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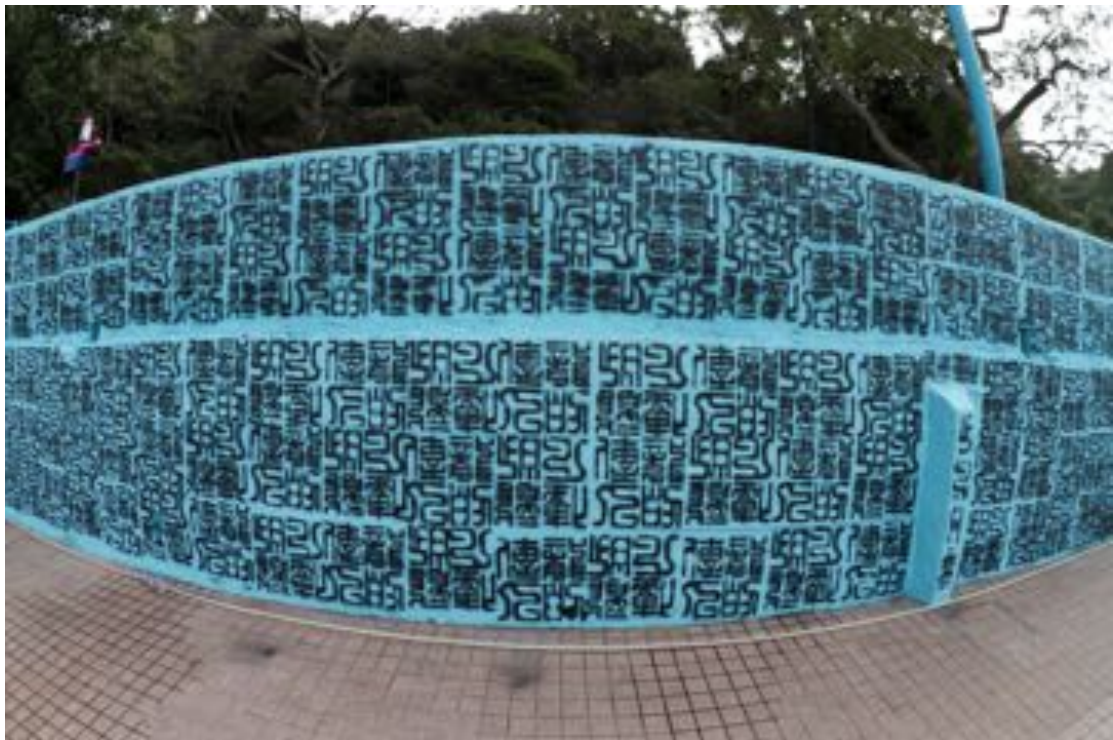
May 22, 2015

Art

asian seals, chinese seals,
contemporary art,
Deepwater Bay, Legend
of the Dragon, Phil
Akashi, Street art.

Surprise – it's illicit! Belgian artist Phil Akashi on his new Asian street art series – Interview

Belgian contemporary artist Phil Akashi catches up with UrbanDNA to discuss his new street art series begun in Hong Kong, his creative journey and why illicit art is just another creative medium.



HONG KONG STREET ART

Phil Akashi is a contemporary artist who sees no boundaries in expressive mediums. To this fine studio artist, creating illicit art on the street is just another way to convey his creative message – by happenstance, some of his creative works can be described as street art. The Belgian artist can be found most often working in his studio in the blossoming South Island Cultural District in Hong Kong, yet is undeterred by policy preventing his work from being seen in outdoor locations. Akashi's most recent endeavor involving an unsanctioned element is his new 'Legend of the Dragon' street art project (with both illicit and permitted artworks) that will be displayed throughout Asia in nine different cities (one chapter corresponding to one city – with one or several artworks per city). The project reflects upon cultural identity through rethinking the use of traditional Chinese seals.



First of the 'Legend of the Dragon' series at Deepwater Bay. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.



Artwork detail. Courtesy Phil Akashi.

