

# BOMB

## Material Stamina: Bat-Ami Rivlin Interviewed by Roni Aviv

*Opening objects to their material agency.*

March 8, 2021



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled*, 2020, inflatable kayak, zip ties. Courtesy of the artist.

Bat-Ami Rivlin shares a graceful scrappiness with her sculptures. When we were students together at Columbia University's MFA Visual Arts program, I watched her constantly pushing the limits of her own body and scale. If she needs to lift a wall, she will find a way to do so with a deceiving ease to the outside spectator.

Her current solo exhibition, *No Can Do*, at M 2 3 in New York City exemplifies the ways in which Rivlin puts her objects and her own physicality to the test. The product of constantly stretching both her own and her objects' stamina as she builds and rebuilds, *No Can Do* is a wink to both Rivlin's sculptures and her attitude as an artist: What can I do? How much can I do? There's nothing that I can't do, almost.

—Roni Aviv

**Roni Aviv** The core of your practice features industrial materials and objects that you collect and reconfigure. How do you handle the more practical side of that—of, let's say, moving a wall if need be?

**Bat-Ami Rivlin** If I think about this prompt of lifting a wall, my first instinct is to just do it. When I find an object I'm curious about, I usually don't think about how heavy it is or what I might need to grab it. I end up attempting something I might not always be physically equipped to do. Once, I saw a discarded bathtub near the studio building, and I decided that I needed it for a sculpture, so I grabbed a dolly to carry it back with me. Because I couldn't really lift the tub by myself, it took me ten minutes of struggling just to plop it onto the dolly. The next challenge was to roll it down the slanted street—

**RA**—and to not tumble down with it.

**BAR** Yes, not tumbling down with it onto the nearby highway. At the street corner someone asked if he could help me, and I responded, "Oh, just push me toward the left." And he did! Which was very helpful.

That's kind of how I operate; it's an extreme version of "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it." I'll cross the next action when I get to it. First, I put it on the dolly; then, the next bridge is whether or not I tumble down the street.

**RA** But first you dolly-skate with a bathtub.

**BARI** really like direct action. If I did move a wall, I would likely bang it around, and it would get hurt by me moving it into my studio. The scavenging process in itself affects and damages the objects, which is somewhat similar to what later happens to them in the studio. I'm interested in these objects losing their untarnished image.



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled*, 2019 , tub, tub, tub, tub, tub, foam, bubble wrap, duct tape, bolts, rubber bands. Courtesy of the artist.

**RA** It looks like the objects are both stationary and active, or in the middle of their own process. There is a feeling of possibility, as if there is no singular perfect end to these objects.

**BAR** That's actually pretty accurate. They are caught like this. These objects stew in the studio for a while, then I do things to them. It takes me a while to figure out how to pair them together, but the kind of combinations they are landing on are caught in a moment. They are pretty much frozen as you described it, which is essentially a moment of material agency.

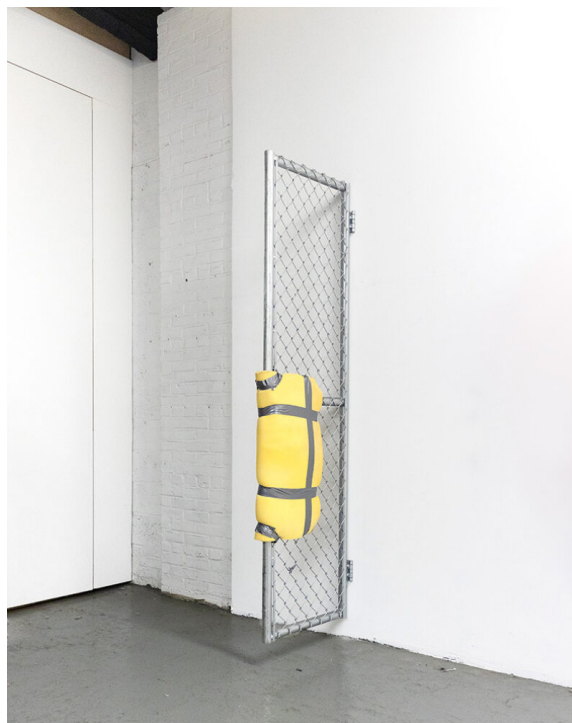
**RA** Can you elaborate on your idea of material agency in the works?

