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# Photo/Ni dual-catalyzed radical defluorinative sulfonylation to synthesize *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones†

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Radical defluorinative functionalization of  $\alpha$ -trifluoromethyl styrenes represents an effective way toward *gem*-difluoroalkenes. There are general interests in developing novel synthetic protocols for defluorinative functionalization with various types of radicals. However, reports on the preparation of *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones via an *S*-centered radical pathway are limited. Herein, we developed a photo/nickel dual-catalyzed defluorinative sulfonylation that rapidly and reliably synthesizes *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones. The merit of this protocol is exhibited by its mild conditions and wide scope, thus providing a novel strategy for the sulfonyl radical participating in radical defluorinative coupling.

As a type of carbonyl isostere, *gem*-difluoroalkenes are usually of unique metabolic stability, bioactivity, and target specificity, thus providing more opportunities for drug discovery (Scheme 1).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the synthesis of *gem*-difluoroalkenes has recently been an emerging goal in organic and medicinal chemistry. Until now, several strategies have been developed for the preparation of *gem*-difluoroalkenes. Classic methods, such as Wittig-type and Reformatsky decarboxylation reactions, usually involve highly reactive species and/or harsh conditions, and result in a limited compatibility of functional groups. As a convergent approach,  $S_N2$ -type reactions, in which fluoride is lost by nucleophilic attack on  $CF_3$ , require strong nucleophiles and may limit their substrate scope.<sup>2</sup> Distinctive in mechanisms, the revival of radical chemistry has provided new opportunities to prepare *gem*-difluoroalkenes, in which the defluorination of  $CF_3$  is achieved by a Ni/Cr-promoted  $\beta$ -F elimination<sup>3</sup> (Scheme 2A) or a photo-/electro-induced radical/polar cross-cover<sup>4</sup> (Scheme 2B). However, most studies of radical defluorinative coupling are focused on *C*-centered radicals or *B*-centered radicals (Scheme 2B). The exploration of other types

of radicals to synthesize diversified *gem*-difluoroalkenes is in crucial demand, yet challenging.

Due to the unique properties of the C–S bond, the construction of *S*-containing compounds has drawn much attention from synthetic chemists over recent decades.<sup>5</sup> Among these organic sulfur compounds, allylsulfones serve as versatile synthetic blocks and can be effectively transformed to other value-added chemicals.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we became interested in the synthesis of *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones which have the potential to integrate the nature of both *gem*-difluoro alkenes and allylsulfones. However, the synthesis of *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones via an *S*-centered radical pathway remains elusive. Challenges still exist in such desired transformations. Defluorinative sulfonylation to synthesize *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones is endergonic by 17.9 kcal mol<sup>−1</sup>, which is thermodynamically unfeasible. In addition, an aerobic difunctionalization to produce functionalized  $CF_3$ -substituted tertiary alcohol is exergonic by −1.2 kcal mol<sup>−1</sup>, which is thermodynamically spontaneous (see the detailed DFT calculation in Fig. S1, ESI†).

To address such a thermodynamic challenge, we focused our attention to the photocatalytic organic reaction that utilizes visible light as energy input, providing a green and sustainable

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Scheme 1 Representative *gem*-difluoroalkenes with biological activity.

## A. Ni-catalyzed radical defluorinative coupling

radical precursor RP = X, OR, CO<sub>2</sub>NPhth etc.

## B. Photo-induced radical defluorinative coupling



## C. This work



**Scheme 2** Recent advances in radical defluorinative functionalization to synthesize gem-difluoroalkenes. (A) Ni catalyzed radical defluorinative coupling. (B) Photo-induced radical defluorinative coupling. (C) Outline of this work.

synthetic protocol. Merging photocatalysis and nickel catalysis, we considered that a radical defluorinative coupling could be achieved based on the addition of a sulfonyl radical to  $\alpha$ -(trifluoromethyl)-styrenes, where the subsequent  $\beta$ -F elimination could be effectively promoted by a nickel catalyst (Scheme 2C). This dual-catalyzed process would offer a solution to avoid a fast side reaction that leads to  $\alpha$ -trifluoromethyl- $\beta$ -sulfonyl tertiary alcohols with trace air. Herein, we report the successful execution of this design plan.

At the outset of our investigation, we chose 1-methoxy-4-(3,3,3-trifluoroprop-1-en-2-yl)benzene **1a** as the radical acceptor and inexpensive sodium benzenesulfinate **2a** as the sulfonyl radical precursor (Table 1). The initial examination was focused on the ligands with Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>(PF<sub>6</sub>)<sub>2</sub> as the photocatalyst and NiCl<sub>2</sub> as the metal catalyst (entries 1–4). To our delight, the desired transformation was successfully realized in 93% isolated yield with 30 mol% **L2** as ligand. By merging Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>(PF<sub>6</sub>)<sub>2</sub> and Ni(bpy)<sub>3</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, the best results were found in MeCN under blue LED irradiation at room temperature to obtain **3a** in 96% GC yield and 90% isolated yield. Control experiments (entries 6–9) proved that Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>(PF<sub>6</sub>)<sub>2</sub>, Ni(bpy)<sub>3</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> and irradiation were essential for this organic transformation. Without the nickel catalyst, only a trace amount of product

Table 1 Optimization of reaction conditions<sup>a</sup>

Entry	Variation from the standard conditions <sup>a</sup>	Yield <sup>b</sup> [%]
1	<b>L1</b> was used	21
2	<b>L2</b> was used	93
3	<b>L3</b> was used	65
4	<b>L4</b> was used	36
5	10 mol% Ni(bpy) <sub>3</sub> Cl <sub>2</sub> was used	96 (90)
6	Without ligand	39
7	Without Ru(bpy) <sub>3</sub> (PF <sub>6</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	n.d.
8	Without Ni(bpy) <sub>3</sub> Cl <sub>2</sub>	Trace
9	Without irradiation	n.d.
10	Eosin Y as photocatalyst	n.d.
11	[Ir(dFCF <sub>3</sub> ppy) <sub>2</sub> ((4,4'-dCF <sub>3</sub> bpy))](PF <sub>6</sub> ) as photocatalyst	12
12	DCE as solvent	21
13	THF as solvent	n.d.
14	Air instead of N <sub>2</sub>	n.d.

