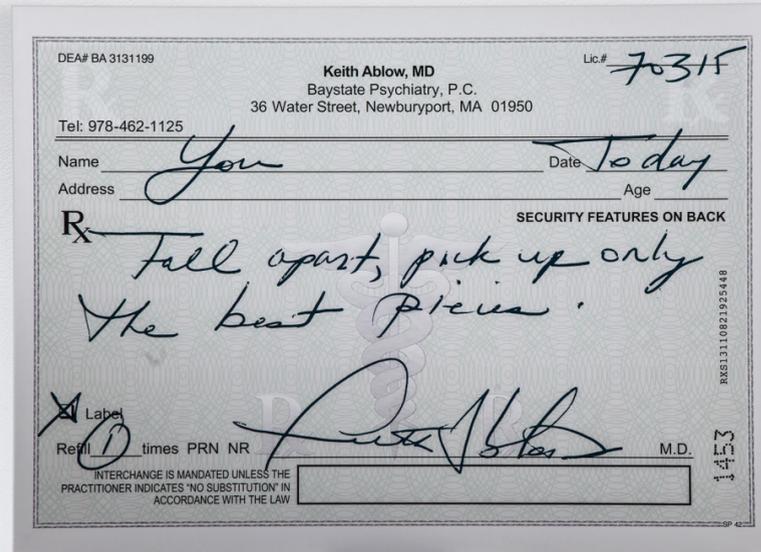


Doctor Strangear

The psychiatrist Keith Ablow has been doling out prescriptions to America on Fox News for years. Now he's transformed his pad into a canvas

BY FRANCES DODDS



Opposite page: Keith Ablow's untitled prescription piece (Rx#1453). Above: Ablow on Fox News.

This is the prescription, made out to “You.” *Adderal-RX-20-Mg Swallow the whole truth about yourself every a.m.*

Blown up to 24x36 inches, on archival paper fused to die-bond aluminum, it’s hanging in an airy art gallery on New York’s Upper East Side. The signature that runs along the bottom is that of Keith Ablow, MD, a middle-aged man with an eggish bald head, who is standing beside me and talking with Vivian Horan, the gallery’s owner. Watching her face, I realize that this must be one of the first real conversations she has ever had with Ablow. Her polite, panicked expression recalls that of a dinner guest who’s just taken a bite of something foul, but is trying very hard to swallow nonetheless.

The funny taste Horan seems to be processing is the revelation that the man standing in front of her is a dyed-in-the-wool, trumpeting Trumper. Right now he’s detailing his idea for a Mount Rushmore-esque monument of Trump—but bigger. “It would create a lot of construction jobs,” Ablow offers. When I call her the

following week, Horan has regained her composure. “I don’t have a lot to tell you,” she says. “I didn’t know anything about his politics. Except what he said that day, which was pretty astounding to me. But I don’t want to be political.”

This is not the first time Ablow has stirred the pot. In fact, he’s made a career out of it. A member of the “Fox News Medical A-Team,” the psychiatrist has made headlines for years with inflammatory sound bites. For example: Obama allowed Ebola to enter the U.S. because he thinks Americans “should suffer,” Newt Gingrich’s marital infidelities would make him a good president, and men should be able to veto women’s abortions. (Ablow is controversial among peers; Columbia University’s chairman of psychiatry, Dr. Jeffrey Lieberman, has called him a “narcissistic self-promoter of limited and dubious expertise.”)

Still, Ablow continues to practice medicine in the small town of Newburyport, Massachusetts, as well as in New York. And recently, he debuted a series of artworks called Project Prescription, many of which have sold—at around \$25,000—to high-profile individuals like the billionaires Steve and Alexandra

Cohen, Meijer supermarkets chairman Doug Meijer, and Ronn Torossian, the founder of public relations company 5WPR.

When I meet Ablow for lunch in New York in January, he explains Project Prescription’s origins. “The idea was to take a culturally powerful medium, the prescription, and to say things that are bigger than, ‘Take this medicine this many times a day.’ These are suggestions for living, ways of looking at the world.” Among his artistic prescriptions: Made out to the “Next Generation:” *Selfies-Selfless*; to “You:” *Facebook the truth today*; to “You:” *Fall apart, pick up only the best pieces*; to “USA:” *Support gun crime control*; to “Women:” *Be fearlessly female twice a week*.

