



Sylvan Lionni
K A N S A S

"I get such pleasure just saying what the subject matters of some of the works are: pieces of paper, rulers, and dust." So writes B. Wurtz on the art of Sylvan Lionni, whose second solo exhibition at the gallery, "Half Life," focused precisely on those quotidian things. Continuing his investigation into what he terms "social geometry"—the intersection of physical space with human thought and behavior—Lionni trains his eye on seemingly banal images, objects, and substances, filtering them through a variety of meticulous processes in order to focus our attention on their oft-overlooked visual and conceptual qualities. In this exhibition, the results appear supremely arid at first glance, but ultimately reveal a wry, self-referential wit and a disarming sensitivity to the fascination of surface.

"Half Life" was, appropriately enough, divided into two distinct groups: "dust paintings" and "ruler paintings." But despite their blunt categorizations, neither set was an example of painting per se; the works also make use of photography and screenprinting to arrive at tweaked reworkings/simulacra of physical objects. A set of panels, all titled *Dust* (all works 2014), first appear to be glossy but oddly grimy affairs, monochrome slabs of aluminum coated in fine layers of the titular stuff. Of course, this is slightly less than half the story: Far from being so straightforwardly besmirched, the panels have been printed with the photographic images of their own once-murky surfaces. Even the marks made by a hand swept through the dirt are faithfully recorded.

The ruler paintings (all, of course, titled *Rulers*) also present the viewer with what appears to be found objects, but which are, in a sense, even more carefully contrived than the dust paintings. For these pieces, the artist created exact reproductions of framing squares—a measuring tool used by carpenters that resembles two rulers fused together at a ninety-degree angle. First, he created replicas of these items in the urethane-coated steel; then he printed the copies in acrylics with flat colors and standard calibrations and finally arranged the devices on the wall in simple T-shapes and crosses. In the environment of a painting-free "painting" exhibition, the resultant works refer to the process of imagemaking, the measurement of one compositional element against another.

But while these works function like feedback loops, pointing endlessly to their own origins, they refer outward, too—not least to the work of other artists. Think of Man Ray's *Dust Breeding*, 1920, and, in relation to the ruler paintings, Mel Bochner's late 1960s "Measurement" series—as well as, of course, pieces by countless other artists, from Jasper Johns to Jeff Koons, who have made more or less exact reproductions of everyday objects. There are shades, too, of Christopher Wool's obsession with photomechanical accident and the recycling of gestural marks in the dust paintings' multistage translation of actuality to photograph to trompe l'oeil print. Artist-critic Stephen Westfall characterizes Lionni's approach to painting as a hybridization of Pop and abstraction, and though this may be less obvious in these two bodies of work than it has been in some of the artist's cheerier-looking series, Lionni's desire to extract aura from outwardly unprepossessing sources remains active, as does his attraction to commercial and functional graphics. Only the exhibition's odd man out, *Super A3*, seemed at first to stray into the realm of the individually expressive. But even this—a flawlessly convincing replica of a note-to-self scribbled on a crumpled sheet of graph paper that is actually a print on bent aluminum—turned out to be the machine-made product of the artist's clear but teasing logic.

—Michael Wilson