

Style by Asia

Style by Asia visits Hong Kong based, Belgian artist Phil Akashi in his artist residency at The Swatch Art Peace Hotel in Shanghai and talk about his current project "Legend of the Dragon".

The Swatch Art Peace Hotel artist residency is a program designed to bring together talented artists from around the world to experience a unique cultural environment dedicated to contemporary art. Selected artists are invited to live and work in specially designed workshop studios for a period of up to six months, in a community of eighteen people from all artistic horizons and national origins. By bringing together in a prestigious setting the creators of art – the greatest luxury of all – and leading Swatch Group watch brands, the Program aims to situate art at the very heart of an urban space dominated by luxury goods.

Phil Akashi is a Belgian-born Hong Kong based artist. He explores and reinvents the functionality of traditional Asian seals with a broad range of media. His arts practice involves using the power of language with a trans-cultural and conceptual approach to question the contemporary world around him. As a result he forges a new artistic language that links East and West and places the past in the service of the present. Phil is currently participating in The Swatch Art Peace Hotel Artist Residency in Shanghai during six months until November 2015 and Style by Asia catches up with Phil during in his residency and talks both about it, and his current project "Legend of the Dragon", where he uses the Chinese characters "Descendants of the Dragon" (coming from an old seal Phil once found in a market) in his Street Art projects and in the artworks in the studio.

What is this residency enabling you to accomplish? What do you feel is the biggest benefit to you here?

The Swatch Art Peace Hotel Artist Residency offers a unique experience to live and work in one of China's most prestigious locations (the Bund). Waking up everyday in this historical building with the gorgeous view of the Bund and Pudong is so inspiring! Shanghai is becoming one of the world's most exciting places for contemporary art and the residency is probably one of the most exclusive artist residencies in the world offering amazing freedom of creation, privacy, comfort, and outstanding facilities. All is made for the artists to feel relax, happy and inspired.

The selected artists are coming from all artistic horizons and national origins, which offers a perfect environment for creative exchange and collaboration. It also extends the artistic boundaries and pushes artists to escape their comfort zone. Besides the stunning "artistic" experience, it is also a fantastic human experience. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Nick Hayek, CEO of the Swatch Group and all the Swatch team making this experience truly unique and exceptional!

Could you tell us a bit about your Legend of the Dragon Street Art Project around China?

In this Street Art project, called Legend of the Dragon / "龍的傳說", I explore the Confucian notion of the great unity / "大同", and I observe how modern China is embracing diversity as an asset for a harmonious world. A quote from Fu Ying, the Vice Foreign Minister of PRC, sums up the context nicely.

"Throughout the centuries, China has been a multi-ethnic society connected by a commitment to unity, prosperity and harmony. Unity is deep in the blood. That is where our strength lies, and forms the basis for China's interaction with the international community."

How did your project come about? Why did you choose the seal of the "Descendants of the Dragon" as your symbol?

Inspired by the legendary creature of the dragon, the project will integrate a series of unsanctioned and commissioned artworks integrating the dragon as a spiritual symbol of the Chinese unity and pride for the country. These artworks will be composed of traditional seals imprints with Chinese characters "龍的傳人" / "Descendants of the Dragon". I found a seal in a market a couple of years ago with these characters and that's how I started to research about the dragon and its meaning in Chinese culture.



Traditional seal with Chinese characters "龍的傳人" / descendants of the dragon. Image Courtesy Phil Akashi

In Chinese lore, the dragon was a divine and mythical creature with powers to bring rain, floods, and even hurricanes to a land. Along with this ability, the Chinese dragon symbolized power, strength, excellence and good luck. From celebrations to the Zodiac, to historical emperors, the legend of the dragon has played a large part in China's rich history and culture. In modern China, the dragon remains a strong, profound and respected symbol of strength and prosperity. Chinese around the world consider the dragon their ancestor and proudly proclaim themselves: "龍的傳人" / "Descendants of the Dragon".

What are you aiming to comment on, or understand with the project?

