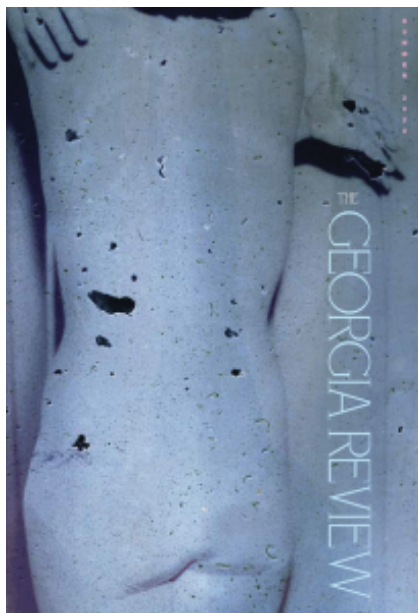


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## What We Bring Home: Little Petra

By

**Lisa Tan <**

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The first time I saw the armchair, it struck me, how sweetly dumb it looked. As if it lacked experience being a thing with four legs. Why else would it be that low to the ground, its weight distributed so awkwardly, appearing as if it'd tip over should someone nearby sneeze? But its cream puff upholstery invited me to take a seat anyway. My hips lowered comfortably just past my bent knees, shoulder blades pressed flat against a wide expanse of cushion, releasing any compaction of lumbar vertebrae, giving space to the nerves that trigger a long-familiar buzzing ache in my legs. What followed was an emotional response similar to what's felt when embraced by an innately good hugger. As if the chair cared for me and I for it. I wanted little else than to take it home.

At the time, the armchair had just been reissued by a furniture company specializing in giving new life to Danish design classics. It was originally produced in 1938 and named Little Petra by its designer. Fast forwarding to a more recent moment. My boyfriend and I were spending part of a Saturday in a department store in Stockholm, where we live. From across the room, past the housewares, near bedding and linens, I saw Little Petra. I walked over. Smiled at it and took a seat. There was a person standing directly

across from me speaking loudly on her phone while waiting to be served. She wore an ivory chiffon shirt and matching palazzo pants. Her phone was in a dusty pink leather wallet case, pressed against her ear that was framed by a curtain of salon-fresh yellow hair. Whoever was on the other end of her call—along with anyone in the vicinity—could clearly hear her say, in Swedish: “I can’t stand society today. And now this Japanese, Korean, Chinese, whatever woman thinks she can sit down wherever she wants.”

Nestled in the wooly arms of Little Petra, it took a few seconds to fully realize she was referring to me. Sitting down in a chair was cause for such a brazen outburst? I couldn’t understand why. My heart rate quickened. I felt my face flush. Anger and humiliation took hold, each trying to top the other. By then, my usually nonconfrontational boyfriend had rushed in so fast I felt the disorientating sensation of witnessing a car crash. I sat still while watching his blue eyes burn red, as he told her she was being racist. The only other time I can remember him calling out someone in public was for taking a parking space he got to first—and we’ve been together fourteen years. Maybe this could’ve been enough for the day. Enough for him to momentarily stare something like this in the face, firsthand, with me as the reluctant envoy. We could’ve left the store, if not unbothered, then at least ready to shake it off over the walk back to the car. But the thing is, regardless if you stay or if you leave—turn the other cheek as it were—a racist encounter is not only injurious in the moment it occurs. It follows you

home. It viciously gathers strength, labors in unpredictable ways and at unlikely moments. And one's conscious processing of it forms both another moment of harm as well as its potential easing. What I'm writing now is some sort of proof of that temporality.

In places where whiteness is neutral, delivering a “Japanese-Korean-Chinese-whatever-woman-thinks-she-can-sit-down-wherever-she-wants” type of tirade, in the national language, comes from a self-entitlement that has decided to decide who owns the right to language and the agency that comes with it. I just couldn't bear to remain voiceless—even dismissively. I stood up from Little Petra and walked over to her. “I do indeed understand what you said.” She became uneasy, but then confidently said she was not being racist. The first explanation: “I've traveled the world.” The second: “I even have a son who is with someone from somewhere else. How could I be racist?”

Whenever this happens to me, in the face of my aggressor, I hope to summon the majestic gravitas of Toni Morrison. Or, to inhabit the persona of one of those chilly, formidable prosecuting attorneys I've seen in movies, as if I had an audience to prove something to—and often I do. It stings my ego to say so, but that day I personified neither. Yet I couldn't back away from the fuming pile she ignited, not until she provided what was minimally needed: a modicum of acknowledgment. I wanted her to surrender—even

the tiniest white flag would've done. But she would neither unfurl nor wave. We argued until her parting words: "you can't even talk on the phone these days."

Back in our Little Petra-less home, I processed the technicalities. What I said. What she said. What I should've said or said better. Rehearsing, as if tomorrow I'd meet her twin ignoramus. Spending any amount of time on such a truly banal encounter breeds resentment. And as I said before, the most loathsome part of being on the receiving end of a racist rant is not the moment itself, but the aftermath. It's time-consuming and lonely. Year after year, the contours of casual racism chafe against me. I can anticipate how they are nothing if not totally needy for misery's company. Time and again, I've watched as they trigger and connect to past experiences—even ones that aren't my own. For instance—and I guess because this happened in a retail space—my first thought was of an incident I was told of involving an Asian Swedish acquaintance, who was nursing her baby on a bench in another department store in Stockholm, only to be told by a white passerby to stop acting like an animal.

