BULLETT

Art

Corey Wash on Cartoons, Consciousness & the Politics of Being Cool

By Amber Alston

Photography: MeLo-X

Artist, model, activist—call Corey Wash whatever you want. Just include that she's shaking shit up. At 24, the Baltimore native has conquered the internet and made a name for herself IRL, with her signature freehand illustrations and punk style. A self described bohème, Wash has become a staple of internet culture through her radical artwork. Now living in L.A., the artist creates clever race and gender fluid characters that tackle issues including sex, class, police brutality and those guys who like to tell you how great your ass looks in a sundress. Wash's most popular character, Willoughby, is her surrogate—a figure whose simple drawing allows the her to explore the complex issues of being a 20-something woman of color. The new wave ingenue—who speaks with an East Coast frankness but keeps a West Coast cool—has recently added music video director, fashion collaborator and creative director to her ever-growing resume. But as she continues to mature as an artist, two things remain the same—and that's her endless dedication to being herself, and waking people the fuck up.

BULLETT caught up with Wash to talk Willoughby, the Women's March and staying woke. Read our interview, below.

You've moved from New York to L.A. in the last year. Which city do you prefer?

Both. New York for the busy atmosphere, L.A for the exact opposite—it's a slower pace, but there are still opportunities here.

You've been described as an artist, model, creative director. What do you call yourself?

I only label myself an artist when I'm meeting someone for the first time. I wouldn't label myself a model, even though that's something I do. But I don't just model or paint or take photos. Why would I put myself under one umbrella? I'm just a human who likes to express herself through multiple mediums.

How'd you get into art and modeling?

I came to New York to do modeling and photography. My big goal was to sign with an agency and become a real model. Neither were working out, so I stepped back and focused on painting—it came out of nowhere, but it allowed me to express myself in another way. That took over my life for a few years, and now I do everything. I've creative directed music videos and musicians, I'm teaching myself to play bass, I cook, and I even collaborated with my friend on a women's line.

That's a lot. Do you think you can you be a successful creative today if you're not doing a million things?

I never place limits on myself. At one point, I thought there were things I would never do, but I've learned to say, 'Fuck it! Why not?'—it's about trusting yourself. As long as I focus, I know I can make anything happen. But that doesn't make sense to everyone—some people feel like they're put on earth to do one thing. I feel like I'm here to do a lot.

Walk me through your creative process.

My process is simple. If I see something on the news or get caught up in my thoughts, I'll write it down and come back to it later. I keep a sketchbook with me everywhere I go—on the subway, in an Uber or at a bar. When I'm at home, I'll look at the notes and start drafting a piece.

You've created a popular character named Willoughby. Tell us about him.

I base Willoughby on my thoughts and the realities of people I pass every day. If a friend tells me about a crazy experience they've had, my first thought is, 'Oh shit! I gotta draw that!' The world he lives in is just all of my WTF thoughts.

How do you use illustration to say 'WTF?'

Sometimes I use dialogue, sometimes I don't. I try to get straight to the point because people are kind of slow. We live in a world where you scroll past things and forget quickly. I want people to say, 'Wow! She woke me up!' or 'What the fuck is this bitch talking about?'—I just want them to have some response.

How have people responded to your work?

I won't say that I'm surprised, but it's been positive. It's humbling when someone sends you a long DM saying that they were inspired by your posts and that it gives them something to look forward to. One of the negative comments I've gotten is from one guy who told me,'Draw some new shit!' I was taken back at first, but I love that—I want people to be honest with me. The bad comments only come when I post pictures of myself—lot's guys who say something inappropriate. But I'll check them, and they get defensive. Or I'll get girls who comment, 'Love yourself, queen.' Bitch I do love myself—that's why I posted the photo.

What has your experience been sharing your art online? Are you ever afraid of copycats?

Everything comes with risks. I feel like the looming threat challenges me to come up with some new shit. I love posting new content—sometimes, I'll take random videos, cook or play random baselines—I always have ideas. If people steal my stuff, I don't get upset—I feel sad for the person that can't be original. If you're an artist online, you have to be aware that someone is going to copy you, or they'll want your work for free, or they'll put your shit on a t-shirt. So, we have to pay more attention to how, why and when we release our work.

What do you see as your role as an artist in the current political climate?

My role is to help whoever I can at this time. I'm at a point where I have a platform, and I know that if I post something or say something, it's going to generate some response. So, I try to be mindful of what I say because people are watching. This is more than just drawing—it's important that I reflect the time we're living in and encourage people through all the crazy shit going on. You can't always be positive—sometimes, you need to be angry. But I want people to deal with it, not dwell on it.

You went to the Women's March in January. Do you think it was as effective as everyone hoped?

While I do encourage protesting, there has to be more. The march was empowering and inspiring. But I don't just want to march—I want to be at the youth centers and the homeless shelters. A lot of people think doing one thing is enough. I feel the same way about voting—after the election, people who voted judged people who didn't. Some of those people may not have voted, but they were in their communities every day cleaning up their neighborhoods. Some voters went back to partying and intoxicating the world.

You've been critical of the fashion industry. What do you see as the leading issue?

The world is falling apart, and it's interesting to see people not caring. I posted a cartoon a few days ago with a person walking down a runway covered in flames. It says 'Hell.' It's about someone who is focused on Fashion Week, trying to look their best, being the coolest. Meanwhile, we're living out scenes from *Day After Tomorrow*. That's not to discredit any designer—I know how hard they work. But I don't feel comfortable participating in something so shallow during these times. Stuff has always been fucked up but how can you ignore it now??

Do you think the fashion industry doing a good job of promoting activism and diversity?

It depends on who you're talking about. A lot of designers are wearing the face of activism—they post all the right pictures and hashtags. But activism is becoming trendy, and I'm scared that people are just wearing causes like accessories. Look at that Pepsi ad—they just handed out a 'Fight The System Award'—seriously? That's the most ridiculous thing that has ever been created. Then there are some young artists, especially artists of color, who are saying something fundamental and exposing real shit—and you can tell when it's real and when it fake.

What advice would you give to other young artists?

Get involved—it's not as hard as you think. We spend a lot of time on bullshit. When you're young you want to have fun—that's fine, but there are a lot of bigger issues. Don't get me wrong, I love a good party, but if the world is falling apart, what are we celebrating? Last week, I opted for a beach cleanup instead of a party. When it's hot, my boyfriend and I hand out waters, some days we give roses to women—it's the small things.