**BAR** It's not insisting that the object does something that is outside of its embedded possibilities. I'm seeing the functionality of these objects as the material agency in itself. These objects are made to just do this one thing, and this is what merges their functionality with their materiality for me.

It's kind of like they're going someplace, but they're incapable of going anywhere else and incapable of operating in any other way—like one-liners or a muscle that can only do one flex. As a sculpture, it's still doing this echo of a function that it can no longer perform. Springs are being pushed down; the zip ties are zipping something; everything is kind of doing what it's supposed to be doing. It's just that it's doing it futilely.

**RA** Yeah, they stay within themselves in their own little limbo. You are letting this thing zero in on itself, letting it perform as it continually digests itself.

**BAR** It's like if something had the function of eating and it couldn't stop. And so it eats itself into nothing. But that process takes a much longer time than we can endure; those things are going to survive after us. We're creating these things that relate to our body in such a strong way. They hold our weight, cushion our bodies, extend our actions; but they are also anti-bodies, anti-us. As time goes by they become bulks of things that will never turn into anything. We're essentially drowning in things that cease to perform after five to ten years, and they can't do anything else but take up space at that point.



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled*, 2019, metal gate, yellow foam, duct tape.  
Courtesy of the artist.

**RA** Your work sends me to thoughts about the struggles of being in the world. What is possible to persist? What is the end? And what is it possible to do with very little means—physically, financially, mentally.

**BAR** Right. To me these objects are dead ends. And being dead ends, they are testing my bodily ability of what I can do to them with my muscles. And that tension projects a certain pessimism. Particularly this past year, which escalated a lot of processes that are worth being really pessimistic about. This kind of sculptural language insists on these particular objects staying themselves, retaining their identity, and exposing their helplessness since they have no cycle to move and transform through.

**RA** What are the tools at your disposal? What are the limitations you work within?

**BAR** I think that the objects I choose give me an abundance of limitations, especially when their transformation is made with simple acts. Holding down an inflated kayak with my body weight so I could zip its deflated areas with cable ties, cutting a bathtub at the center of its curves and jumping on top of it to flatten it down, stretching a plastic screen on a curved three-and-a-half by seven-foot steel remesh sheet; taking these direct actions is part of how the work eventually evolves and how it looks.

There is a limitation that comes with the fact that these objects are not made to be changed at all, unless they're taken to huge industrial facilities. There's something in them that exposes our inability to change our own world as we are surrounded by objects that are completely set.

And so instead of changing them I am rearranging them and saying: "Look, this thing, the only thing it can do is function in this particular way, and it can't even do that anymore." It still insists on referencing function. That's important to me because it also has an echo of the body and an echo of a body that constantly works. There's no end to this poisonous productiveness. It lingers in the material even after it's completely incapable of carrying out its role.



*Bat-Ami Rivlin: No Can Do. Installation view. M 2 3, New York City. Courtesy of the artist.*

**RA** A lot of the works, though sculptural, land at flatness.

**BAR** Some of this physical flatness I think comes from forcibly pairing these objects with each other while also paying attention to what they're "letting" me do. So there's something about this dance in which I attempt to do something to the objects, but the objects only collapse in a particular way. It's almost like a cardboard box: force it to collapse, and it would flatten into a cardboard sheet with a

flatness that comes out of the factory and is indicative of the industrial production process embedded in these things.

**RA** You are creating a situation of play between the different possible iterations of the material, merging them into a simultaneous object that speaks to a troubled state. There is an attention to the things you're not supposed to care about, not supposed to look at, thereby altering them while letting them remain within the logic in which they exist. It is a form of sculptural poetry. The content and language are familiar, but the way things are combined allows me to re-see and experience these familiar, almost invisible objects. I am slowed down by the looped objects, strikingly awkward and wounded.

**BAR** Yeah, thank you. I like that way of thinking about familiar language as a way of refusing to elevate the objects. These objects are bound to themselves. Whatever they do is what they do and what they are. They collapse between what they are as objects and what they are as actions.

*Bat-Ami Rivlin: No Can Do is on view at M 2 3 in New York City until March 21.*

*Roni Aviv is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist. Her current project includes an artist book, drawings, and photographs and will be on view at the 2020 Columbia University's MFA Visual Arts thesis show in April.*