

ARTFORUM

MAY 2021, VOL. 59, NO. 9

Bat-Ami Rivlin

M 2 3

“No Can Do,” Bat-Ami Rivlin’s cannily spartan solo debut at M 2 3, mined the rich terrain of ontological weirdness that lies between functionality and uselessness, proposing a kind of conceptual junkyard where incapacitated things reveal themselves—and the larger networks of economic and social organization to which they belong—in ways they never could have while operational. Well acquainted with the informal economy of the New York City curb, au fait with both the lightly used castoff and the straight-up piece of junk, Rivlin makes meticulously impoverished bricolage that’s always attentive to the ways in which the human body sizes up the stuff of the world, and vice versa. Stymied, obstructed, bewildered by the nuanced detournements of her deceptively simple constructions, that worldmaking stuff’s thwarted identity as equipment opens it up to new modes of expression: the surfacing of clandestine vitality, grace, and pathos.

Rivlin completed her MFA at New York’s Columbia University in 2019, and while all her work across the past several years has engaged with the spatio-material conditions of corporeality, her main project during this time seems to have been an essentializing one. Transitioning from fleshier student-era forms indebted to figures such as Robert Gober or Alina Szapocznikow, Rivlin increasingly began shaping her abject bodies via blunter consumer and industrial matériel: discarded bathtubs and sinks, a busted dishwasher, sections of fencing, garbage bags, hunks of foam, fat rolls of trashed carpet. The two earliest sculptures on view here were from 2019, and, as is the case with all Rivlin’s works, their frank inventorial titles emphasize how

Bat-Ami Rivlin,
*Untitled (inflatable
kayak, zip ties)*,
2020, inflatable
kayak, zip ties,
20 × 18 × 110".



REVIEWS

the artist’s objects are also always her subjects. In *Untitled (remesh, 4 springs, net, zip locks)*, for example, a nearly six-foot-wide metal grid that called to mind both basic infrastructure and a kind of Minimalist seriality is bent into a slight arc; stretched across its surface over a quartet of coiled springs is a veil of industrial textile that reads like a diaphanous coverlet for a phantasmal bed. And in *Untitled (metal gate, yellow foam, duct tape)*, a too-narrow fence gate was hung incompetently from the gallery wall, its midsection encased in a rough wedge of soft packing material, the intervention suggesting both a bit of IRL jury-rigging designed to cushion a troublesome protrusion and a compositional tactic pitting structure and rigidity against slapdash pliability. The gate cannot do what it is meant to do, but it nevertheless must, like all objects, do *something*; probing the limits of what exactly that might be is, as always, at the heart of Rivlin’s inquiries.

The other four pieces in the exhibition were figured as kindred pairs. Each of the two versions of *Untitled (wire, spring)*—one made this year, the other in 2020—was its own awkward lariat of bent wire held together by small extension springs and pinned to the wall like a bit of industrial taxidermy. The other pair of works were built from different parts of a single inflatable kayak: The smaller of the duo, *Untitled (grab lines, grab handles)*, 2021, was constructed from accessories of the full-size craft; strapped to a nondescript tubular metal frame, the rubber handles puddled on the floor giving the entire construction the look of a flaccid dinghy meant for a toddler. Meanwhile, the mother ship, *Untitled (inflatable kayak, zip ties)*, 2020, was placed on its own in the gallery’s final room. Suggesting a gigantic entomological specimen, it was battened into uselessness with a series of vertebral black zip ties that choked its thorax, leaving only its very ends inflated. Yet despite this centerpiece of Rivlin’s literal object lessons being rendered incapable of inhabiting the operative heroism of its intended purpose, the work, like its compatriots, unexpectedly felt not degraded by her interventions but rather somehow ameliorated by them. Brought across the line of indifference that usually separates us from the devices we use to command our worlds and into a relation of melancholic empathy, Rivlin’s debilitated entities provoked questions not just about the utility, but also about the latent affect, of things.

—Jeffrey Kastner