Ironically, Trump is not a patron of the arts. His Administration, like that of many Republicans before him, has vowed to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts. Which may be one reason openly conservative artists have rarely gotten much traction in the modern art world. They’d tell you the artistic elite are intolerant to diverse ideologies, while liberal artists would say the lack of diversity espoused by conservatives’ real-world views limits their ability to produce nuanced work. And as many conservatives place their hope in a Twitter-obsessed reality television star, it appears they have less time for nuance than ever. Trump is no politician; Ablow is no artist—which is why he may be the movement’s best mouthpiece yet.

In person, I have to admit, he’s much less offensive than his bellicose TV personality would lead you to believe. He listens carefully; I can fathom how he made it through medical school. He’s personable, courteous, charming even.

“A lot of psychiatry is about process,” Ablow says. “You’re looking for feedback. So there is a fantasy in these [prescriptions] that you could say to someone, ‘Look, this is what you have to do.’ Psychiatrists aren’t very prescriptive—I may be one of the planet’s more prescriptive ones. The medium is tempting, because it’s not a debate. It’s just like: ‘I told you what the prescription is. Deal with it.’”

The piece that Ablow sold to Torrossian hangs in his Manhattan office, and when I visit he shows me the directive in question: *Say what the fuck you mean*. Torossian, who’s seen conflict over his own politics, answers my delicate query about whether he might be sympathetic to Ablow’s views. “I’m a proud Republican. I plead guilty in the city of New York. But to be fair, that’s not why I bought Keith’s stuff. I think Keith is a visionary in many ways, and, from an investment standpoint, if Steve Cohen is going to buy someone’s art, it’s not a difficult decision to make.” (It was actually Cohen’s wife, Alexandra, a longtime friend of Ablow’s, who purchased the piece). A walker and talker, Torossian paces down the halls of his office, pointing out the work of other artists he’s collected: Jim Dine, Mel Bochner, Andy Warhol, Vik Muniz. “‘Say what the fuck you mean’ is certainly the mantra of this political moment,” he says.

The fact that Ablow is actually a doctor—a psychiatrist, no less—who has counseled real patients for twenty years can be easy to forget amidst all of his rabble-raising. But every now and again he says something that surprises me. When we start in on the topic of “absolute truths,” I prepare myself for the worst.

“I think there are absolute truths,” Ablow says. “There are irreducible truths, like that people are unconditionally loveable. I don’t believe anyone is born evil. As a forensic psychiatrist I’ve talked to people who have done unspeakable things, but they

weren’t babies. I see no evidence, so I don’t believe there is such a thing as a bad seed. The idea that some people are not worth trying to save strikes me as false. I’m not a death penalty person.”

This glimmer of hope hovers in the air like a buoyant little lightning bug. Alas, Ablow wastes no time reaching up to squish it between his fingers. “Another of my absolute truths is that sexual behavior does not reflect anything else about you.... I think one of the misunderstood moments in Trump’s march to the presidency was the revelation of that tape. He simply told the truth. Nobody wants to talk about the truth. The truth is that when you’re a billionaire and you’re on TV you can touch pretty much any woman. A lot of women will let you do it and we don’t know why, and we should think about it.”

Shocked to attention, I seize the moment to discuss a piece of Ablow’s that particularly interests me. “Be fearlessly female twice a week,” I ask. “What, exactly, does that entail?”

“Here’s what I meant,” he says. “I think that Freud was right. He talked about penis envy and people were like, ‘Oh what a schmuck.’ But if you look around, you’re like, *wait*. I saw Rhonda Rousey on TV getting pummeled by another woman, and I thought to myself, *how preposterous*. Who talked women into trying to be hyperbolically male? It’s patently absurd. I think the culture has not honored femininity, because last time I checked, women are more vulnerable physically. When you get into pregnant women being in combat on the frontlines, I would say, well obviously they shouldn’t be. But then I’d get a lot of pushback. ‘What are you saying? That a woman can’t choose to be in certain situations because she’s pregnant?’”

I point out that “pregnant women on the front lines” are not a thing, and that his reasoning treads a slippery slope. And then Ablow says something that I find very interesting: “Having been bullied as a kid, there’s some value, I’ve learned, in saying to yourself, ‘I refuse to budge.’ I do that as a way of reminding myself I exist. If I think I know for sure, I’ll say I know for sure. Which gets people going. So yes, I think it’s obvious that if you’re a pregnant woman, you don’t want to go to the front lines. But, to other people, it might not be.”

The artists of social movements often provide insight into the psychic workings of their fearless leaders. They hone the cacophony into a single melodious note of meaning. *I refuse to budge. I do that as a way of reminding myself I exist*. It’s a flawless, gleaming Trumpism of Descartes: I stamp my foot, therefore I am. ■

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