

who is also one of Magnum's founders?

"I'm not looking for peaks, I'm looking for bottoms," he says with a laugh, and he's not joking.

In interviews online, he has been quoted as being in search of an "abyss", and this is in line with the sort of imagery he produces — haunting, highly emotive portrayals of locations and situations far from the norm.

While he has dabbled in commissioned images and urban landscapes, he's best known for his images of brief and intimate encounters around the world as well as documents of stimulated moments of pleasure. They are hard-hitting, but beautiful.

How exactly his images and ideology fit into the mainframe of what Magnum is perceived to be — a stalwart of the photojournalistic tradition — is interesting.

"Contrary to most photojournalists, I don't photograph ugly situations. I photograph pleasure, moments of ecstasy. Of course, my images are dark, but in the end what I photograph are just moments of beauty and intensity, so I don't see any abject (qualities).

"Photojournalism has

been photographing pain and violence, and the photojournalist has been in the position of condescension by looking down with pity (for so long)," he says.

It's arguably more exploitative to photograph, say, a war scene and its victims and leave with a gripping image that promises brisk sales at the newsstands, and d'Agata breaks photojournalistic tradition by arguing he is anything but an observer in the scenes he captures. He makes his life part of his material (often becoming a subject in his images) and spends time writing scenarios for his life, which he later lives up to.

This act has tinges of romanticism and a literary quality to it, which is simply fitting as most of d'Agata's influences stem from literature. "It's an amazing way to live," he says.

D'Agata sees the beauty in the what we would normally perceive as dark situations, and like Brassai 80 years before him who photographed denizens of the night for his publication, *Paris de Nuit* (Paris By Night), d'Agata has a fascination for shining a light on rarely seen worlds.

He admits that his works can sometimes be disturbing, and at the Q&A session after his Vision Culture Lecture, one man "attacks" him for appearing to exploit his subjects.

To this, d'Agata acknowledges that he receives more from his subjects than he could ever give them in return. And that he's fully aware of his subjects' socio-economic standing (many live on the fringes of conventional society).

But exploitation is far from his mind, and while most will perceive his images as abject, he feels the only woeful aspect of his images is a social one.

"The only abject part I see is social abjection, the economic conditions that people live in. I work with people who are left out of any kind of economic benefits and who have no social status. My photography doesn't address these political-economic issues directly, but in an indirect way by trying to give a different vision of the reality of this life," he explains.

The way d'Agata lives, thinks, acts and makes photographs come to life, is a hark back at a romantic past. He calls photography a "magical tool",

rhapsodises how "it breaks so many barriers, it makes things happen" whatever his subjects' cultural background, and refutes traditional photojournalism by fusing his life and his subject matter.

"I see photography as the only artistic language which requires someone to experiment a situation at the same time he creates a vision or language out of it. So, refusing to experiment, for me, is to give up on the essence of photography," he says.

He finds a lot of photography today "frustrating", arguing that people look and forget to act ("Human beings define themselves by their acts and not by their ideas or vision"), and his existentialist view is what dictates his work ("One is what he does, not what he is or feels or what he sees").

With such a strong body of work, speech does seem irrelevant, but d'Agata's words are as powerful and poignant as the images he creates.

While his story suggests it has taken him a lifetime to get to where he is today as a photographer, his images and words are testament to how it's one that has been worthwhile.



Acrylic on canvas by Margaret Gudumurrkuwuy in Living Art From Ancient Land

#### Impasto Of Shamsul Baharin — Nuansa Pekan Lama

Where: New Straits Times Press, 31 Jalan Riong, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur  
When: Until May 27  
Admission: Free  
Call: 03-2282 3322

THIS first solo exhibition by Shamsul Baharin Mohd Yusof features paintings of old buildings in Perak and Penang using the impasto technique, which involves using a palette knife to apply thick paint, layer after layer, on surfaces such as a canvas.

#### Utopia, An Exhibition Of Paintings By Haslin Ismail And Hee Chee Way

Where: Wei-Ling Contemporary, G212 & 213A Ground Floor, The Gardens Mall, KL  
When: Until May 28 (10am-10pm, Mon-Sun)  
Admission: Free  
Call: 03-2260 1106

SHARING a similar passion for sci-fi and fantasy, the two artists revel in their imaginations and create futurist worlds inhabited by whimsical creatures. Look out for Haslin's installation of paper cutouts where cardboard boxes and books are deconstructed and given new life, while Hee's hand-printed photograph and paint works, where familiar images are contrasted with fictitious ones, lure audiences into the realm of the surreal.

#### A Mother's Love

Where: Galeri 3A & 3B, National Art Gallery, 2 Jalan Temerloh, Off Jalan Tun Razak, KL  
When: Until May 29  
Admission: Free  
Call: 03-4025 4990

A SHOWCASE of works in various media and dimensions from the 1950s to the present, from

#### THE A-LIST

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the gallery's permanent collection. Works by contemporary artists using the representational idiom are also on display, along with photo submissions to the Kasihnya Ibu photography competition organised by the gallery for women photographers. The artworks are complemented by poems from national poets such as Datuk A. Samad Said, Datuk Usman Awang and Masuri S.N.

#### Bull And Beyond

Where: Sutra Gallery, 12 Persiaran Titiwangsa 3, KL  
When: Until June 6 (10am-5pm, Mon-Sat)  
Admission: Free  
Call: 03-4021 1092  
THROUGH his paintings, A.V. Ilango traces the bovine form and symbol that is closely related to man from the prehistoric days to the modern era.

#### Living Art From Ancient Land

Where: Shalini Ganendra Fine Art Gallery, 8 Lorong 16/7B, Section 16, Petaling Jaya  
When: July 8-Sept 30 (11am-7pm, Tue-Sat)  
Admission: Free  
Call: 03-7960 4740

THIS exhibition features 20 artworks by five leading Elcho Island Arts artists. These include works by Peter Datjing, Margaret Gudumurrkuwuy, Spirit Men sculptures by Jeremiah Bonson, bark paintings by Richard Gandhuwuy, and soft sculptures by Mavis Warrngila Ganambarr.



A selection of images from a series of portraits of Cambodian sex workers

## Community effort

THE Vision Culture Lectures is an innovative community initiative that brings international luminaries here to discuss their topics of expertise through lectures and workshops.

Launched by Shalini Ganendra Fine Art last year, the series promotes

regular cultural exchange and discourse and seeks to engage local audiences on a variety of topics. It is sponsored by HSBC and endorsed by Unesco.

Vision Culture Fellows include Sir Roy Calne, Carol Cassidy (renowned textile artist), Oscar Ho (museum

director and curator) and Antoine d'Agata.

The lectures are often accompanied by exhibitions, all hosted in the gallery's new green public premises in Section 16, Petaling Jaya.

Next on its list is Dr Susan Cochrane, an international expert on

aboriginal art, on July 7, and a well-known curator from the International Center Of Photography later this year.

For details, visit [www.shaliniGANENDRA.com](http://www.shaliniGANENDRA.com) or call 03-7960 4740. Or follow the gallery's activities on Facebook (SGFA).