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ROSS SIMONINI TAKES A NAPKIN

By EMILY MCDERMOTT



ABOVE: AN INSTALLATION VIEW OF ROSS SIMONINI'S 12 "ANXIETY NAPKINS" AT MARTOS GALLERY

Life is about the little things. We all know the saying and take it for granted, rarely considering what it actually means. Often, for artists, a simple word, sight, or doodle inspires a larger body of work. As viewers, however, we only see the final product. The little things—even if they exist in and of themselves, linked to nothing bigger—are left outside the gallery walls. But artist Chuck Webster wants them to be seen. Accordingly, he curated the exhibit "The Age of Small Things," which opens this week at Dodge Gallery and features small works

by over 40 artists, including Sigmar Polke, Kiki Smith, Philip Guston, and Ross Simonini.

Simultaneously, a series of small works by Simonini join together as a larger installation in the exhibition "Bad Fog" at Martos Gallery. Over the course of three years, Simonini stole napkins from high-end restaurants and used them in place of sketchbooks. He drew on the napkins during dinners, but also carried them around in his bags and pockets, pulling them out whenever he felt anxious.

"I thought of them as this way of soaking up the anxiety or cleaning up the anxiety in the way you use a napkin," Simonini says.

While he has created over 30 napkins, only 12 are on view in "Bad Fog." Similar to the theme of "The Age of Small Things" at Dodge Gallery, Simonini's napkins at Martos Gallery began as one idea, but have since led to others. Simonini spoke with us about his anxiety napkins, what exactly they mean, and what he's working on now.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: What inspired you to steal these napkins?

ROSS SIMONINI: I started thinking about mark-making as a broader practice than just drawing or painting. Then I started thinking about daily activity that would leave a residue, and one of those would be wiping your face on a napkin. I liked that it has a history, a personal element, and a performance aspect to it. When you're at a dinner, you're sort of making this art without changing anything that you're doing. You're just changing the way you're thinking about it. Then I started to extend and blur the lines between this natural form of art-making and art mark-making. I would put the napkin in my lap and throughout the dinner start to draw. That continued to where I would take the napkin and put it in my bag or pocket and I would carry it with me throughout the day and make marks on it whenever I felt anxiety. If there were marks from the dinner, I would respond to those. A lot of my work uses food anyway.

MCDERMOTT: So it was like an extension.

SIMONINI: Yeah. Sometimes I use food in more careful, purposeful ways, where I'm trying to explore what that food does—what it does to the body, or if it has some negative aspect. Sometimes I choose to do particulars, like turmeric or aloe vera juice or things that make sense at a particular time for me. I like how this married the thing I was doing in my studio with food and the food that I was eating in the outside world. Also, napkins are like little canvases that you can carry around. They're not just paper or sketchpads. They're more substantial. With a canvas, you're asking someone to not think about the canvas too much. Certain artists obviously draw attention to the canvases, but in general the canvas is this window, but the napkin isn't. It's still a napkin. You see the marks on top of the napkin. I have trouble ignoring the canvas, but this is a surface that has associations and you can play off of those.

MCDERMOTT: Was each napkin completed within a day?

SIMONINI: Some of them started that way but then became more extensive. I started keeping them with me, and thinking about them functioning like worry stones. It becomes an intimate object that way. The person connects with it and puts their worries onto it. I wasn't having worries so much at the time, but I was having anxiety and was particularly interested in addressing the anxiety. I wouldn't even look at [the napkins] a lot of the time when I was marking on them. It was not an ocular thing, I guess. The way people talk about anxiety is that it's an above-the-shoulders kind of thing. It's all in the head. But if I'm not looking at the

napkin and I'm making the mark, then it's not about hand-eye coordination. It's more about a physical kick.

MCDERMOTT: Do you consider yourself an anxious person in general?

SIMONINI: No, I don't think that I am, but I think that everybody has anxiety to some degree. The time period in which I was making them, I had recently moved to New York, and I'm in a band and we were on tour constantly. I started thinking a lot about making art that wasn't just in a sketchbook on the road. I started bringing canvases with me and when we had free time I would unpack and work on those, but that's not always convenient. The nice thing about napkins is that you can keep them in your pocket, and if you have three minutes or if you're driving or if you're talking to people, it can be comforting. It's almost like a massage. Being on tour is a particularly stressful, anxious time, because you're constantly moving. You go from the hotel to the car to the hotel. Having something like the worry stone—you can grab it, you can pull it out—is something to keep focused on. I wouldn't say that I'm a particularly anxious person, but it's about extracting anxiety in general. Not just my anxiety, but a larger environmental anxiety. Everybody, especially in New York, has anxiety and hears that word and it triggers different things. Hopefully by saying I'm marking down anxiety it can be an aid in connecting people.

