Eduardo Chillida at Ordovas

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"It's been said that his works are not in space but that they are space," the novelist Carlos Fuentes wrote about Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002). It is hard to disagree after an encounter with Chillida’s alabaster works on view at Ordovas, which presents the first London gallery exhibition of the Basque sculptor for almost two decades.

Arquitectura Heterodoxa III (2000) is a cube of the translucent stone in which cuboid voids have been carved; the relationship of these negative spaces to the whole are the sculpture’s subject. But although the work is like a condensed exercise in architecture (if one was small enough to wander through its voids, it would seem a heavenly temple), it appears as light as the air around it. In the words of critic John Borger, the Honorary Academician could ‘carve alabaster so that it seemed to fall like a dress on the floor’.

The alabaster sculptures are shown in the downstairs room of the gallery, surrounded on the walls by drawings and paper constructions. The latter also investigate three-dimensional space as, although appearing flat from afar, the layering of white, beige and black papers produces shadows – one imagines one is floating high about a modernist structure in the sculptor’s imagination.

Upstairs the gallery presents four pieces in weathered steel, as, of course, metal was his métier. Chillida swam out of the artistic slipstream of Julio González and Pablo Picasso, whose welded works changed the conception of what sculpture could be, but unlike his fellow Iberians he took inspiration from the natural world. His public sculptures are situated across the world, often in natural environments, and his most famous work comprises three forms that curve out like pincers from the rocks of San Sebastián’s bay, Comb of the Wind (1977).

When Philip King PPRA visited the sculpture for the first time he said: “It brings you up against the forces of nature, of water, sky and air and even fire.” In two steel works (1994) on view at Ordovas, the figure and the environment also come together: vertical forms inhabit a horizontal sheet of steel, like sentries standing guard over the land.

- Eduardo Chillida is at Ordovas until 27 July 2013.

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