TO SEE THE OTHER SIDE

In the world of abstract geometrist Lucien den Arend, landscapes become this artist's canvas to meld both man and nature.

While conventional wisdom states that artists are to be misunderstood in their own time, Dutch sculptor Lucien den Arend has had the great fortune of epiphany, in realising that he's made a breakthrough with his audience. In 1985, the city of Barendrecht, near Rotterdam, commissioned den Arend to design a landscape for its new housing project called Molenvliet. In the midst of suburban dwellings, den Arend masterfully wrought a square island rising from the water, with 256 willow trees planted in a grid. At the time, den Arend felt that this project was one of his most abstract pieces in approach but the usual brickbats that he was expecting didn't materialise. "I asked myself if I was on track." The reason den Arend felt perplexed by the accepting and enthusiastic reaction was because he had, all the while, been getting a lot of flak for his projects, even though he personally felt he was doing good work and designing in a manner that was entirely his own. "In time, I came to accept that maybe I found a connection with the people."

To this day, the Pieter Janszoon Saenredam Project, which den Arend named after the constructivist *avant la lettre* 17th-century painter, continues to attract plenty of attention for its almost mystical charm, from both the man on the street and art aficionados. "I named the project as a tribute to Saenredam, who constructed his paintings in a mathematical way," den Arend explains. "Some of the churches which he painted on are now gone, but architects say that they could reconstruct the churches just based on his technical drawings he made before he actually painted on the churches." This is why, every 12 and a half years, the willow trees are painted white, to recall the columns in church interiors, which were whitewashed by Protestants during the reformation to cover the Catholic paintings.

For den Arend – who was in Kuala Lumpur for the first time recently as part of an ongoing lecture and workshop series held by the events arm of architectural firm ZLG Design – the stunning imagery of white-painted trees goes all the way back to his childhood. "I was born during the war and, in my early childhood, I would go with my father, who owned a cigar store, into the Dutch countryside to visit cigar makers. At the time, the trees were still painted white because the bombing during the war meant that all lights had to be dimmed out. And a white-painted tree would catch the light of the bicycle in the night, so you could see where you were headed."

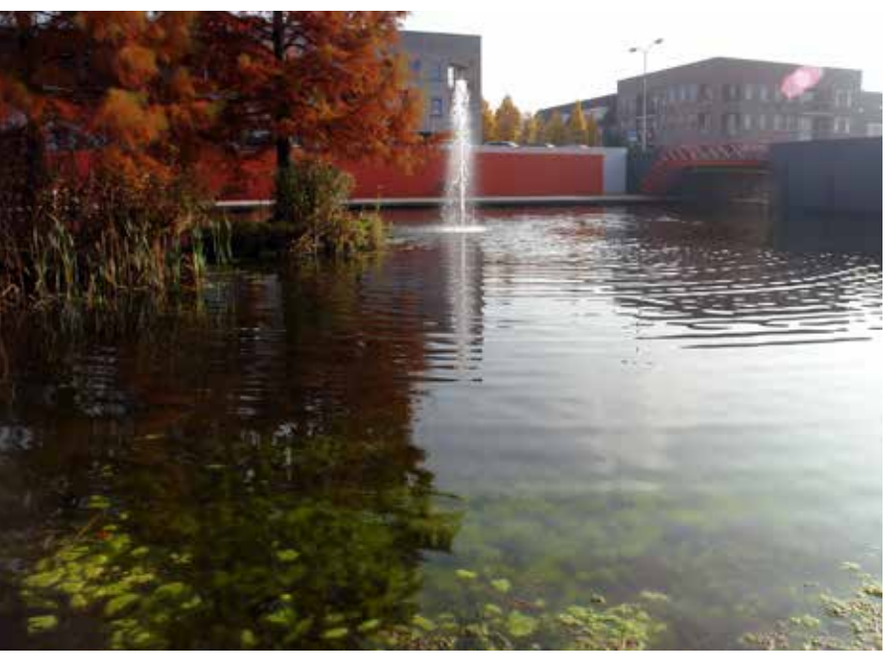
In the same way, a visit to Tuscany much later in the life of den Arend was a flashback to his childhood, as he saw orchards of white-painted fruit trees, ostensibly to prevent the trunks from being scorched by a lower-angled sun in winter, as well as serving as protection against wood borers. This unearthly, ethereal vision has served as one of his greatest inspirations – that idea of beauty originating from a necessary action by men, who produce it without any objective or pretensions of creating art, or something special. In that simplicity itself, the beauty of both men and nature is revealed.