MCDERMOTT: That also seems to go into the theme of "Small Things," the small napkins leading to a larger idea.

SIMONINI: What's interesting in the napkin show is that the installation turns them into a single idea. With small drawings, I carry often a small sketchpad with me everywhere. It's funny how you think small things can be a smaller version of a bigger thing. You have Franz Klein and guys like that who literally try to enlarge small works, but it's a different sensibility. It's on the level of the muscular. If you can't make the big arm motion of a painting, it becomes smaller. People tend to associate the smaller gestures with more anxious gestures in a way too. The big arm, full-body kind of motions, those are not really associated with anxiety.

MCDERMOTT: Anxiety makes me think of fidgety, small movements, whereas bigger movements are never reactions to anxiety. Even if you look at your napkins, they have small intricate strokes.

SIMONINI: I guess that speaks to different sizes and different scales working. It's not just about something being small or large, but it contains a different spectrum of expression. I don't necessarily feel that way when I work on small things—that I'm more frustrated or anxious. It's natural making a very tiny work and it's happenstance that the two shows are opening at the same time, but that is a nice connection. The entire show ["Bad Fog"] is not necessarily about anxiety. The works resonated with and on some level connect to this idea of environmental fog, like the static in the air.

MCDERMOTT: You said you were working on the napkins when you were on tour, so when was that? How long were you working on them?

SIMONINI: I'm still working on them, but now I'm also working on an extension of the napkins and I'm calling them podiatric drawings. Fancy hotels, they'll have mats for every guest and put them down next to beds. They're not shower mats; they're bedside mats. I have stolen many of those and am drawing on those with my feet. I've been doing a lot of drawing with my feet and a lot of full-body drawings with my hands and feet simultaneously. I was told that to keep your feet and your legs healthy, you want to keep the muscles in your feet agile and strengthen them. One of the things the doctor suggested is trying to lift things with

your feet. None of the napkins were done with my feet, but that project has developed into doing these podiatric drawings. It's good because it exercises your feet and at the same time it's taking something that's part of everyday life, but bringing it into this realm of therapy—therapeutic work in the art.

MCDERMOTT: Was there ever a moment where someone was like, "Um, what are you doing with the napkin?"

SIMONINI: *[laughs]* No one has ever caught me stealing one, nor do I think they care. Initially I was going to write down where each napkin came from and have it be particular to that location. That was the birth of it, but in the end I couldn't. It's nice to have that on a personal level, but I couldn't figure out how that made sense with the napkins. My wife is very understanding of my ways. A few times I've been out with her family, and my mother-in-law will steal three extra for me. A lot of my friends are all artists like myself, so they don't say anything. If I'm having an in-depth conversation or someone is confiding in me, I wouldn't whip out the napkin. *[laughs]* I'm not just in a constant state of drawing. I pick and choose the moments. It feels very natural to me. Most of my friends, they tend to be drawing at the same time.

MCDERMOTT: How would you describe your art to somebody who has never seen it before?

SIMONINI: I think it's the person who you're describing it to that makes a big difference—what kind of person are you describing it to? What aspect would they connect with? If someone looks over your shoulder and they see you drawing this abstract mark, you can say it's a dog, but in most cases it's really not a dog. So maybe to say, "I'm trying to mark down a feeling of anxiety" is a way for somebody to connect with it or be able to understand and accept it. It's not about telling the unconscious depths of imagery. I would explain it to people on a level that's not very visual. There's a lot of great art writing that tries to break down the formality and formal aspects and structure and visual tropes and all these things, but for me I always try to talk about are the things that are more palpable, like how the person makes it, the attitude or move or environment or what the person is saying—these concrete things that orbit around the art.

MCDERMOTT: And how would you describe your philosophy toward art?

SIMONINI: Art is a bigger thing than visual art, and I jump around from writing to painting to making music. All of those things are art and I like to come at it from all different angles. It can be very scattered, but for me it's as simple as the ideas of seeing, hearing, tasting and smelling. These are all things that we do. Nobody thinks it's crazy that one minute you're eating a pancake and the next minute you're listening to a song. It's a way of accessing all the parts of the world. So I feel that way with art. It's a way of accessing the world, and I care about doing that through every means possible—through sound, language and even movement. Art comes through different membranes. It should be ingrained into everyone and the more you do that, the more ways you look at it, smell it or touch it, the more it becomes every day.

"BAD FOG" [OPENS](#) TODAY, JANUARY 9, AT MARTOS GALLERY. "THE AGE OF SMALL THINGS" [OPENS](#) THIS SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, AT DODGE GALLERY. FOR MORE ON ROSS SIMONINI'S ART, MUSIC, AND WRITING, PLEASE VISIT HIS [WEBSITE](#).