Melita Westerlund has lived and created art on three continents. Residing in Bar Harbor since 1982, she regularly exhibits across New England and in her native Finland. “Over many years I have been exploring the interrelationship of color and form,” says Westerlund. “The shapes I create and colors I use have been inspired by a combination of my American and African experiences and my traditional Finnish background.”

The artist combines these cultural influences into a unique sculptural style that is fluid, organic, and endlessly imaginative. Her sculpture ranges in size from tabletop pieces to room-sized public commissions and kinetic works for both indoor and outdoor sites. Her early focus was figurative, though that evolved over time to the much more abstract and complex style that she is known for today. As an artist who is continuously challenging herself, some of her recent work is in fiber, specifically cotton fiber, using a metal and mesh armature to create sculptures with fluid textural surfaces and saturated color. Her most recent series, “Environmental Chaos,” has been motivated by the increasingly fragile state of coral reefs around the world and is created with recycled fiber.

Born and raised in Helsinki, Finland, Westerlund traveled to Tunisia to study at L’Ecole Des Beaux Arts, then returned to Helsinki to attend the Free Art School and graduated from the University of Arts and Design. She later earned an MFA in Sculpture from SUNY Buffalo. She has completed 16 public commissions in schools around the state under the Maine Arts Commission’s Percent for Art program. Other exhibition credits include museums and art galleries in New England, New York, Finland, and Kenya.

by Carl Little

As this celebration of 35 years of sculpture attest, the Finnish-born Melita Westerlund is a master artist. Recognized in her adopted state (she moved to Bar Harbor in 1982), in New England, and beyond, Westerlund has consistently explored different techniques and materials, catching her audience off guard, as it were, by always being in the avant-garde.

The work that has emerged from Westerlund’s studio, a brick building that once housed the Bar Harbor Electric Light Co., never fails to amaze, delight and compel. Making use of the entire industrial space, she goes about her work without distraction, cutting and welding, sanding and shaping—consistently creating marvelous art.

This exhibition, curated by Robyn Holman in consultation with the artist, offers an exceptional cross-section of work, starting with early figurative pieces in bronze. Runners Early Life I (1972), cast paper, 48” x 30” and Five Seated Figures (1986) capture the dynamics of the human body in space. Several likenesses of family members, also in bronze, demonstrate the artist’s ability to finesse facial features in an empathetic and animated manner.

In the abstract work for which she is best known, Westerlund often embraces the linear and curvilinear. Working in steel, stone and other mediums, she can produce a lyric composition of the sculptural envelope. I think of artists like Dudley Zopp, Lauren Fensterstock, Noriko Sakanishi and Celeste Roberge. One hopes that a future statewide initiative, like those devoted in recent years to fiber art, printmaking, drawing and photography, will focus on sculpture. We have a lot to brag about.

With this retrospective of Westerlund’s work, the Atrium Art Gallery is once again transformed into one of the most exciting—and welcoming—art venues in the state. Free-standing sculptures, aluminum works suspended in air, coral bouquets atop pedestals the space proves to be custom-made for presenting the diversity of this artist’s singular sculptural vision. It offers an occasion for celebration and an opportunity to admire a master.