At last reckoning, den Arend can count 55 different cities where his large sculptural pieces of art are present (although he thinks the number is closer to 60 or 65 now). From giant arches to sculptures, bridges to islands, den Arend has, in his own way, changed a little of the world with his fantastical art forms. In the present day, the artist lives and owns a sculpture park in a desolate area called Kangasniemi in the Finnish countryside, where "the quiet and stillness of the

TEXT **KENNETH TAN** PHOTOGRAPHY **LAW SOO PHYE** & **LUCIEN DEN AREND**

"I LIKE TO WORK USING A COMBINATION OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PLACE, BE IT A LAKE OR GROUND WATER, WHICH YOU CAN DIG AND MAKE USE OF."

Highlights from the Pieter Janszoon Saenredam Project, Lucien den Arend's breakthrough achievement. Situated in the midst of suburban dwellings in the city of Barendrecht, near Rotterdam, den Arend's landscape for the then new housing project Molenvliet included a square island rising from the water reservoir, with 256 willow trees that are painted white and planted in a grid. Right in the centre of the island is a stainless steel cube installed in memory of the 400th birthday of the painter Pieter Saenredam.



The Walburg Project in the city of Zwijndrecht in the Netherlands.

An urban art project in Ede, a city in central Netherlands.

night makes you think you're in a factory, only to realise that the pounding sound is of your own blood ringing through your ears."

However, it was in sunny, cheery California where den Arend took his first steps towards this life-long vocation. "I lived in America for 13 years and thought of becoming an artist and painter," he remembers. His first inkling that sculptural forms were his calling occurred when he made a piece in plaster. "The result and reaction was so fantastic and that evoked the 3D quality in me." He would go on to enrol in art school ("because I needed the official teaching degree for a real job") but, as the fates would have it, den Arend was commissioned to work on a patio at a social work building fresh out of graduation. The project, which started out with the architect asking him to create a sculpture by a pond, took a life of its own. As it transpired, den Arend was eventually tasked with designing the entire garden. "I thought why design the sculpture when you can make the whole place totally new?"

This understanding was the genesis of den Arend's approach to environmental projects – using an architect's approach in thinking about the materials to be used – concrete, steel, stainless steel, plants, water and bronze – which should always be hollow ("Because when you knock it, it should sound like a bell"). "I like to work using a combination of the characteristics of the place, be it a lake or ground water, which you can dig and make use of," he says.

That whole lesson of being familiar to the material and landscape would be augmented when a 27-year-old den Arend met up with modernist English sculptor Henry Spencer Moore in Italy, back in 1971. "Moore had seen a garden which I was allowed to do, including the fountain that I created, and he said it was good that a sculptor makes something with his own hands," den Arend recalls. "At the time, I didn't think it very important... what he said, but then you realise that you have to know material, to know what you can do with it," he says, adding, "because you see stupid things now, being done by people who haven't touched the material at all."

The label of abstract geometrist, which den Arend has earned in how his sculptures seem to distort and then meld curiously, is another life-long objective of his. "At art school, we studied isometric constructions, technical drawings and perspectives," he says. "I had fun trying to put spatial geometry into form." For his first works, den Arend worked on crafting results from the use of tools. "If you take a file – used to make straight surfaces – you can't make a football," he says. "But, with the same file, you can make the straight lines into parabolic shapes." By way of explanation, den Arend uses the effect of moving two lines with an imaginary sheet of rubber between. "I liked the way the rubber would form in relations between the planes." In all this, the overarching objective of employing three-dimensionality is to enable the audience to see the other side, the twists and turns whereby all the planes, angles and materials merge as one.

The aforementioned inclination shares the same thematic thread as den Arend's approach to designed landscapes, in that he starts with architectural shapes in an organic environment, evoking ideas of old classical buildings, and then letting it slowly grow into nature. In his words, "to show where the human being was and where nature takes over."