

Eduardo Chillida

In 1943, aged 19, Eduardo Chillida's football career ended. Eduardo, who died in 2002, could be considered one of Spain's great modernist artists, best known for his monumental public works, and previously described as 'the greatest living sculptor' by Thomas M Messer, former director of the Guggenheim Foundation. But he might never have become an artist at all, had he not suffered a horrific injury while playing in goal for Real Sociedad in his Basque Country hometown of San Sebastián. Eduardo's son, Luis, tells me a story from years after his father's retirement from football: 'my mother went to a shop and placed an order in Chillida's name, to which the shopkeeper said "Are you the wife of the former Real Sociedad goalkeeper? Your husband would have gotten far if it hadn't been for the injury." That's when my mother thought that he would have never become the artist he ended up being if he had continued in his football career.'

The definitive moment occurred on 14 February 1943, when Sociedad faced Real Valladolid in a league game, which they ultimately won 3-1. During the match Eduardo collided with Valladolid striker Fernando Sañudo, seriously damaging his knee. He attempted to make a comeback in April that year, in a friendly against Real Madrid, but this was his final game. His injury forced him to leave the field, and while he subsequently underwent a series of surgeries, he would never play professionally again.

Eduardo had played one season of professional football, fourteen games as a goalkeeper for Real Sociedad in the league and the Copa del Generalísimo (now known as the Copa del Rey) from 1942-1943. Although his career was cut short, it wasn't without success. In his lone season, he ousted the veteran Tomás Eguia to become the team's first choice keeper, helping them secure promotion as they won the second division title. And while he wasn't the tallest, he was highly rated for his agility and quick reflexes, earning the nickname 'the cat'. His form even attracted the attention of Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atlético Madrid. But it wasn't to be. He never fully recovered and had to retire from professional football while still a teenager. As such, Fernando Sañudo might take credit for inadvertently starting the artistic career of one of Spain's most significant sculptors.

Eduardo's father, Pedro, was instrumental in instilling an interest in both art and football from a young age, and the two were interlinked throughout Eduardo's life. Real Sociedad, in particular, were closely tied to the family. Eduardo keenly supported them throughout his life, following the games on radio and television after retiring, as he found it too difficult to return to the stadium once he was unable to play. During his playing days, his father Pedro was even Sociedad president, although the club are keen to point out that 'this relationship did not influence his signing.' Pedro insisted on the importance of art education for his children, and drawing became an important hobby for Eduardo. Luis recalls that Eduardo 'used to tell us that during the [football] team's trips and training camps, he used to draw his teammates, their knees, hands... His love for art was always there, even when he didn't know how to express it.'

At the age of 18, Eduardo was invited for a trial, where he impressed the club coach Benito Díaz and was signed for the team. The Spanish Civil War had recently ended, and Sociedad were in a precarious financial position. They became something of a yoyo team – a Basque equivalent to West Bromwich Albion – bouncing between the first and second divisions several times throughout the 1940s. At the time, Sociedad only fielded players of Basque heritage, something that would continue until 1989 when the club signed John Aldridge from Liverpool for £1 million. During Eduardo's time, and for long after, this policy was an important manifestation of Basque identity while Spain was under General Franco's fascist dictatorship, which promoted the supremacy of Castilian Spain, suppressing the cultures of regions such as the Basque Country and Catalonia. The importance of

Basque culture is a key link between Eduardo's footballing and artistic careers, Luis says that his father's artistic 'language, in a certain way, is Basque identity.'

Despite his interest in art, becoming an artist wasn't the obvious next step after leaving football. Luis says that when his father retired 'it was time to think about what he wanted to do with his life and he always told us that it was much easier for him to decide what he didn't want to be. So, by discarding many options, he arrived at architecture.' Thus, in 1943, soon after hanging up his football boots, he moved to Madrid to study architecture. This became his life for the next four years, until he quit his studies in 1947 to pursue his artistic ambitions. According to Luis, Eduardo 'began to realise that what attracted him to it was the creative side and his freedom when it came to working'.

This naturally led him towards art, and the creative freedom that it could offer. This took him to Paris, where he stayed from 1947 until 1951. While in Paris, Eduardo spent time studying ancient Greek art in the Louvre and began experimenting with semi-figurative sculpture in materials such as plaster and clay. However, upon his return to Spain in 1951 began to move towards the ruggedly abstract style that he is best known for. Eduardo settled in Hernani, just outside of San Sebastián, and soon began working in iron, completing his first purely abstract piece, *Ilarik* later that year. In Pierre Volboudt's 1967 book *Eduardo Chillida: Art Now*, he quotes Eduardo as saying that 'Up to now I had never ventured to use this material and so I had to learn a completely new technique. The village blacksmith put his workshop at my disposal and I used to take his place in the early mornings before he started work and in the evenings after he'd finished. I learnt how to handle bellows and to stoke the fire. It was a tough apprenticeship.'