As a Belgian artist living in Asia, I am always looking to further deepen my interest and understanding in Asian cultures. I also want to play my role as an artist and question with respect the contemporary world. Escaping the studio and traveling across the People's Republic of China, I will try to push the boundaries of Street Art to open up a dialogue with the Han majority and local ethnic minorities. Through creative approaches and techniques, I will also try to engage with nature, civilization and local cultures, and eventually aim to go beyond existing definitions of art. After each chapter, I will come back in the studio and create artworks related to the local experience. And the project will grow and evolve during my journey.



Aerosol spray on traditional Kyrgyz yurt - Karakul Lake, Xinjiang, China 2015. Image Courtesy Phil Akashi

What locations are included in this exciting cross-China project?

This Street Art project will be completed during 2015-2019 through 9 chapters across 9 different provinces, municipalities and special administrative regions of People's Republic of China. The number 9 is considered lucky in Chinese culture. This is also reflected in the depiction of the Chinese Dragon, composed of 9 different animal resemblances.

The first chapter of the project started in *Hong Kong* during Art Basel Hong Kong 2015. The first artwork has been created the 9th of March 2015 at Deepwater Bay Beach in Hong Kong. Later on, a second artwork has been created in Wong Chuk Hang in the South Island Cultural District (SICD), Hong Kong's New Destination for Contemporary Art.



Wong Chuk Hang, South Island Cultural District SICD – Hong Kong 2015. Image courtesy Phil Akashi

For the second chapter, I went to the *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region* to meet several ethnic minorities such as the Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uyghur and to create some innovative street art pieces in the mountains and in the nature. Larger than Alaska, Xinjiang is a land of extremes and bounty with a complicated, intriguing history, a complex network of ethnic groups, and a rich artistic, musical, gastronomic heritage. The largest group is composed of Uyghurs and the term Uyghur means “confederation of 9 tribes”.

I did for instance a project with the Uyghur ethnic group in the Taklimakan desert where I spray-painted on traditional Uyghur silk on a caravan of camels. The *Taklimakan desert* was one of the great obstacles in the path of the *Silk Road Merchants* on their way to the Middle East so I thought it was a nice way to celebrate the region’s textile culture, its people, and its nature. The trading activities along the Silk Road have facilitated the transmission of goods, ideas and culture over many centuries and I am happy to sustain this tradition with my own artistic language.



Aerosol spray on traditional Uyghur silk – Taklimakan Desert, Xinjiang, China 2015. Image courtesy Phil Akashi

You recently participated in the Nanjing International Art Festival in China. Please tell us about that, and about the Excellence Award that you received there!

I was selected as a finalist to participate to the *Nanjing International Art Festival* (read more about it and Phil's award [here](#)) which took place from 16th till 26th of September at the Nanjing International Exhibition Center.

Much to my surprise, I received an Excellence Award for my artwork, untitled #1, of my Legend of the Dragon project. The artwork was presented in the Global Collection Exhibition with the theme: Diversified Colors - Leading Trends. The collection of these artworks aims to pursue freedom and equality in the spirit of the arts, and thus to provide a fair arena for both Chinese and International artists to display their talents. This exhibition is about the portrayal of emotions that artists feel towards current society, their contemplation on and utilization of culture, their versatile methods of expression, and also to encourage experimentation and creativity.

The Nanjing International Art Festival is the largest international art exhibition sponsored by Chinese private institutions. It dedicates to inject new vitality to the Chinese art community, help Chinese culture and art open wider to and blend in with the outside world. The curatorial team, led by Zhu Tong (Chief Curator), Yu Ke, Xia Kejun and Eleonora Battiston, has selected nearly 1,000 pieces of art among more than 20,000 artworks from all around the world that were submitted. The organizers aim to build the event into a Chinese "Venice Biennale" thus discovering potential talents, injecting vigor for the art world and cultivating well-known artists with global recognition.

What else have you done this year and what do you have coming up until the end of the residency?

Well it's been a pretty busy year for me so far with exhibitions in the European Parliament in Brussels, in Hong Kong during Art Basel, in Shanghai at the Power Station of Art and in Nanjing for the Nanjing International Art Festival (WOW! editors note).

