Basque brawn
Alastair Smart

EDUARDO CHILLIDA
★★★★★ | Ordovas, to Jul 27, ordovasart.com; 020 7287 5013

Some people are just born lucky. Where most of us plug and toil away in a bid to do one job decently, a precious few – like Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida (1924–2002) – are gifted enough to excel in two different careers entirely.

Chillida started out as a goalkeeper for his local football side, Real Sociedad, and was on the verge of a move to mighty Real Madrid when a knee injury cut his playing days short. Unperturbed, he fell back on Plan B: a 50-year artistic career that would see him garlanded with honorary membership of London’s Royal Academy, Paris’s Grand Prix National des Beaux Arts, as well as exhibitions aplenty worldwide.

Not bad work if you can get it. In truth, Chillida always claimed the skills of one job transferred to the other, and he didn’t just mean manual dexterity. He had a propensity for monumental sculptures, arguing that space itself was his material in chief. And for this he required just the same grasp of space’s potentialities as he had done when playing between the goalposts in La Liga.

The current exhibition of his work at Ordovas Gallery, in Mayfair, is Chillida’s first in the UK since a Yorkshire Sculpture Park show in 2003. The focus is on a set of much smaller sculptures, which – before visiting – had left me rather unexcited: to bring Chillida indoors seemed, in every sense, to diminish him. His best works are huge abstracts in iron and steel that interact engagingly with the natural environment around them. Most famously, his prong-like Wind Combs, protruding from the rocks of his hometown San Sebastián into the Bay of Biscay: playful riffs on Poseidon’s trident that are at times caressed, at times battered, by the sea beyond.

Though unmistakably modern, Chillida’s public works – with their curious hollows and curves – manage to evoke eerie, prehistoric monuments, especially when found in a land as ancient as the Basques’ and when made from the ancient local material of iron. Surely, a white-walled gallery in Savile Row wouldn’t quite be the same.

True, but the steel sculptures on display are still hefty (routinely weighing in at 200 stones), and one can’t help but be impressed both at Chillida’s sheer strength in forging them (he never cast) and ability to turn rough, heavy metal into something lyrical. The pillars of Idea para un Monumento (1994), for instance, reminded me of three aged friends (two tall, one short) stopping to chat in a Basque square. The pair of vertical forms in Basoa IV, in turn, might be two boxers in a clinch, one delivering a cheeky upper-cut to the other.

English-speaking commentators often compare Chillida’s work to that of peers such as Caro and Moore, but perhaps a Spanish context is more instructive. For, alongside the likes of painter Antoni Tàpies, he formed part of a generation of late-Fifties abstract artists who sprang up in Spain in oblique opposition to General Franco – whose regime preferred old-school, academic art of clearly-comprehensible figuration. Chillida was no fan of the Generalissimo, who ruthlessly crushed all Basque claims to freedom and self-rule. In 1988 he created Gure Aitaren Etxea, a “monument of peace” for the Basque city of Guernica, on the 50th anniversary of its destruction by Franco-backed, Luftwaffe bombing.

The show also includes works in alabaster, many of them looking like blocks of Idiazabal cheese, cut intricately into geometric pieces. My favourite, though, Arquitectura Heterodoxa III, is altogether different. This block boasts hollowed-out “windows” on its sides, which not only allow light to enter and diffuse within but which also inspired Chillida’s most ambitious project of all.

He longed to carve a huge, 50-cubic-metre hollow out of the middle of Mount Tindaya on the Canary Island of Fuerteventura – with two tiny shafts allowing light in at the top and a small path allowing visitors in at the side. Environmentalists, however, failing to see the artistic merit in what was ostensibly a sculpture of thin air, protested that the mountain might collapse. Despite repeated false dawns, Chillida’s dream was never realised. Local government bureaucracy was one peak he just couldn’t scale.