

Sophie Gogl

Jars

“Not now!” It’s a formula that’s often uttered but, when you actually think about it, rarely meant. The addressee, in most instances, is someone the speaker is quite close to: a relative, a confidante, perhaps a colleague (and colleagues are in some sense confidantes). To blurt out “Not now!” is to put off an interaction with someone until some later time. Yet although the exclamation sounds definite and determined, it’s usually motivated by an acute helplessness, an inability to cope with the overwhelming challenge of organizing one’s own time. By suggesting a postponement, the speaker makes a promise. That promise, however, is deferred until an indefinite future. Young children, who are dependent on grownups, hear it a thousand times. Until they turn the tables and start saying it themselves, though the autonomy this confers on them is specious. In reality, they’ve taken a major step toward the world of grownups—which is to say, toward power over others—only by becoming actively involved in the trade relations around the commodity that is “deferred materialization”. And so we grope our way into the future, trying to find purchase in one another and ourselves.

Deferred materialization, of course, is a nonce phrase for an established concept that adequately describes the constellation of concerns in question: procrastination. The unuttered “Not now!”, the passing impulse that isn’t even mentally cast into those words, captures a condition or, perhaps better, a process, a category in our lives that we all grapple with, some more, some less. In an essay in the October 11, 2010, issue of the *New Yorker* (“Later”), the writer notes that even renowned and prolific creative minds, the authors of celebrated works, are confronted with the problem. One anecdote has it that Victor Hugo was in the habit of undressing before sitting down at his desk and instructed his valet to hide his clothes during the day to prevent him from leaving the house on a whim in order to avoid writing and thinking. Something else that comes to my mind is a television documentary in which a family of cellphone addicts is offered different rules to help them mend their ways and spend more time together. One proposal is to set up a “phone garage” in which all devices have to be deposited at predetermined times. By the end of the trial period, everyone except the father has managed to reduce their time spent online. It turns out that his phone is also the tool with which he does a lot of his work, and so between tasks he’s more tempted to game and surf the web. Or so he says.

The procrastination problem concerns all of us in one way or another. In which way, though, depends a great deal on how we describe it to ourselves as a problem. On this point, the ethics of acting on our better judgment and conscience hinges on the subjective sense we make of procrastination. As long as we don't consciously classify something as a redirection activity, it isn't procrastination in the true sense of the word. When we're aware that we're fending off someone's or our own demands with promises of another day, it is.

The flipsides of the jam jar lids in Sophie Gogl's expanded-painting series "Jars" represent just this kind of situation. Some are like flashes of insight, others like permanent states of affairs. The smartphone display with the game of golf that absurdly enough is a source of pleasure right now, the dirty dishes, the leftovers after doing the dishes, the bathtub, children's toys. Most of the pictures are based on screenshots or Gogl's own cellphone pictures. Using acrylic paint and an airbrush, she translates the images into scenarios that sometimes exude an air of the surreal. They stand in for the manifold stimuli and the mundane entanglements they entail that the artist contends with day in, day out, between a thousand other things. On the one hand, all that stuff is the banal materialization of our everyday lives; on the other hand, it can stand as symbolic of the displacement of our "true" intentions, whether they be guilt-stricken imaginations or real. In fact, that distinction is often not so easy to draw, as the flow of events and the intermingling of activities are at times just too rapid and at times too other-directed for us to accurately align them with how we ideally envision the structure and aspirations of our day-to-day lives. These considerations are translated into yet another register on the jam jar lid undersides when Gogl assembles letters into them; made of model-railway moss, fairy-tale wool hair, and fabric roses, they spell "not now."

The topsides of the jam jar lids show a set of images and idioms utterly unperturbed by any of this: the images and idioms of the world of fruit preserve consumerism. Painstakingly executed painted replicas of the originals, they make for an almost stoic contrast with the flipsides—or underbellies. In modeling her reversible tondos on jam jar lids, Sophie Gogl has actually spotted a genuine niche object in the universe of consumer goods. The topsides or faces with their complaisant, snug, unequivocal catchphrases and natural imagery come across as a mimicry version, agreed upon with the consumers, of a world that is "right." They seem to suggest what we, or the majority of us, want from the bottom of our hearts, how we imagine the perfect life (in this instance, a life in jams). Not many people talk about design for the masses, or about procrastination. We let it all happen to us. There's a real contradiction here, although these loose ends manifestly leave many of us unhappy.

The problem, then, isn't that we're short-sighted or superficial per se. For as the New Yorker essay also rightly observes, what we lose sight of in such circumstances that make us unhappy is the need to acknowledge the fact that we don't have consistent predilections and desires. Our longer-range ideas about what we want to do and be are at odds—at war—with the cravings of the moment.

Melanie Ohnemus