Sitting on a park bench near his apartment in New York City, Hilton Als, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and critic for *The New Yorker* magazine, posted an image taken with his phone facing down at his sneakered feet on the pavement, directly following a racist incident that opened other recollections. The image's caption begins, "I refuse to bring this shit into

my house.” It’s an inspiringly adamant statement, but I am skeptical his strategy of waiting it out will succeed. The shit always finds the key hidden under the potted plant.

The pollution filling my mind only dissipated when I thought about a famous artwork made by a venerable artist and analytic philosopher that consists of an edition of small printed cards that lead with: “Dear Friend, I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark . . .” Running it through art, the need to analyze it back and forth in a loop of resentment dropped. Adrian Piper, who “retired from being black” at age sixty-four, had been subjected to racist speech so often, so routinely—that she made a card to deal with what is said when people think no one is listening. This calling card, one in a series of two made in 1986 (a third made in 2012), expertly choreographs her exit from an offensive conversation. Saying her piece without needing to speak. When *My Calling (Card) #1* was shown at Piper’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 2018, it was framed next to its two sibling cards and made available in stacks on a pedestal. Any viewer could do as the sign above them offered, “join the struggle take some for your own use.” Piper’s experience is neither rare nor rarified, and so neither is the artwork.

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Little Petra might look like a Labradoodle puppy ready

to fall backward nodding off to sleep, but she is as fancy as she is deft in making a strong argument for the softer humanism of Scandinavian modernism, before it gave way to a sleeker, harder species. She couldn't be more appealing at a time like this. As it is, we're feeling the ground slip beneath our feet, the edge of a precipice so plainly at hand, and the last thing any of us needs—particularly in our homes—is to lean up against a sharp angle.

The specific model I want, upholstered in a cumulous cloud of sheepskin and with perfectly stubby, oiled oak legs, is also the most expensive. Yes, I could forsake other things and buy Little Petra. After all, I'm employed as a professor of art in Sweden. And a few years ago, I paid off my American college and credit card debt. But the shadow of my mother's extreme frugality organizes garage sales in the back of my head, and so I hesitate, instead searching secondhand auction sites for the armchair—and every now and then, I inquire with a retailer in town if they'd be willing to sell me their slightly worn floor model at a discount.

I look up the chair's designer, an architect named Viggo Boesen. The Dane looks affable in the one picture in circulation. I'd wager he was a dog person. I'd like to know more, but in my cursory search, all that surfaces are retailers' websites or articles on Little Petra's renewed popularity, replete with images of the armchair in serene, empty rooms. It became obvious that "my chair" is anything but mine. No matter how

much I extol the way Little Petra feels against my ass and fantasize about all the books I'd read in it—and these alone are the reasons that inform my desire to own it—I feel acutely aware of how wanting this chair is a sure sign of aspirations that look deathly pale in this light. Patinated with an air of unquestioned mobility and the ease of racial anonymity. Something I know my own tense shoulders will never experience, no matter how much social or economic capital I accrue. Do I really want to bring this into my house?

Adrian Piper's calling card gives her some semblance of a break, as much as it delivers us—or at least me—a chance to envision its utility with satisfaction. It's easy to project an image of the card's recipient reading it, taking in Piper's words, and reflecting on their actions. It's an exceedingly generous thing. Not only does the card close with, "I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me," but its very portability allows it to be read alone. In private. Maybe even at home. *This is everything.* Beyond being shelter, home's defining feature is as the place where one can most be themselves—their flawed, overflowing human selves. And it's also at home, where one might be able to sit down at the kitchen table, or in a comfy armchair to write or amend a more beautiful version of themselves—one that might function in the company of others, and in fact *the other*. They say that the collapse of the division between private and public realms has destroyed the space and time required to think alone through one's experience of the world.

And while that can't begin to fully explain the actions of the person I came across that day at the department store, there is something to a publicly audible unleashing of white supremacy that occurs inside a private phone conversation, conducted in a public space that one has taken to be their rightful home. Who else could I be in that equation other than the intruder?

Ultimately, our interior lives are shaped by the possibility of genuine rest in the place we call home.







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This text is one component of an artwork by Lisa Tan, titled *Little Petra* (2021), which was developed and presented for the eleventh edition of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA), organized by Röda Sten Konsthall and curated by Lisa Rosendahl in 2021.

Images courtesy of the artist. Photography credit: Hendrik Zeitler.



Lisa Tan

<  
<https://thegeorgiareview.com/authors/tan-lisa/>>

Lisa Tan is an American artist living in Stockholm, Sweden. She works with video, photography, installation, and other gestures. Her work was recently presented in *The Collection* at Moderna Museet, Stockholm; *Artists' Film International* at Whitechapel Gallery, London; *Komunikazioa (in)komunikazioa* at Tabakalera, San Sebastian; *84 Steps* at Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam; *The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change*, the eleventh Göteborg International Biennial of Contemporary Art; and *Dodge and Burn* at the Athenaeum in Athens, Georgia.

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