

**ArtSeen**

## Bat-Ami Rivlin: *No Can Do*

By **Nicholas Heskes**



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled (grab lines, grab handles)*, 2021. Inflatable kayak grab handles, metal frame, 3 x 23 x 49 inches. Courtesy M 2 3, New York.

Staggered across the corridor-like space of M 2 3 are the discrete sculptures of Bat-Ami Rivlin's first solo exhibition at the gallery. Composed of single-use industrial materials like springs, coils, wires, zip ties, netting, yellow foam, remesh sheets, and duct tape, as well as a partially deflated kayak, "grab lines," "grab handles," and a gate, the sculptures seem to play games with the format of the readymade while suggesting an uneasy relationship between utility and objecthood. These materials are broken, stretched, and bound together in ways contrary to their intended purposes. The gestalt of each sculpture, irreducible to the sum of its parts, is bent into something distinctly alien and useless under the particular pressure Rivlin exerts. An ontological problem seems to lie at the heart of this work, which stands at the threshold of utilization and decay.

A particular sustained tension defines the exhibition. This comes across most clearly in the three small wall works at the front of the gallery collectively referred to as *Untitled (wire, spring)* (2020–21). They are composed of simple bent wire precariously clasped together with springs, seeming as though they might come loose at any time and cause the wires to snap back with force. This tension is the result of the decisive alteration of a material that is meant to clasp and hold, but to no real end. *Untitled (remesh, 4 springs, net, zip locks)* (2019) does the same. Netting is stretched across a curved wire frame; springs press against the net, causing it to become taut. Such physical tension is reflected in the sculptures' relationship to past and future: they are suspended between origin and end, without aim. The only piece that does not reflect this tension as clearly is *Untitled (metal gate, yellow foam, duct tape)* (2019). It is awkward, a dumb interjection into space. The gate has been pulled from its proper place at the entrance to a fenced area, and as if to add insult to injury, the locking mechanism is replaced by soft and ineffective yellow foam that only increases the gate's already abject obtuseness.



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled (metal gate, yellow foam, duct tape)*, 2019. Chain link fencing, metal frame, hinges, polyisocyanurate foam, duct tape, hardware, 84 1/2 x 5 x 24 inches. Courtesy M 2 3, New York.

The centerpiece of the show, *Untitled (inflatable kayak, zip ties)* (2020) is, like all the works, untitled but designated with a list of materials. While idiosyncratic, this decision seems to reflect Rivlin's desire to present objects themselves without indicating what each sculpture should signify. In the case of *Untitled (inflatable kayak, zip ties)* a physical, even practical, relationship to the visitor is arranged. According to Rivlin, her sculptures "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." The kayak is punctured in the middle, which would cause it to deflate were it not for the patchwork of zip ties holding it together. Through the "action," as Rivlin puts it, of tying down the middle of the kayak, these materials cancel each other out, creating a negative scenario out of what would appear to be two positives: proper use of the zip ties, to hold fast, keeping the kayak inflated. While ultimately this is a poor solution to the problem from the perspective of utility, it does serve to bring attention to the present-at-handness of the object broken and divorced from its appropriate context. Similarly, *Untitled (grab lines, grab handles)* (2021) represents a kind of pure possibility. Its title suggests a tactile association between the two grabbable parts which in their proper contexts are used for completely different purposes, one a safety attachment for the kayak and the other intended to assist disabled people with getting in and out of the shower. Through their embrace (literally grabbing each other) the two objects together form a new indeterminate object which is itself neither useful nor completely useless.



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled (inflatable kayak, zip ties)*, 2020. Inflatable kayak, zip ties, 20 x 18 x 110 inches. Courtesy M 2 3, New York.

I see an affinity in Rivlin's work with contemporary sculptors like Nicole Wermers or Michael E. Smith, but Rivlin's work also takes a different path. For example, Wermers presents utilitarian objects in sleek contest with each other, or simply as they are untouched, a defiant approach which follows more faithfully the readymade style. Smith manipulates his materials more; however, they ultimately read like jokes, relying heavily on surprise. When he attempts to bring attention to faulty objects, or brokenness, it is with a certain dark sense of humor. But Rivlin abandons the impulse to make unlikely or surprising combinations of things convey a message, or play a role, if even a small one. The sculptures rather act out on their own, bringing attention to a permanent wound they share, not broken, repurposed, or fixed, but indefinitely repairable.

## **Contributor**

### **Nicholas Heskes**

**Nicholas Heskes** is an artist, writer, and translator.