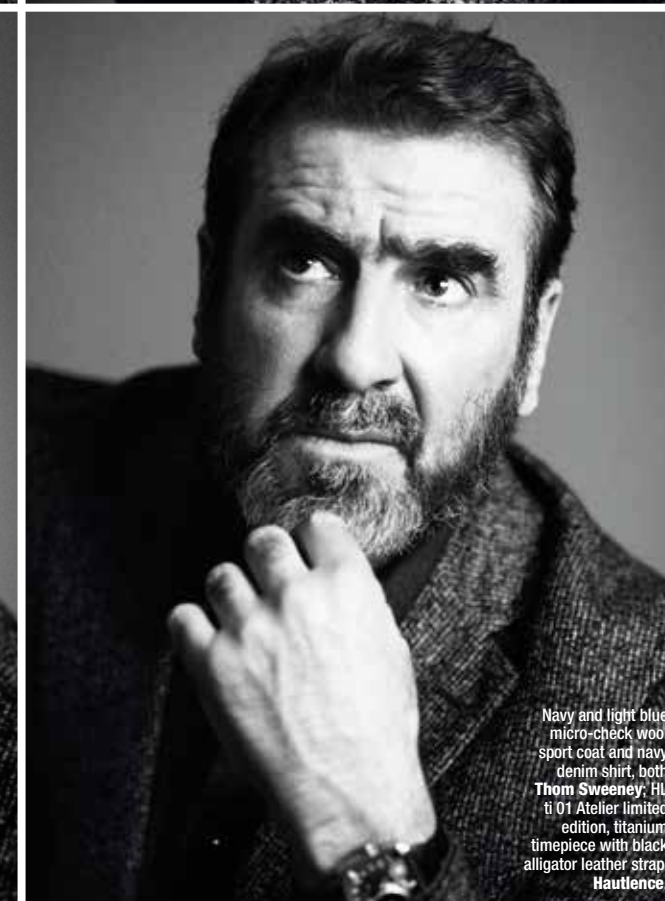
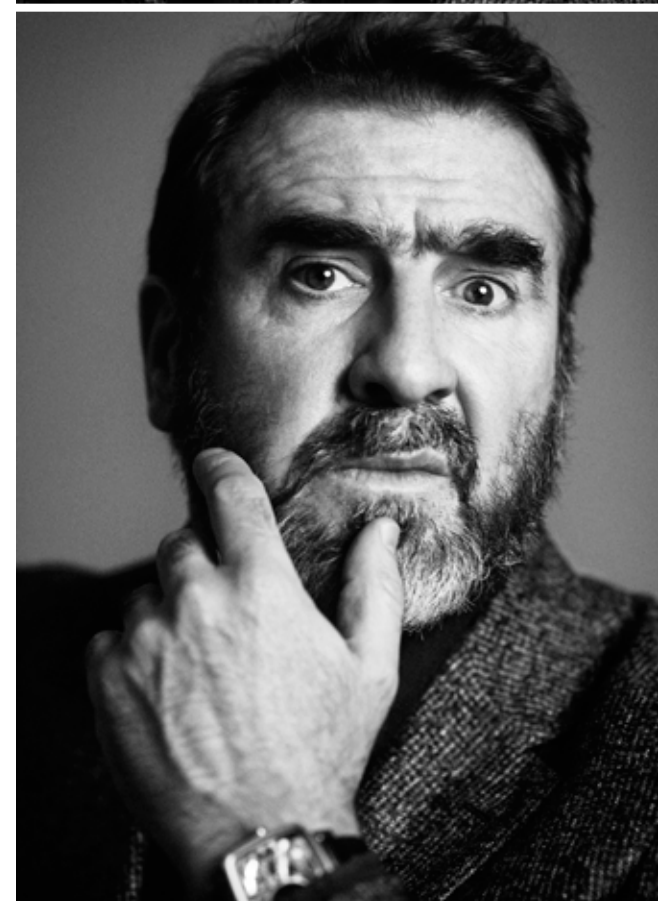
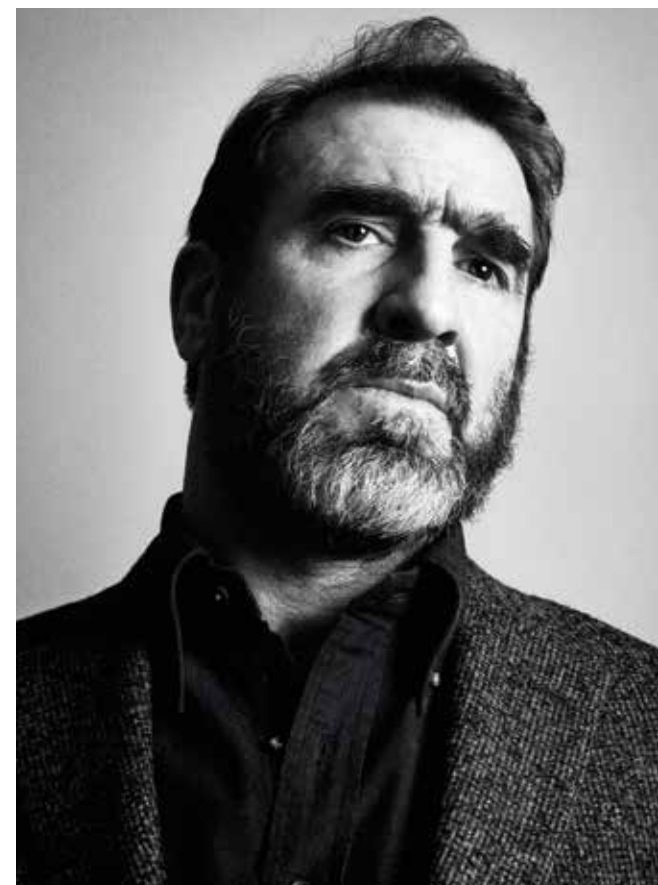
'Sac à merde'

