Stepping inside Hashem Montasser’s home in Al Barsha, Dubai, is akin to a history lesson in modern Middle Eastern art and culture. Books can be found throughout the handsomely designed space telling of countless tales of regional lore. Aligning the walls are works by some of the most renowned names in Middle Eastern modern and contemporary art. Mahmoud Said, Adam Henein, Mona Hatoum, Mamed Al Dowayan, Rayyane Tabet, Basim Magdy and Yto Barrada illuminate Montasser’s many rooms with their presence and stories.

The owner of The Lighthouse restaurant and concept store in Dubai Design District (d3), the place du jour for a heartening meal and a catch up with friends, Montasser’s home with its many artworks exudes the same sense of welcoming. Named after Virginia Woolf’s acclaimed novel To The Lighthouse (1927), Montasser’s eatery, accented by numerous art, fashion and design books and its concept store of hand-selected objet d’art from around the world, is a place that breathes the idea of community and shared history. It is a nod to the members of the Bloomsbury Set, a group...
The often neglected concept, and his relationship to a part of Egypt, wrote his essay on the notion of oral history as an impactful, but much undocumented in the history books. It was my first concept respectively. “My mother was young when it happened and she and father are English literature and economics professors, grew up with this in the shadows,” says Montasser, whose mother Revolution in 1952, while his grandfather was rule of Anwar Sadat, Montasser’s great-grandfather, Hussein Pasha Sirry, was a three time prime minister of Egypt just before the Revolution in 1952, while his grandfather was the youngest Minister of Interior at that same pivotal moment. Montasser’s great-grandfather’s wife, Nahid Said, was the aunt of Queen Farida, King Farouk’s first wife. During the revolution they were segregated like many members of Egypt’s artistic regime. “I grew up with this in the shadows,” says Montasser, whose mother and father are English literature and economics professors, respectively. “My mother was young when it happened and she rarely spoke about it—it must’ve been, in many ways, traumatic for her.”

Montasser didn’t find much in the public domain about this part of his family’s history and began to ask questions. “Growing up in Cairo, I was close to my grandmother and generally curious, so she would tell me a lot of these personal anecdotes that were pretty much undocumented in the history books. It was my first concept of the power of oral history.” For his application to Harvard he wrote his essay on the notion of oral history as an impactful, but often neglected, concept, and his relationship to a part of Egypt’s history and its reappropriation by artists,” he says. “It’s that intersection between history and identity that I find so intriguing. On another wall is a work by Baasim Magdy that at first scene like a highly stylized photograph, but Baasim manipulates it by applying chemicals to its surface, rendering it almost post-surrealistic,” Montasser explains. “It’s about taking images with certain views and subverting them.” He points to a work by Ziad Antar shot with an expired film roll that “blurs the line between fiction and reality.” Towards the entrance is a large piece by Palestinian artist Hazem Harb: “created through the unearthing of old photographs from Palestine as part of a conscious excavation by the artist to create a semi-sculptural collage work.” Such ways of creating art challenge one’s thought process as well as one’s interpretation of history and memory. Perhaps those artists are saying just that: that history is subjective and we are all, to a certain extent, play with our past and future. “This theme is about the artist acting as an archivist and how they are appropriating their memories to better understand the histories of their communities,” explains Montasser. Through his collecting Montasser also realized that he had time-specific memories of Egypt that he was nostalgically drawn to. Perhaps he is an archivist then, as well as that of the collector. Memories intertwined with artworks that contain real-life remnants of the past are powerful indeed. A poignant large black and white photograph by Saudi artist Manal Al-Dowayan hangs on the wall. Nearby is a work by Yto Barrada that incorporates her identity and memory. It’s the relationship between history and memory, and identity and memory, that helps inform work with archival objects—documents or photographs that have not always withstood the test of time-but add a particular story of their fragmented histories, and use historical markers to formulate more coherent views of our current realities” he says. Through his collecting Montasser also realized that he had time-specific memories of Egypt that he was nostalgically drawn to. Perhaps he is an archivist then, as well as that of the collector. Memories intertwined with artworks that contain real-life remnants of the past are powerful indeed. A poignant large black and white photograph by Saudi artist Manal Al-Dowayan hangs on the wall. Nearby is a work by Yto Barrada that incorporates her identity and memory. It’s the relationship between history and memory, and identity and memory, that helps inform work with archival objects—documents or photographs that have not always withstood the test of time-but add a particular story of their fragmented histories, and use historical markers to formulate more coherent views of our current realities.”he says.

Looking at art resonates within his professional interests. “Spaces like The Lighthouse actively debate these hybrid notions, whether formally through our TLC Con Gesation Series, where we invite members of our creative community such as Sultan Al Quasim or Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, or informally through a shared meal or gift buying,” he says. “It’s the idea of seeing things from the past and present in a new light. Indeed, a work of art can offer that. It can create a new future.”

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