In Paris, Eduardo took inspiration from the ancient Greeks, but now he looked closer to home, specifically the traditional funeral monuments of the Basque Country. Via Volboudt, Eduardo described this interest, saying 'In the Basque stelae we are struck by the need to treat reality geometrically, and this is characteristic of all the earliest Basque monuments. In the Basque provinces we can find geometrically conceived figures of Christ with stiff limbs reminiscent of the spokes of those wheel-like suns round which space seems to revolve.'

By coming home, looking at local artistic traditions, and working in iron – which his son Luis describes as a 'material that we [Basques] feel as our own', due to the region's industrial history – Eduardo began to fully realise himself as an artist. With an angular form, a roughly worked surface, and its heavy, thick-lined presence, *Ilarik* shows that he had developed a way of working that would define his career.

However, football remained a presence in Eduardo's life. In 1950, shortly before his return to Spain, he was commissioned by Real Sociedad to produce a sculptural relief for the fruit market next to the club's old stadium, the Atotxa. The work was a semi-abstract response to football, with figures that could be interpreted as players and spectators. But sadly, the final sculpture was never actually realised, as the mould was damaged while being driven from Paris to San Sebastián, and the only remnants are Eduardo's sketches.

The connection goes deeper than this though. Estela Solana, Registrar and Exhibitions Coordinator at Chillida Leku – the museum and sculpture garden based out of Eduardo's former home in Hernani – informs me that Eduardo knew this well enough himself, and previously saying that 'Football and sculpture have a lot in common. The skills that a good goalkeeper needs are exactly the same as those needed by a good sculptor. In both jobs you need to have a great grasp of space and time... a football pitch is a two-dimensional space but this two-dimensional space gains a third dimension at

the goal mouth. This is the goalkeeper's space and it is always where the ball is most active. It is where everything happens.'

While it seems surprising for a football player to reinvent himself as an artist, perhaps it is less of a surprise for a goalkeeper. For one thing, the keeper is the only player on the pitch who is allowed to use their hands. As Eduardo mentions, a goalie also needs a 'great grasp of space and time'; they need to think geometrically, always considering how to position themselves in relation to the ball and the other players, whether reducing the angle for an attacker's shot, or "building" a wall to defend against a free kick. By its nature, less athletically demanding than outfield positions, the goalkeeper might also be considered the most thoughtful role on the pitch.

The goalframe itself might even be considered as a sculptural object; an architectural metal structure, like much of Eduardo's work. Importantly, the goal is also defined by the void at its centre, rather than just the frame itself. To hit the post or the crossbar is not to score, scoring can only be achieved by penetrating that central void. Yet the void needs the frame in order to define itself (childhood arguments over 'hitting the post' when playing jumpers-for-goalposts are an apt illustration of this).

So, we have structure and void in dialogue with each other, a relationship that is mirrored in Eduardo's sculpture. Eduardo went as far as to describe himself as 'an architect of the void' in a 1999 exhibition catalogue (for an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, also home to Real Sociedad's great Basque Country rivals Athletic Bilbao). Art critic Giovanni Carandente expanded on this, saying that in Eduardo's work 'the weight of the void has as much validity as the physical mass'.

Some of Eduardo's best-known works aptly demonstrate this idea. His 1990 work *Eulogy to the Horizon* is the largest he ever made, constructed using over 500 tons of concrete. In its home outside the city of Gijón on the northern coast of Spain, it sits on top of Santa Catalina hill, overlooking both the city and the Cantabrian Sea. Carandente describes it as an 'open form: open to the sea and open to the sky, open, above all, to welcome all comers.' Openness is a defining quality of the work, its great concrete form appears like an invitation to embrace, while it also frames a view out towards the sea and the sky. Despite its size and weight, it also appears remarkably light, rather than imposing. Perhaps this is due to Eduardo's insistence on sculpture as in dialogue with space, rather than just form itself.

If *Eulogy to the Horizon* embraces space, the 1977 series of San Sebastián *Wind Combs* appear to try and contain it. These works were long in the making, initially proposed in the 1960s by Eduardo, as an alternative to a retrospective exhibition that the city had suggested to him. They are among his most ambitious projects, placed in seemingly precarious positions on the actual coastline, jutting out off the rockface itself where they are at the mercy of the wind and sea. Made from iron, that quintessentially Basque material, they look like remnants of a ruin, something mysterious and ancient. In great claw-like forms, they seem to reach out into the air, grasping at the wind and the sea spray. Much like *Eulogy to the Horizon* is completed by the vistas it looks out over, the *Wind Combs* come alive with the presence of the sea, particularly when it swells and rushes up to crash and spray over the sculptures. The structures that Eduardo created, with pincers outlining a central void, seem designed to accentuate this. Once again, form and void are in dialogue to produce a fully realised sculpture.

Monumental works such as these are Eduardo's legacy, what he is best remembered for. But the importance of his footballing days should not be overlooked. Undoubtedly a formative experience, that would shape his life to come, as well as a tantalising glimpse of the path not taken, an alternate

life where he might have gone on to footballing greatness. Eduardo puts it best himself, with his son Luis quoting him as saying 'I have always kept in mind what I have learned from football. People laugh when I say this, but I learned a lot of things from football that I have used later in sculpture.'