Two artworks from the 'Legend' street art project have already been created in mindfully chosen, unsanctioned locations in Hong Kong. The first piece was installed by the artist at the Deepwater Bay beachside boardwalk in March, during the week of Art Basel in Hong Kong. The timing of this first piece incidentally provides fascinating insight into the handling of high caliber street art during Hong Kong's much-touted art week – would the art survive? Sadly, not. The unpermitted Deepwater Bay mural lasted hardly a week before city crews returned the wall to its original, blank (in this case, blue) state. This, despite the interest and thanks of the many onlookers who witnessed the work's creation. On another note, the artist was surprised by the unwaning crowds of nighttime swimmers that continued through the wee hours of the morning. Hong Kong's elderly do love a good evening dip and, apparently, street art.



Second 'Legend' artwork in Wong Chuk Hang, courtesy Phil Akashi.

The second unsanctioned installment in the 'Legend' series went up in Wong Chuk Hang in mid-May, and can still be viewed along the highway at 55 Wong Chuk Hang Road, at the opposite side of the street from the L Hotel.

Although Akashi's creative repertoire may include street artworks, he identifies simply as an 'artist'. He says, "I am just an artist... who likes to express myself from time to time through street art..." His use of unsanctioned space stands out as a solidly 'post-graffiti' practice, part of a new era of illicitly created, fine street art that has evolved beyond territorial markings and spreading one's name into a recognized medium of contemporary art. Unlike some traditional street art, it isn't concerned with its own illicit nature. Rather, Akashi is executing painstaking, studio-quality painted works with or without permission in highly visible locations that address cultural identity. Rather than being a street art purist who only works with or without permission, Akashi's creative practice blurs the lines of placing importance on permission at all, offering a fresh freedom.



A design by Akashi for 'ARTE y MODA', Fashion Art EU. Courtesy Phil Akashi.



The artist working on pieces for Fashion Art EU. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.

Phil Akashi is a young artist to watch going forward. His exhibition with *Fashion Art E.U.*, which selected him to represent Belgium, is currently on display at the European Parliament in Brussels and will soon begin traveling across European capitals. He also embarks upon a notable brand collaboration at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel Artist Residency in Shanghai – fascinating as Swatch is especially supportive of contemporary art and is a main partner of the Venice Biennale.

Style by Asia catches up with Phil before his departure for the Swatch artist residency in China, getting the scoop on his latest street artworks in Hong Kong. Read on for the uncut, exclusive interview with the artist.

.....INTERVIEW.....
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Where are you from, and how has your background shaped your artistic practice?

I am a Belgian-born artist based in Hong Kong. Born in 1978 and raised in Brussels in the multicultural capital of Europe, I quickly developed a curiosity and a passion for art. As a nomadic artist, I later lived in Los Angeles, Madrid, Wellington (New Zealand), and then Shanghai, where I enjoyed stimulating artistic environments and further deepened my interest in Asian cultures. I now live and work in Hong Kong. Passionate about Asian seals and Asian characters, I have built my artistic identity with an Asian essence. I chose the pseudonym “Akashi” for the vocal strength and for the diversity it represents. Living in China, I have also created a Chinese name, 涛程, meaning “big wave journey” and I intentionally reversed the two characters to play with the rules and to make my Chinese name unique. With these names, I play with paradoxes, talk about my inner world and how I view the world as a transcultural element.

Can you describe your creative training? What are your preferred mediums to work with?

I have never been to an art school but I have always been curious about art in general and experimented with creative things as a hobby. Four years ago during a trip around China, I fell in love with Asian seals and when I arrived in Shanghai, I decided to become a full time artist and started experimenting with Chinese chops. Today I reinvent the traditional use of Asian seals working with a broad range of media. My arts practice involves using the power of language with a transcultural and conceptual approach to question the contemporary world around me. As a result of my usage of traditional Asian seals, I forge my own artistic language that links East and West and places the past in the service of the present.



The artist is inspired by traditional Chinese seals like this pictured. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.

What inspires you? Who are your favorite artists?

I am inspired every day by the life of all my grandparents who have been very hard workers and taught me very good values in life. I am also trying to be surrounded by optimistic people who live unconventional and unique lifestyles, who dare to take risks and who enjoy achieving their dreams.