Between the **8-11th of October** some of my work will be presented at the *Asia Contemporary Art Show in Hong Kong* (read more about the show [here](#)). The **17th of October** I will participate at an *Urban Art Festival in Shanghai* where I will paint houses of a traditional lilong (traditional lane houses neighbourhood) and then between the **28th of October** (opening) and the **27th of November**, I will have a solo show in Hong Kong at *Fabrik Gallery* in Sheung Wan in Hong Kong. At the beginning of November I will have an exhibition-open studio at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel in Shanghai.



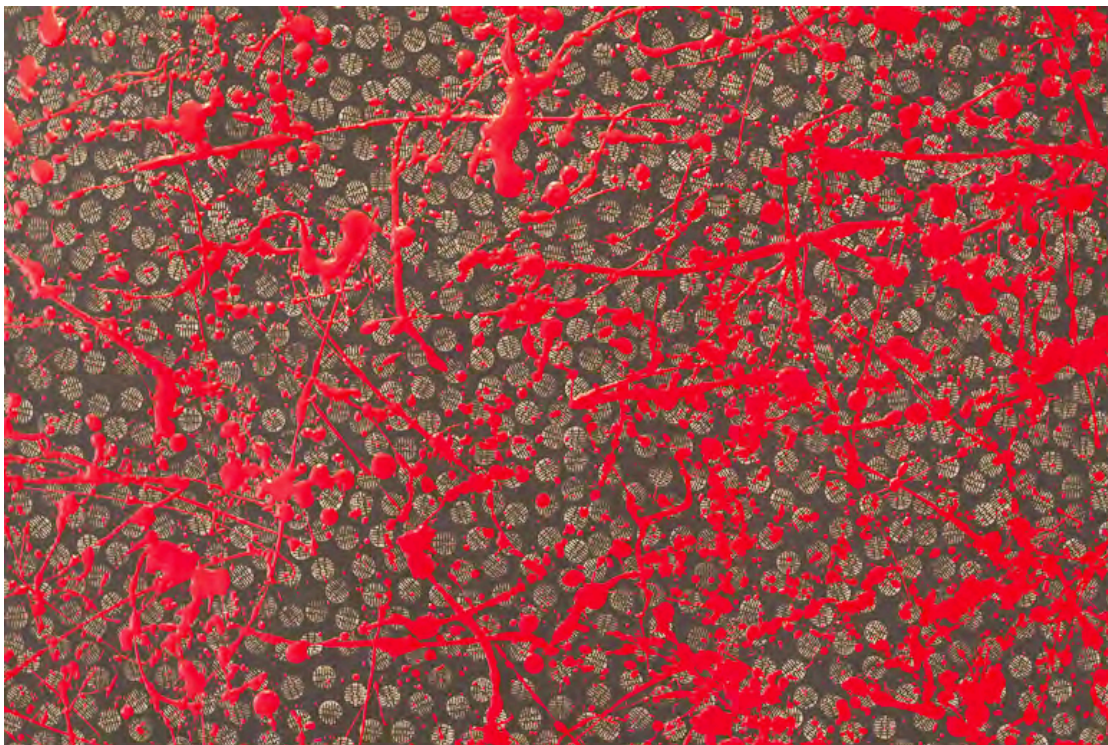
PHIL AKASHI AT WORK, CLOSE UP OF ESSAQUIRA. Image courtesy Phil Akashi

Tell us more about your upcoming show at Fabrik Gallery in Hong Kong. What sort of series will you be exhibiting; does it also have the seals from this series as its main theme?

I will show artworks of my *Rings on Fire* trilogy series made in Hong Kong in 2014 and beginning of 2015. In this project, I engage the viewer through an optimistic, yet nomadic reflections of the meaning of marriage and it's relation to happiness". In this series, I employed a collection of traditional Asian seals to imprint and rejuvenate the functionality of the Double Happiness character "囍" commonly used in China as a decoration and symbol of marriage.

