

AVENUE

At the Galleries by Julia Dault



TORONTO

BEAUTIFUL VOYEURISM

SNAPSHOT NOW

Coke Wisdom O'Neal
Angell Gallery (Ongoing)

It's easy at first to dismiss Coke Wisdom O'Neal's photographs as gimmicky. They are life-size images of bathroom cabinet interiors and their contents, things like Ex Lax, various antihistamines, razors, soap, Vaseline — the stuff found in any bathroom in any part of the developed world. Keep looking at these heavily saturated images, though, and you find they are achingly telling portraits of total strangers and utterly fascinating.

For some time, O'Neal has been sneaking into the bathrooms of friends and strangers' homes with his camera — a blatant violation of sacred private spaces. The results are simple cross-sections that slowly reveal a person's habits, weaknesses and dependencies. An image like *Big Pain*, above centre, shows a cabinet nearly overflowing with prescription painkillers. Another, *the Stranger* (Mint Julep), above left, is stuffed with

products, among them a stick of peculiar Mint Julep deodorant.

On one hand, these images are no different than those taken by a peeping Tom or a digital phone at the local YMCA: The subject matter is not meant to be seen. And yet, O'Neal figures that what he sees is common reality, a form of truth binding all people together. It's his job as an artist to give back this truth. It just so happens these everyday collections of bottles and containers, when compared and contrasted, relay great amounts of information about people we will never meet. O'Neal presents the viewer with the stuff of magic. This is not just Mint Julep deodorant: it's "Once upon a time there lived a woman..." It's rare that such a beautiful image and simple idea rely so entirely on the viewer for the ultimate conclusions. He's giving over-the-counter a whole new meaning.

Angell Gallery is located at
890 Queen Street West,
Toronto, ON. 416-530-0444
For more information, visit
angellgallery.com