Cantona's anger is of the righteous variety, undoubtedly. But has it always been? During his playing career, he garnered a reputation for being, shall we say, a little prickly. The moments that Cantona's combustible temper got the better of him (besides that martial arts episode) include calling each member of a disciplinary panel an 'idiot', one by one, after he threw a ball at an official while playing for Marseille; throwing his boots in the face of a Montpellier teammate who criticised him; and calling then French national manager Henri Michel a "sac à merde" for dropping him in 1988. He averaged a red card once every 24 Premier League games. Playing a particularly ill-tempered fixture during his Auxerre days against some bruisers from a mining town in the Auvergne, as one anecdote goes, he left the changing room after the match and took on a mob of 10 players waiting for him with his kit bag, his fists and his feet until manager Guy Roux stepped into the melee.

His fury is not just down to a surplus of epinephrine and norepinephrine, though. And there's more to it than the innate rebelliousness that, in his youth, saw him and his Auxerre teammates play dodgems with defunct cars in the local rubbish tip. A better understanding of Cantona's temperament can be found in the fact that, while doing national service for the Bataillon de Joinville, he was banished 150 miles to Orléans to lug bags of potatoes around for refusing to shave.

Eric Cantona loathes authority with a passion, and an

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Opposite page:
Silk dressing gown,
Dolce & Gabbana;
eye frames, property
of Eric Cantona.

anecdote he tells in *Un Rêve Modeste et Fou* perhaps reveals the fuel of the fire in his belly. Aged 12, Cantona was playing for Les Caillols and was clear on goal to equalise in the dying seconds of the 1978 Coupe de Provence final, having dribbled past a handful of opponents, when the referee penalised him for his bootlaces having come undone. To the letter of the rules of the game, the decision was right; to Cantona, the incident typified how officialdom is the enemy of invention. It's herein that Eric Cantona's loathing of authority, which thrives to this day, resides.

For most of us, authority is the enemy of autonomy; for Cantona — a man who could never have played as a defender — it is also the enemy of creativity. This is why those he admires most include David Bowie (“like Auguste Rodin, just too clever to live in his time”) and the French dramatist, poet, essayist, actor and director Antonin Artaud, while George W. Bush encapsulates everything he loathes about humanity. Even the notion of language, being a collection of terms whose concepts and connotations are imposed by a majority rule, riles him as a kind of tyranny. “Who is a ‘terrorist’ and who isn’t?” he says. “You have extremists in all religions — in France 30 years ago, Catholic extremists set fire to a cinema with people inside it because *The Last Temptation of Christ* was showing. Who is ‘crazy’ and who is ‘normal’? This is an internal, obsessional question for me. Who has decided where the limits go? We have a lot of people who everybody thinks is normal, but in fact they’re the crazy ones, especially in politics. There are people in charge of

democratic countries killing hundreds of thousands of people, and no one will judge them like they will judge the president of a poor African country for crimes against humanity.”

Cantona has been a retired professional footballer for half a decade longer than he was a professional footballer. These days he lives in the Fontenay-sous-Bois commune in Paris's eastern suburbs. He travels extensively — Lisbon's indefinable energy inspires him the most — and leads a charmed and varied life. The sum total of his life goals are encapsulated by his favourite word, ‘metamorphosis’. But while that term refers to an entire biological rebirth, is every aspect of Cantona's core subject to constant reformation?

There are parts of his idiosyncratic make-up that will forever be. Twenty minutes after our interview is completed, an SMS from a colleague summons me back to the hotel suite. Eric wishes to speak to me again. It'll be the first of three recalls to the scene, during which he'll clarify his previous assertions about terrorism, sanity and social media. For the first of these reconvenings, though, Cantona — having interrupted his pre-photoshoot haircut to embellish one of his previous utterances — re-enters the suite wearing a barber's poncho, beer in hand, eyes inflamed, and raises an index finger. “Let me tell you what France is today,” he says. “It is like the old lady who loves her garden but is now too frail to take care of it, to make it give bloom, give colour. So she plants plastic flowers instead. That is France today.”



PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT: SAM FORD
FASHION STYLIST: JO GRESZCZUK
GROOMING: KAZUKO KITAHARA

DESIGN FOR LIFE

Why Eric Cantona's association with Hautlence is a timely affair

Before designing Hautlence's Vortex Primary timepiece, Eric Cantona turned his aesthetic verve to the Swiss company's Invictus Morphos model (“The butterfly wings mixed with the skeletonised effect is about eternity,” he says of his first horological creation).

All in all, the pair make an excellent match. “I joined them in 2014, because they're always trying to find new ways, new things, with watch mechanisms,” Cantona says. “They're like crazy geniuses. I've discovered so much I didn't know. I was always passionate about watches before, but not by mechanisms.”

Visiting Hautlence's atelier in La Chaux-de-Fonds changed that, he says: “I watched the mechanisms being made, from A to Z, observing these very passionate people working on tiny parts, making them beautiful even though nobody will ever see them. I'm passionate about this world in which people try to find different ways to describe the time. ‘What is time?’ is an eternal question, and an obsessional one for me.”

Surely the most absorbing aspect of the relationship for Eric, though, is its provision of yet another outlet for self-expression. As he puts it: “I am searching for abstract ways of expressing reality, abstract forms that will enlighten my own mystery.”