The first chapter of the trilogy - **Tradition** - refers to the social and cultural values of marriage. These artworks bear the marks of repetitive elements and their patterns exposing intricate layers of Cinnabar ink paste on Xuan paper.

The second chapter - **Challenge** - explores the contemporary revolution in marriage and its consequences. I photographed the artworks of the first chapter, digitally transformed them and printed them on Hahnemühle Fine Art paper. I then painted them with acrylic to create unique and intriguing compositions.



MARRAKESH. Mixed media on Hahnemühle Fine Art paper with Chinese characters: 囍/"Double Happiness", Hong Kong 2015. 35.4"x45.2" / 90x115cm. Image courtesy Phil Akashi

For the series final chapter - **Wisdom of Happiness** – I gathered elements of the two first chapters, then carefully added gold leaves and thin layers of acrylic using a bamboo stick. The Rings on Fire series ends ultimately with a spiritual question: is marriage both a cause and an effect of happiness?



WISDOM OF HAPPINESS. Mixed media on canvas with Chinese characters: 囍/"Double Happiness", Hong Kong 2015. 78.7"x118.1" 200x300cm. Image courtesy Phil Akashi



Phil Akashi in action in his studio in Hong Kong. Image courtesy Phil Akashi

What is next, where do you go after the residency?

I will come back to Hong Kong in November and will finally take some holidays in December to spend Christmas in Belgium with my family. Next year I plan to complete my Legend of the Dragon Street Art project around China and I might travel to Brazil for a big project for the RIO 2016 Olympic Games (tbc).



PHIL AKASHI STUDIO - HONG KONG 2014. Image courtesy Phil Akashi

At Style by Asia, we think that Phil definitely deserves a holiday after such a busy year and we can't wait to see the finished result of his exciting series "Legend of the Dragon"! A big thank you to the team at Swatch Art Peace Hotel for their assistance with this article. And don't miss Phil's exhibition at Fabrik Gallery in Hong Kong from Oct 28th - Nov 27th.

The Swatch Art Peace Hotel artist residency welcomes a broad range of cultures, artistic styles and media. Artists are under no obligations with respect to the organization or nature of the work undertaken during their residency. They are free to engage in individual or joint projects and to work according to their own schedule and plans. All participants will be asked to leave an artistic "trace" of their visit at the end of their stay, but will be completely free to choose how to do so.

The main focus of the project is on creative exchange. Artists are encouraged to engage in collaborative work and discussion and to interact as a dynamic artistic community so as to enrich the creativity of the group as well as each other's work. Communication, confrontation, observation and discovery should challenge the artists and enable them, in this vibrant artistic and cultural environment, to build upon their existing skills and extend the boundaries of their art. The artists in residency frequently get together for dinner and conversation at the common spaces, so there is plenty of opportunity to learn from others.



Image courtesy Swatch Group

Artists are chosen by the international Artists Selection Committee chaired by the CEO of the Swatch Group, Nick Hayek.

Art is the real luxury in life. A natural consequence is to bring art to where luxury is in Shanghai and to combine these components through creativity. Where can this blend of luxury, art and creativity be better expressed than in The Swatch Art Peace Hotel on the Bund? A historic luxury hotel to host an artist residential community. An artist residency of a unique kind.

The Swatch Art Peace Hotel Artist Residency offers artists, who are shaping the luxury of tomorrow, the opportunity to develop creative exchange by living and working together in a dedicated environment in one of Shanghai's most prestigious locations. Two floors have been reserved for this purpose in a legendary landmark building in Shanghai, China and under a concept developed by Swatch Group, the former Palace Hotel (later known as the Peace Hotel South Building) has been restored to its original splendor. Now known as The Swatch Art Peace Hotel, it is located directly on the Bund, once the heart of old Shanghai and today the luxury mile in one of the biggest and most dynamic cities in the world.

Find out more about the hotel and the artist residency [here](#)

Find out more about Phil Akashi [here](#) or follow him on [Instagram](#)

<http://www.stylebyasia.com/peace-for-art/>

October 2015 Sandra Smedhall