Melita Westerlund’s Wonder World
by Carl Little

As this celebration of 35 years of sculpture attests, 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 and Five Seated Figures (1980) 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 like the wall piece Mask (1986) or a totemic construction like Grounded (1998). She loves to play hard edge off curves, as in Not from Troy (2002). Different surface textures are sometimes juxtaposed in a single piece.

Westerlund has always been fearless in her approach to materials. At some point in the 1990s, she discovered aluminum. This flexible metal enabled her to produce a range of wall works and free-standing and suspended pieces that dazzle through design and surface treatment. The remarkable Misplaced Invitation (2004) is brilliant in its composition and use of color. To paraphrase Wordsworth, these sculptures “flash upon the inward eye.”

Using pre-consumer cotton fiber waste, Westerlund creates organic forms that conjure the shapes of coral-invented, curious and often colorful. “This is a more serious aspect of my work,” Westerlund told Bangor Daily News reporter Aislinn Sarnacki on the occasion of a show at the Blum Gallery at College of the Atlantic in 2011, “but if I were to make black coral, it would be so depressing.”

Westerlund is one of an impressive group of Maine-based sculptors who have been pushing the sculptural envelope. I think of artists like Dudley Zopp, Lauren Fensterstock, Noriko Sakanishi and Celeste Roberge. One hopes that a future statewide art 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.


Notes
2. “Westerlund’s sumptuously colorful coral reef wall reliefs, however, are the stars of the show. Not only are they visually exciting and handsome, they are technically unusual…, and they deliver a passionate warning about the Earth’s coral reefs….” Dan Kany, “‘Worldview’: Answer’s in the Questions,” Maine Sunday Telegram, March 17, 2013.