<sup>a</sup> Conditions: **1a** (0.15 mmol, 1.0 equiv.), **2a** (0.20 mmol, 1.33 equiv.), Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>(PF<sub>6</sub>)<sub>2</sub> (1.5 mol%), NiCl<sub>2</sub> (10 mol%), ligand (30 mol%) in MeCN (2.0 mL) under N<sub>2</sub> atmosphere and irradiation with blue LED (465 nm) for 6 h. <sup>b</sup> Yields were determined by GC-FID with decane as the internal standard; isolated yield is shown in parentheses.

could obtain and the yield was lowered to 39% without the bipyridine ligand. When using eosin Y or an iridium complex as photocatalysts instead of Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>(PF<sub>6</sub>)<sub>2</sub>, lower yields of **3a** were found (entries 10 and 11). This transformation exhibited a much lower yield with DCE as the solvent and failed with THF as the solvent (entries 12 and 13). Similar to other radical defluorinative couplings, the synthesis of gem-difluoro allylsulfones failed in air (entry 14).

With the optimal conditions in hand, we turned our attention to exploring the generality of our photo/Ni dual-catalyzed radical defluorinative coupling of  $\alpha$ -trifluoromethyl styrene. As shown in Scheme 3, the scope was largely insensitive to electronic changes at the *para* and *meta* positions of trifluoromethylated alkenes (**3a–3k**). However, this defluorinative coupling failed with *ortho*-substituted trifluoromethylated alkenes (see the ESI<sup>†</sup>). Interestingly, other cyclic motifs of CF<sub>3</sub>-substituted alkenes were also suitable radical acceptors for this organic transformation, including naphthalene (**3l**), benzodioxole (**3m**), benzodioxan (**3n**), and *N*-Boc pyrrole (**3o**).

Next, the scope of the sodium sulfonates was examined. A series of *para*-substituted sodium benzenesulfonates, including halides (**3q** and **3r**), amides (**3t**), and trifluoromethyl (**3u**), were all well tolerated, forming the desired products in 54–80% yield. In addition, 2-naphthylsulfonic acid sodium (**3v**) was also a suitable sulfonyl radical precursor for this transformation, providing 64% yield. Pleasingly, sodium alkylsulfonates (**3w–3y**) were also well-tolerated under the reaction conditions and provided yields of 59–94%. To further explore the potential applications of this synthetic



**Scheme 3** Scope of substrates. Reaction conditions: **1** (0.15 mmol, 1.0 equiv.), **2** (0.2 mmol, 1.33 equiv.), Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>(PF<sub>6</sub>)<sub>2</sub> 1.5 mol%, Ni(bpy)<sub>3</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> 10 mol%, MeCN (2.0 mL), room temperature, N<sub>2</sub>, 6 h. Yields of isolated products are shown.

method, we carried out a gram-scale experiment (Scheme 4). The gram-scale reaction between **1a** and **2a** afforded the corresponding gem-difluoroalkenes **3a** in 96% isolated yield.

Based on previous reports,<sup>4h,7</sup> a plausible mechanism of this radical defluorinative sulfonylation is shown in Scheme 4. Firstly, sodium benzenesulfonate is preferentially oxidized by photo-excited Ru<sup>II</sup>(bpy)<sub>3</sub> to generate the corresponding sulfonyl radical and Ru<sup>I</sup> complex. Then, radical addition occurs between the sulfonyl radical and **2a** to form a benzyl carbon radical **I**, which can further react with Ni<sup>II</sup> to form alkyl-Ni<sup>III</sup> species **II**. Next, the final product **3a** is obtained *via* a β-F elimination from **II**, and at the same time Ni<sup>III</sup>-F is generated. Finally, Ru<sup>II</sup>(bpy)<sub>3</sub> and Ni<sup>II</sup> are regenerated *via* a single electron transfer between the Ru<sup>I</sup> complex and Ni<sup>III</sup>-F and the catalytic cycle is completed (Scheme 5).



**Scheme 4** Gram-scale experiment. **1a** (6 mmol, 1.0 equiv.), **2a** (8 mmol, 1.33 equiv.), Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>(PF<sub>6</sub>)<sub>2</sub> (0.09 mmol, 1.5 mol%), Ni(bpy)<sub>3</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> (0.6 mmol, 10 mol%), 80 mL CH<sub>3</sub>CN, r.t., 465 nm, 12 h.



**Scheme 5** Proposed mechanism.

We have demonstrated that a radical defluorinative sulfonylation, consisting of the addition of a sulfonyl radical to alkenes and a nickel-promoted β-F elimination, leads to a challenging coupling of sodium sulfonates and CF<sub>3</sub>-substituted alkenes to synthesize a series of *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones. This protocol features mild conditions, a facile synthesis, and a wide scope of substrates. We believe that this method not only provides a rare example of a sulfonyl radical participating in the synthesis of *gem*-difluoro allylsulfones, but also represents a new strategy of photo/nickel dual-catalyzed defluorinative functionalization.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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