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## Tall, Slim & Erect: Portraits of the Presidents

**Alex Forman**
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From the 1950s up through the 1968 election, American toy maker Louis Marx produced a semi-educational series of presidential figurines. From Washington to Nixon, the presidents, each standing on a small base, were reduced to two and three-quarters inches. Despite their identical settings, various arm positions capture each one's unique personality. Originally cherished for the amazing likenesses of the presidents portrayed, Marx's figures have a found new purpose in Alex Forman's *Tall, Slim & Erect: Portraits of the Presidents*.

One of five books in the sixth annual TrenchArt: Recon Series, *Tall, Slim & Erect* combines photography and prose to approach this year's thematic query: What does one make in, and of, the brokenness? At four and a quarter inches wide and nine and three-quarters inches long, Forman's book makes a lot from, and with, these old toys discovered at a flea market. Firstly, it borrows the descriptive phrase used regularly to describe the presidents, "tall, slim, and erect of carriage," as its definition and title.

Inside, the book's distinctive format and Forman's black-and-white photographs showcase the iconic nature of her subjects. With her assistance, the plastic presidents deliberately fill their two-dimensional spaces in much the same way they lived: the camera captures Honest Abe's back as if following the agitated pacings of a troubled man; with his large chest and bull-neck thrust forward, Grover Cleveland's taurine stance dominates the picture in a perfect explanation of his nickname, "His Obstinacy"; and Calvin Coolidge stares back at the viewer, willing to be photographed but always keeping the distance his agoraphobia demanded.

While the homogenity of the presidential office is underscored by the uniform dimensions of the figurines, Forman highlights each president's individual nature by photographing them in isolation. She builds upon this sense of agency by pairing the pictures with a selection of well-curated biographical facts and rumors about each man. Although extremely brief—the longest is just shy of five hundred words—they touch on the joys, tragedies, ironies, and accomplishments of each president's life. From the get-rich-quick books that filled Washington's library, to Nixon's favorite breakfast of cottage cheese, ketchup, and black pepper, the details recast these political deities as human.

With its phallic title and use of miniaturized men, it's easy for the viewer's inner college sophomore to dismiss Forman as attempting to castrate, or at least shrink, the American patriarchal establishment. But on closer inspection, a much more sophisticated intention becomes unavoidable. By examining these men in miniature, by photographing them as individuals who stand alone, and by moving beyond the canon of acceptable historical trivia, Forman reveals the smallest details of humanity in the nation's highest office.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (May 31, 2012)

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