My favorite artists are Axel Pauporté, Keith Haring and Ado Chale. Axel Pauporté is a big mountain snowboarding legend. He was such a creative artist in the mountains. I was following him when I was a teenager and he inspired me to take risks, follow my intuition and to do what I love early in my life. I have been passionate about Keith Haring since I was a kid for his widely recognized visual language and for his social activism. It's probably thanks to him I do some street art projects today. Ado Chale is an artist, designer and most importantly sculptor of time – passionate about mineralogy, gems and stones. I visited his studio in Brussels when I was 15 years old and it was an eye-opening experience for me... I am also very sensitive to the work of Jaume Plenza, the collective Enra and Gregor Hildebrand.

How does your street practice fit into your overall creative practice?

What came first for you – the street or the studio?

The street practice is one way to express myself and to escape my comfort zone and my studio. I need a lot of freedom and diversity as a person so it is good for me to change regularly of environments. The first painting I did, I wanted to do it on a canvas and I finally ended painting it on an entire wall.



'The Passage of Strength'. Courtesy Phil Akashi.



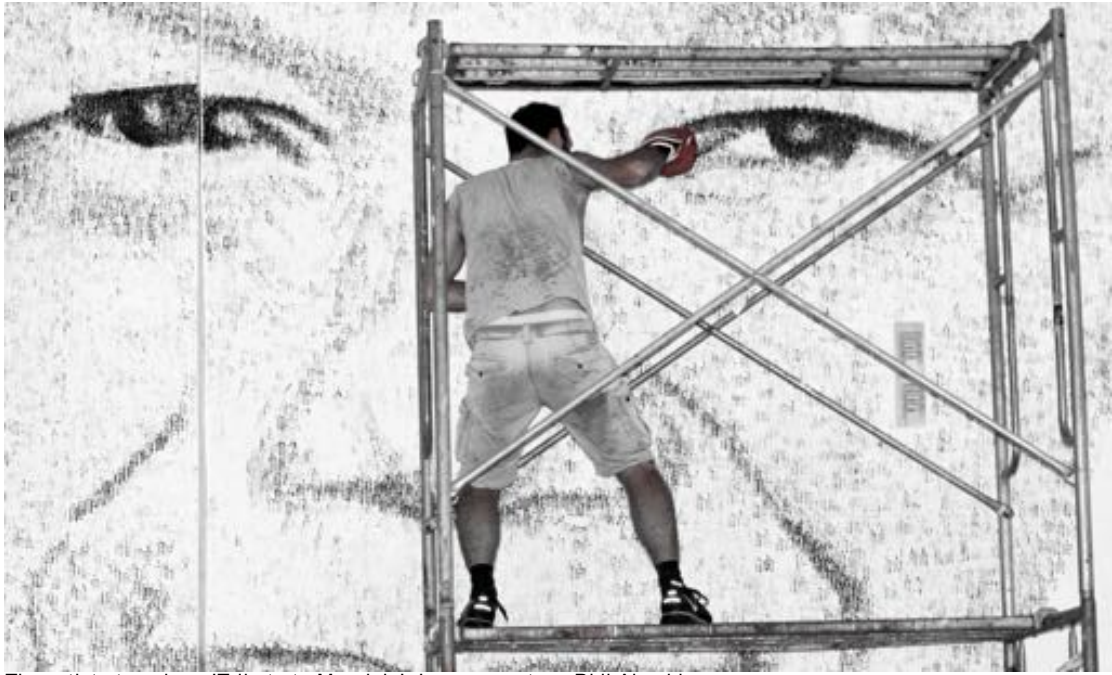
Detail of 'The Passage of Strength' – revealing the tiny characters that create the bigger picture. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.

Can you describe your process for creating street art? What comes first, the content or the location?

My process of creating street art is the same as creating art in general. I have ideas everyday when I am thinking, when I am meeting people, when I am commuting, traveling, reading... then I take notes and 'sleep' on the ideas for a while. When I come back to my notes, if I still feel the idea has potential, I develop the concept and decide later to create a project or series around it. The content and the message are keys as I like to add meaning and symbols in my art. The way I do it and where I do it come next. In my street art process, the choice of the location is important. It has to bring me a special emotion, either it's the environment, the location or the architecture. It has to be a bit funky or unique. I can also discover a cool spot and start to build content for it. It's like making the spot your own and creating your own 'carte blanche' commissioned project. But I always do it with a sense of 'respect' and try to create something meaningful and aesthetic.

