

Critics Page

M 2 3

By Theodore Mauritz



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled (inflatable kayak, zip ties)*, 2020 inflatable kayak, cable ties 20 × 18 × 110 inches. Courtesy the artist and M 2 3. Photo: New Document.

The role of the gallery within culture is at once aesthetic, economic, and mystical; as it is tasked with preservation, collection, and refuge. M 2 3 functions as a reaction to, and reflection of, the current trends in dominant culture, as well as an intellectual awareness, and economy of artistic achievement. The gallery's exhibitions form a resistance to presiding currents through its interest in linking the way work feels within an artist's studio—an artist's sense of gesture and investigation that galleries often try to simplify and reduce as it enters into the gallery space. This philosophy runs counter to the predominance of decorative works that have at times stifled the conversation within contemporary art. The work widely exhibited in galleries has been canonized as the “art of our time”—but does not reflect what is being produced *in studio*—a scenario that has remained consistent since art took on a more direct consideration as “commodity,” but amplified during the past few years of the lockdown and post-lockdown period and the formation of an algorithmic American market.

While the lockdown produced a heightened awareness to social justice issues and diversity as a result of the murder of George Floyd, a disconnect developed between what galleries were presenting online—and the remarkable output elevated by a renewed sensitivity as a result of this and related events. The artworks presented were those that would be most palatable (and salable) through online platforms, which came to be the American aesthetic when we returned to the IRL gallery experience. This superficial, banal aesthetic was in part influenced by online culture and the temporary rise of the NFT, along with other digital media which in turn elevated the influence of artists, galleries, and collectors whose relevance would have been unconscionable just three years ago.



Installation view of Karinne Smith: *Melon Skin*, 2021. Courtesy the artist and M 2 3, New York. Photo: New Document.

As a gallery, M 2 3 has chosen to focus on artists, exhibitions, and works that speak to art as philosophy, rather than commodity, and theory over hype—preferring a model that is closer to an American *Kunsthalle*, with exhibitions that reflect contemporary culture, and advance the conversation through channels of decentralized action and cooperation. The gallery privileges the ideals of a new generation of diverse artists that reflect contemporary artistic procedure, and explore the lineage of their practices as it relates to art history—while gesturing toward the commercial currency of critical thinking. With extended shows, the gallery has become a space not only for exhibition, but for artistic debate, aesthetic and cultural research, and knowledge production.

The recent solo exhibition and accompanying text by Jonathan Mildenberg titled *The Drowning Dog* alludes to concepts related to safety, the home, and ideas of domicile as a metaphor for the body. *The Drowning Dog* speaks to the current cultural shift away from proven academic standards of aesthetics, science, and truth—resulting in collective insecurity, and a definitive “qualitative crisis.” Karinne Smith’s exhibition *Melon Skin* included collagen sculptures and rotting melons which spoke to the transience of life, the futility of ephemeral pleasure, and the certainty of death. Bat-Ami Rivlin’s sculptures and assemblages created from repurposed objects extract the component, isolate it, and see what its failure tells us about the larger system to which it belonged. Sean Donovan’s current exhibition *Praxis of Matter* speaks to his own activism that is related to the global environmental crisis, and the American denial of mass shootings.

Our program, practices, and gallery outline are inspired in part by historical figures including Leo Castelli—who represented a classical idea of a dealer and gallery as a developing philosophy of aesthetics, and created a community based on artists supporting the gallery and each other such as Hanne Darboven, Robert Morris, and others who advocated for social issues including environmental and social justice through performances and exhibitions, using their platform to center and prioritize human rights. Castelli reigned over contemporary art during one of the most important cultural moments in global society, and contemporary art history—the late 1960s through the early 1970s. We now find ourselves similarly within a new possibility since 2020 and this post-lockdown, post-pandemic moment.

---

#### **Contributor**

Theodore Mauritz  
Theodore Mauritz is the founder and curator of M23. He has been an educator, curator, activist, and collector since starting his career at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY. He has previously operated M23 Project Room, Brooklyn, NY, and worked for Leo Castelli, New York.