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TALL, SLIM & ERECT: PORTRAITS OF THE PRESIDENTS

BY ALEX FORMAN

“Watch carefully. The great are tiny, the miniscule immense” –Ben Ehrenreich

Introduction by Ben Ehrenreich
Afterword by Patric M. Verrone
Cover artwork by Renee Petropoulos
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Tall, Slim & Erect: Cultural criticism exploring how history is written and built on hearsay, conjecture, rumor, and repetition.

After stumbling upon a wooden box containing a complete set of miniature wax mold figurines of US presidents at a flea market, artist Alex Forman began photographing each little man, minus their pedestals. Presented for the first time in book format, Forman’s elegant black and white portraits are accompanied by brief biographies composed entirely of appropriated texts cleverly cut and reassembled by the author. What emerges in *Tall, Slim, & Erect: Portraits of the Presidents* is not the tired tale of legendary men and their mythical quest for democracy, but rather, a gossip’s dream: Jefferson could not ride a horse for months due to boils on his backside; Hayes felt a crazed and tender devotion to his sister Fanny; Wilson remained a virgin till twenty-eight. While playfully shedding light on these powerful men, their quirks, bodily functions, and stained sheets, *Tall, Slim, & Erect* ultimately asks the reader to question the extent to which presidents are merely toys to be coveted, loathed, or adored for nostalgic purposes. As Louis Marx, the figurine’s manufacturer, noted “There are only old toys with new twists.”

Tall, Slim & Erect: Portraits of the Presidents is published as part of the TrenchArt: Recon Series, with an Introduction by Ben Ehrenreich, an afterword by Patric M. Verrone, and visual art [cover] by Renee Petropoulos. TrenchArt is an annual series of new literature, selected and edited to create a textual conversation between some of the most dynamic and exciting writing today—and tomorrow

ABOUT ALEX FORMAN

Alex Forman is a photographer, writer, translator, and personal historian living in Rio de Janeiro. A graduate of Brown University and the Yale School of Art, her photography has been widely exhibited throughout the world. She is co-founder of JUBILAT, an international poetry journal. *Tall, Slim & Erect: Portraits of the Presidents* (Les Figs Press, 2011) is her first book.

PRAISE FOR TALL, SLIM & ERECT: PORTRAITS OF THE PRESIDENTS

Legions of paid professionals try, and fail, to get underneath the gloss and myth of the presidents of the United States. Alex Forman has done it with a view camera and a cast of toy miniatures. The irony is that, through the very kitsch that represents our distance from these men, she opens the door into something truthful about the human beings who have been our presidents and about the country itself: humble and boasting; vivid and mysterious; plain and regal. Alex's images do not sneer, or crow, or shout. She opens her eyes and looks, and you won't be able to look away.

—Joshua Wolf Shenk, author of *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov wrote, "There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic." In photographing this set of presidential figurines and rendering them life-size, Alex Forman performs both operations, making her giant miniatures reveal both the particularity of personality and the imprecision of symbols. The staging of these photographs is essential. Through Forman's lens, not all of William Howard Taft, the fattest president, will fit in the photograph's frame; Woodrow Wilson is in a fit of giggles; Franklin Delano Roosevelt looks ready to dash Heathcliff-like about the heath; and Nixon's suit looks suspiciously shiny. If you've ever wanted to peer through the keyhole into the Oval Office, now's your chance.

— Matthea Harvey, author of *Sad Little Breathing Machine* and *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form*.

Tall, Slim, & Erect: Portraits of the Presidents is unique its inception, its scope, its playful yet pointed irony. Traditional history may label these men as heroes and leaders, thereby stamping their legitimacy as unquestioned and untouchable. Critics of this history may instead see these men—rightly, but reductively—as mere representatives of America's unequal distribution of rights and money and power. Yet these photos tell an exuberantly more muddled story. The images with their accompanying text are a study in the public and personal construction of entitlement. Forman explores what attributes of public office we choose to fetishize and what qualities we must erase in order to preserve our fetish.

— Erin Soros, author.