What themes or motifs do you usually paint? Has this focus changed recently?

For the moment, my arts practice involves using the power of Asian language with a transcultural and conceptual approach to question the contemporary world around me. So you can see some Asian characters, words, poems either from China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea appearing as seal imprints. That's my way of creating a visual signature and to forge my own artistic language that links East and West and places the past in the service of the present. It is also an exciting way to escape my comfort zone and to sustain the very old tradition of Asian seals with passion, emotion and innovation.



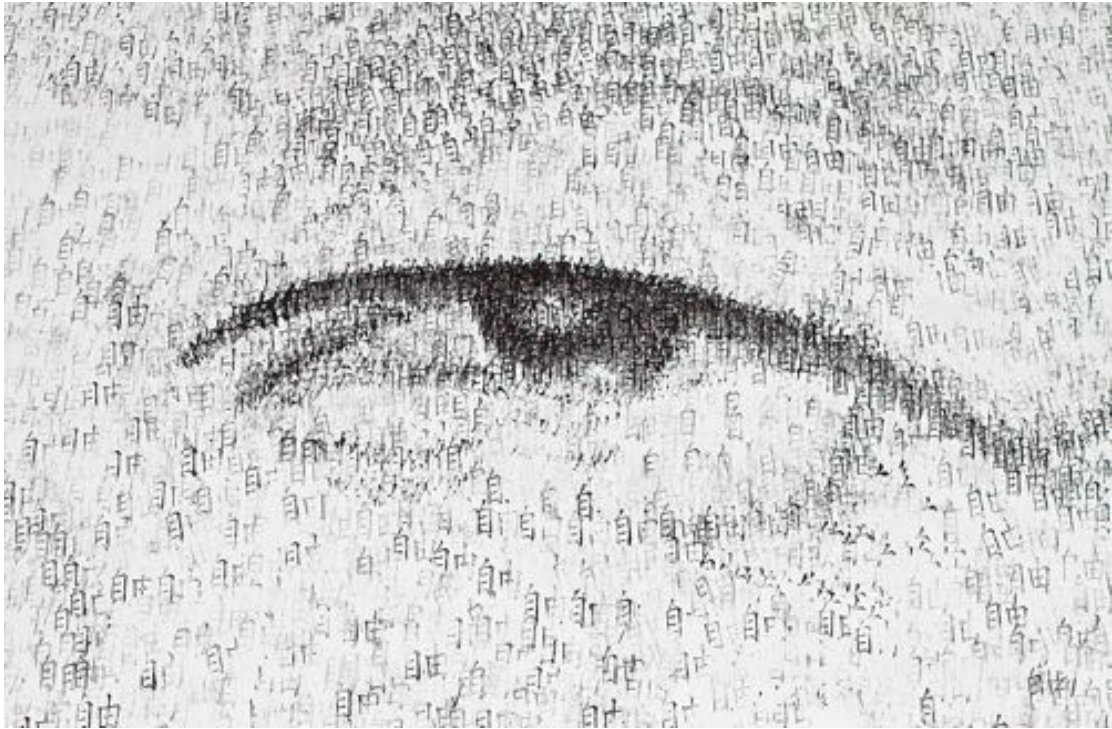
The artist at work on 'Tribute to Mandela'. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.

What brings you to Hong Kong, and why is painting Hong Kong important to you? Does painting Hong Kong offer any special opportunities or difficulties that aren't found elsewhere?

Two years ago while we were living in Shanghai, my girlfriend received a business opportunity to move to Hong Kong with an expatriate package. After 3 years in mainland, it was a cool opportunity for us to discover Asia from another angle so we decided to go for it. I feel really lucky to have the chance to be able to live and work in Hong Kong without having to worry about paying the rent. Hong Kong has so much to offer and it is all about finding the right balance to enjoy the best of it. I really appreciate the nature, the ocean and the central location in Asia. Painting Hong Kong is important for me to leave a trace of my passage. It is also a way to immortalize into my work the influence of Hong Kong as a cultural, political, social environment.

