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While these images taken in Jerusalem exemplify the type of topics linked to traditional photojournalism, they still illustrate d'Agata's adept skills at capturing human emotion

Visionary shots of reality

Antoine d'Agata breaks photojournalistic tradition by arguing he's anything but an observer in the scenes he captures. RACHEL JENAGARATNAM goes behind his lenses

IT was a chaotic parkour (movement) through life and in the world. I think these 12 years almost got to me. There were many extreme experiences," recalls Antoine d'Agata, who was in Kuala Lumpur recently for the Vision Culture Lectures.

The French photographer — the third speaker, or Vision Culture Fellow, in a series of talks organised by Shalini Ganendra Fine Art in Petaling Jaya — explains how he left school at 17 and lived on the streets of Europe and around the world.

He speaks about his humble beginnings in almost flawless English, choosing each word as precisely as a photographer would the camera settings to compose a picture.

His first time in Malaysia, the Marseille-born d'Agata's early experiences have shaped the photographer

and person he is today. His photos are entryways into private or rarely seen encounters and scenarios.

And although he's a Magnum photographer (a photographer with one of the world's leading photography co-operatives), his images and stature don't suggest he was a late bloomer in this field.

But he was. Photography wasn't a feature in his life until he was 30, when he found himself in New York after over a decade of practically living on the streets, lost and shocked by his new environment. "By casualty, photography came," he says.

Friends pushed him towards the art as a means to carve a better life for himself. He enrolled in the prestigious International Center of Photography (ICP), a step that would alter his course.

There, in a group of 40 students from 12 countries, d'Agata was tutored by

leading photographers such as Nan Goldin and Larry Clark.

"At the time, it was the best place to learn photography in New York. I had no money or experience, and this place was meant for those who were already photographers. I think they took me in as some kind of experiment because while I had no experience in photography, I had so much experience in life," he says.

D'Agata may not be the norm at ICP, but that turned out to be an advantage as it enabled a symbiotic exchange between himself and his group mates — he learnt from them, and they from him.

After his stint at ICP, he didn't pursue photography as he simply wasn't ready, he says. It was only in 1997, at 36, that he became a professional photographer.

This late start also turned out to be fortuitous. Unlike many young photographers

who struggle to find their creative footing in the early stages of their career, d'Agata subconsciously knew he would choose that path as he'd already chalked up so much life experience.

Things then moved quickly — exhibitions, books; recognition and awards. Magnum came knocking in 2003, but he turned it down. He was approached again two years later, and this time he agreed.

"Magnum is a bit of a temple of photojournalism, and to be inside Magnum and to question the things I question, it's the most appropriate place," he says.

Is this the peak for him, to be part of a fraternity of photographers that include the world's most celebrated such as Steve McCurry, Martin Parr and the late Henri Cartier-Bresson,

