

CHICAGO

Scott Wolniak

65GRAND

Setting foot inside the apartment kitchen—cum—art gallery 65GRAND always gives one pause. Yet Scott Wolniak's recent show, dispersed across the walls among domestic fixtures, felt peculiarly fitting within this unorthodox space (now in its sixth year of operation). His five paintings—all of them battered, modestly sized, and monochrome—tug at the ontological condition of the medium, albeit in an ungainly hand. All but one are humorously pierced with found projectiles that conspicuously violate the picture plane. But Wolniak's conceit is not driven by some profound desire to examine the dimensional limitations of a painting's material makeup. Rather, his impetus is farce, and the work's wit is entirely bolstered by its display in a functioning kitchen.

Composition in White and Red, 2010, is audacious in its appraisal of pictorial illusion, as well as the tensile strength of canvas. Hanging with its back facing out from the wall, the painting sports a red brick suspended in a hole torn in its center. The brick seems to have been hurled from across the room: The wooden stretcher bars are cracked and splintered from the apparent impact, pushing the painting outward into a mangled convex form. The canvas, too, is affected, torn and frayed where the stretcher buckles but intact along the lower edges of the frame, retaining a neat row of evenly spaced staples. Almost immediately, however, one realizes that the brick was not thrown. In fact, the abuse was carefully engineered by the artist—in an act of trickery that trades on trompe l'oeil.

Chopstick to Pencil, 2010, is buttressed by similar deception. The work's crumpled canvas and broken stretcher bars are heavily whitewashed, with color relegated solely to a tiny wisp of blue paint at the base of a chopstick that juts from the surface. The painting looks as if it has been subjected to a brutal act of violence. *Little River*, 2009, by contrast, evinces sustained decay: A delicately protruding twig and a small plastic cap are embedded within an encrusted surface. Unlike *Composition in Red and White* and *Chopstick to Pencil*, in which splintered wood depicts savage acts of an imaginary assailant, the tears in the fabric face and the cracking of the paint's surface suggest a dried-up riverbed. The perpetrator here, it seems, is none other than the passage of time.

Adjacent to the kitchen exhibition space, Wolniak projected his single-channel video *Flash Art (Circles and Rectangles)*, 2009. Decidedly low tech, this optical abstraction begins with a shot of an aluminum reflector inside a lamp; a lightbulb in the shot's center flicks on and off. As the video plays on, nearly identical shots are superimposed, but at a steadily decreasing scale, resulting in an array of nested rectangles. The rhythmic blinking of intense light—accompanied by audible clicks from the plastic light switch—presents the viewer with a swift progression of blinding geometries. Although *Flash Art*'s dizzying effects are riveting, the video only feints at probing the limits of its medium. The canvases and their staged brutality, on the other hand, twist painting and its structures in on themselves—however farcically—and slyly bedevil vision.

—Michelle Grabner



Scott Wolniak, *Composition in White and Red*, 2010, acrylic and brick on canvas, 28 x 25 x 8 1/2".