How does the graffiti scene in Hong Kong compare to other cities you've worked?

The graffiti scene in Hong Kong is still in its infancy. It's the same for street art and the art scene in general. Hong Kong is so expensive that makes it almost impossible for locals to have the chance to express themselves as full time artists. The potential is here but it is just tougher compared to other cities. Also the government doesn't seem to be 100% ready to understand the benefits of street art initiatives.



Detail from 'Tribute to Mandela'. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.

What is your 'dream canvas' in Hong Kong? Are there any particular obstacles that complicate gaining access to that space?

Well I do have a couple of funky street spots in Hong Kong I would like to appropriate but this is top secret information! Apart from that I would be very excited to create a monumental artwork on the entire bottom of the swimming pool of the Four Seasons Hotel, or on the entire floor at Pearl Lam, Gagosian or Galerie Perrotin. I don't really see any obstacles, they just have to call me ;o)

Where else have you painted? What are your favorite cities and countries to work, and where do you plan to create work in your 'Legend of the Dragon' series?

I lived and created in Brussels, Los Angeles, Madrid, Wellington (New Zealand), Shanghai and Hong Kong. For the 'Legend of the Dragon' street art project, I plan to work in 9 different cities of China and S.A.R. You can follow me on Instagram (@philakashi) to discover every step of the journey.



Akashi posing in front of completed 'Tribute to Mandela'. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.

How fast do you generally work? How long did it take you to create the illicit piece in Deepwater Bay, the first in your 'Legend of the Dragon' series?

It depends of the artwork, the environment, the size, if it is legal or not...the longest artwork I did was the 'Tribute to Mandela' in Shanghai in the summer 2013. It took me three weeks and I lost 7 kilos! I attached a seal embedded with the Chinese characters "自由" (meaning 'freedom') to a boxing glove, and imprinted a monumental portrait into a mural with 27,000 punches.

The piece in Deepwater Bay Beach took me one night. I started at midnight and finished with the sunrise. I was surprised to see so many people who were going to swim at every hour of the night in the dark.

Can you describe your experience creating the first piece in the 'Legend of the Dragon' series in Deepwater Bay? What about the second piece in Wong Chuk Hang?

Creating a monumental piece during the night along the Deepwater Bay beach was really unconventional for me. Having the "green" in front of me while hearing the noise of the ocean behind me made it a peaceful moment. I finished the piece with a wonderful sunrise. I was also impressed by the number of old people going to swim at every hour of the night in the darkness. The majority came by to check me working, they all were very kind and supportive of my work which was a good surprise too.

The second piece in Wong Chuk Hang was a bit less peaceful as it was on a main street. It needed a couple of hours to be achieved as I had to do it in several steps. I had to paint the backgrounds first then I had to wait 2 hours to make it dry then I added the characters with the sprays. One of my friends joined me to record some videos and we've had two funny moments. The first one was when a public bus with passengers stopped in front of me to observe me spraying. We exchanged a smile with the driver then he left with a long supportive claxon! Then an hour later we had a small stress when we heard a police car siren arriving. But it was finally an ambulance and after it passed, we just had a big laugh.



'Legend of Dragon' in Wong Chuk Hang. Image courtesy Phil Akashi.

Do you see a meaningful difference between illicit and permitted pieces within your street practice?

Honestly, no. When I create, I just want to express myself. I choose a location to add significance or emotion to my message. If it is an illegal location, I always try to respect it and beautify it. This is art. I am an artist, not a vandal. And if someone doesn't like my artwork, wants to remove it or cover it, I respect that.

For the 'Legend of the Dragon' series, is the illicit nature important to the overall meaning of the works? Will all the pieces be unauthorized?

The meaning is in the technique, the message and in the choice of cities and locations. The location might add significance and emotion, not the illicit nature. I plan to have a mix of unauthorized and commissioned pieces but I will do with what I manage to get. I would like for instance to do a mural in Macau, why not for a casino, but it is not going to be easy. If you own a wall or know someone I could contact, please let me know through my website contact page.

Where will the next piece in your 'Legend' series be located? Will it be a permission piece or not?

It will be unsanctioned in mainland China but the precise location is a surprise...

What are your expectations for the illicitly created pieces? Does it matter they may not remain in situ for long? After documenting the art photographically, does it matter whether it remains intact?

Of course I would prefer an artwork remains intact for a certain time but this is street art and I respect if it is removed, covered, or not liked.

Does the source of permission matter within your understanding of street art? Do you perceive government authorized painting differently from private permission?

I am just an artist... who likes to express myself from time to time through street art. I respect the fact some artists are less opened minded about street art, commercial, or public commissioned artwork. But honestly I don't have so much time to care about that. I know what I will accept and prefer to focus on what's exciting or inspiring me.

Does the description 'street artist' apply to you?

Yes of course, even though I like the freedom to consider myself simply as an artist. The street practice is a real passion and one of my ways to express myself and to escape my comfort zone and my studio.

Where do you see as the center of global street art culture– or is there one at all? Where do you see as the biggest graffiti scene within Asia?

I am not an expert of the street art culture and the graffiti scene. I am just an artist.

Have you ever experienced legal issues for creating work without permission in the public space? How was this resolved?

No, but if it happens I will try to explain I am doing art with respect and passion.

Do you abide by any street art 'code' or etiquette? How do you evaluate a site's propriety for displaying your work?

I just follow my intuition and try to respect others.



Where are your works available? Are you working with any particular galleries?

I am still in the early stages of my artistic career as I started only 4 years ago. I have spent my first two years in Shanghai experimenting with techniques and mediums. Then I focused the last 2 years on creating various series of more elaborate and collaborative projects. At the same time, I have participated in solo and group exhibitions in Belgium, China and the United States, which was good experience – not to sell high volume but rather to pay the bills, to learn and to build up my CV. So I was not ready to be represented. Today I feel I know more about who I am as an artist, about where I want to go and I feel my work has started to become more consistent. I start to have more and more interest from collectors, curators, galleries and media from different parts of the world. So I feel ready this year to start talking with galleries and I believe the next twelve months will be exciting for my development. Anyway, finding galleries is not complicated but finding the right long-term matches requires some patience.

Regarding exhibitions, I am participating right now in the **Fashion Art E.U. exhibition** in the European Parliament in Brussels till the end of May 2015. Then the show will travel to several capitals in Europe. This ambitious project aims to gather “ARTE y MODA” to promote creativity in Europe. This exhibition is curated by the Fashion Art Institute that has selected 28 artists from the European Union – each of the artists using their personal technique to communicate European values in their particular manner. I have been selected to represent my country, Belgium and I created a dress mixing Japanese sumi ink and cinnabar paste with seal imprints with Chinese characters: 文/“culture” and 乐观/“optimism” as I hope Europe will start to re-build together a culture of optimism. You can find more information on my **website**.

What’s next for you, and where are you working? When can we expect you back in Hong Kong?

In May, I will embark on new challenge and join the Swatch Art Peace Hotel Artist Residency in Shanghai as a residing artist for a 6 month period. I have been selected by the Swatch Artists Selection Committee, composed by François-Henri Pinault, George Clooney, Nayla and Nick Hayek, Esther Grether, Mikhail Kusnirovich and Sir Francis Yeoh. Thank you guys!

I have my studio in Hong Kong in Wong Chuk Hang in the **South Island Cultural District**, a new destination for contemporary art in Hong Kong. However, it will soon be temporarily closed for 6 months. After Shanghai I will come back to Hong Kong probably around November this year. Apart from that, I am

in discussion for a commissioned project of sculpture in Japan in a ski resort so I might have the chance to go to Hokkaido this summer. I am also preparing a street art project in Bali for 2016!

Check out more from Phil here:

www.philakashi.com

Instagram: [**@PhilAkashi**](https://www.instagram.com/PhilAkashi)

Erin Wooters Yip

<https://urban-dna.org/2015/05/22/surprise-its-illicit-belgian-artist-phil-akashi-on-his-new-asian-street-art-series-interview/>