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Rabel Betshmueel: 'Assyrian Culture Is Alive, Evolving and More Creative Than Ever'

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Rabel Betshmueel discusses his proudest moments as an artist, how to pass on cultures to younger generations and the outcome of engaging in uncomfortable conversations.

Liana Jacob
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Rabel Betshmueel.

Rabel Betshmueel is an Assyrian-Iraqi artist, whose family fled from Baghdad to Chicago, US, due to political and religious persecution.

His family originate from the village of Bebedeh in northern Iraq and he has grown up with their native food, music and traditions.

When incorporating traditional food into his family meals, he puts his own spin on the recipes while being inspired by other cuisines.

"Homemade Kubbat Khumaa (meat dumplings in sour vegetable stew), dolma, and folk music were always a part of our lives," he said.

"Even after moving to Chicago, we made sure to keep those traditions alive. That said, I'm pretty particular about food; I don't actually eat the dishes I grew up with all the time.



Village of Bebedeh, Iraq. Photo credit: Ninou Shmuel.

"Instead, I like to put my own spin on things, like making a 'dolma burrito' with dolma filling, tortilla, yoghurt, and mint.

"We're experiencing an Assyrian Renaissance; a time when our culture is alive, evolving, and more creative than ever.

"Assyrians are still here, making art, building community, and pushing our traditions forward in new ways.

"This is a moment worth celebrating and supporting."



Making art with images of Assyrian relics.

There have been people who say that having uncomfortable conversations that require a lot of self-reflection have helped them forge connections with others on a human level.

Rabel agrees as he has had similar experiences.

"Some of my greatest growth has come from honest, sometimes challenging conversations about identity, spirituality, and the realities of growing up," he said.

"I've had my mind changed many times, and I try to pay it forward by sharing Assyrian history or listening when others share their stories.

"This is how we build real connections. I always say that art is the bridge that links us to the world and brings the world closer to us."

When asked what he likes the most about his Assyrian heritage, Rabel said: "I love the creativity, resilience, focus on family, and the ancient symbols that still resonate today.



Rabel and his mother, Janet, reuniting with Elias, who was stationed at an opposition-controlled area in northern Iraq.

"Our story has real depth and complexity. For me, it's not just about survival. It's about innovation, creativity and how to keep moving forward.

"I'm always searching for that deeper meaning in Assyrian culture; it's not about copying relics but about transforming them into something new and innovative."

His art has evoked a lot of curiosity from people, some of whom see Assyrian culture differently because of his artistic approach.

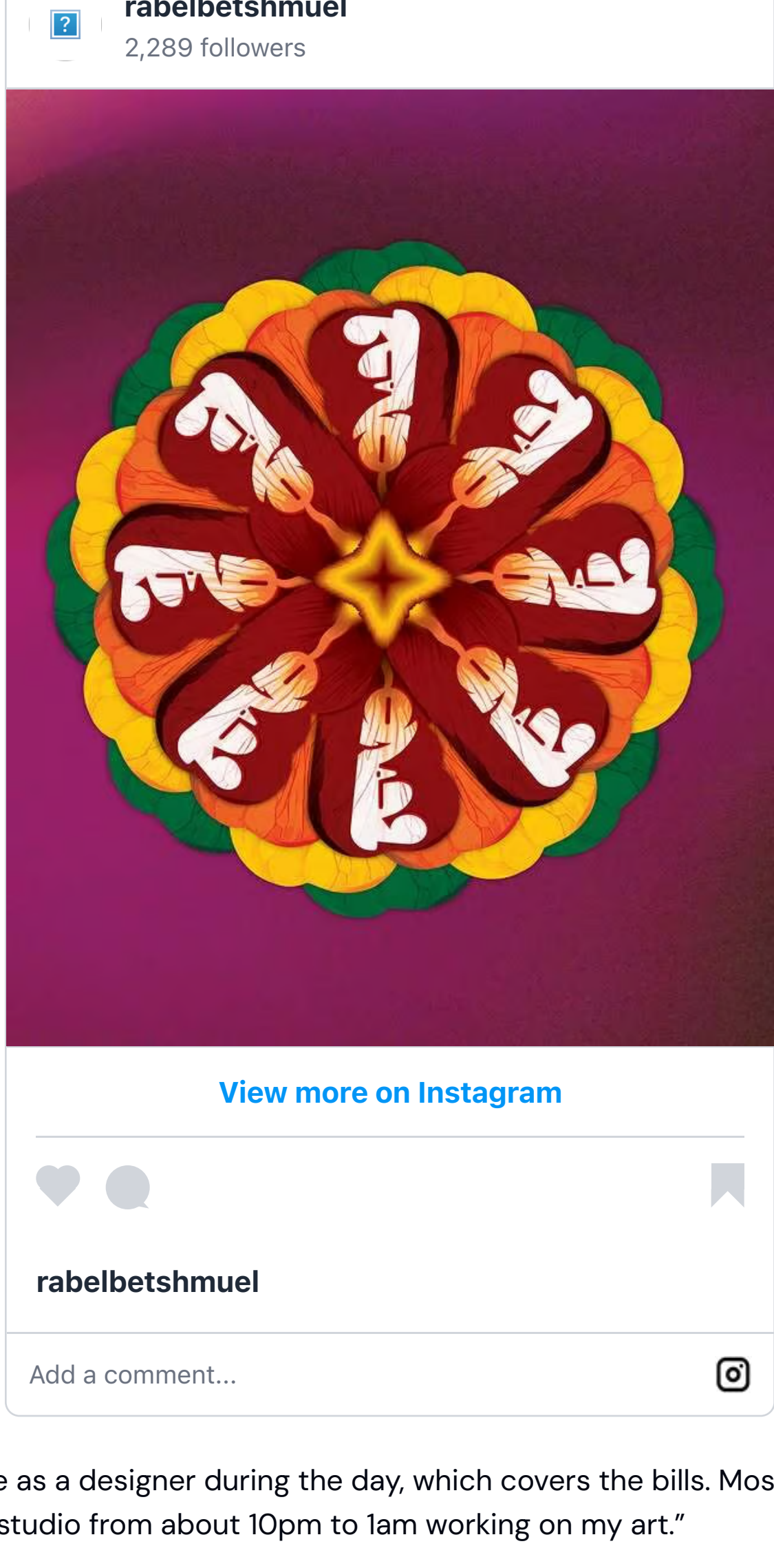
"My proudest moments are when someone tells me they see Assyrian culture differently because of my art," Mr Betshmueel said.

"That's what motivates me. It motivated me to write my manifesto, which I titled The Rebellion.

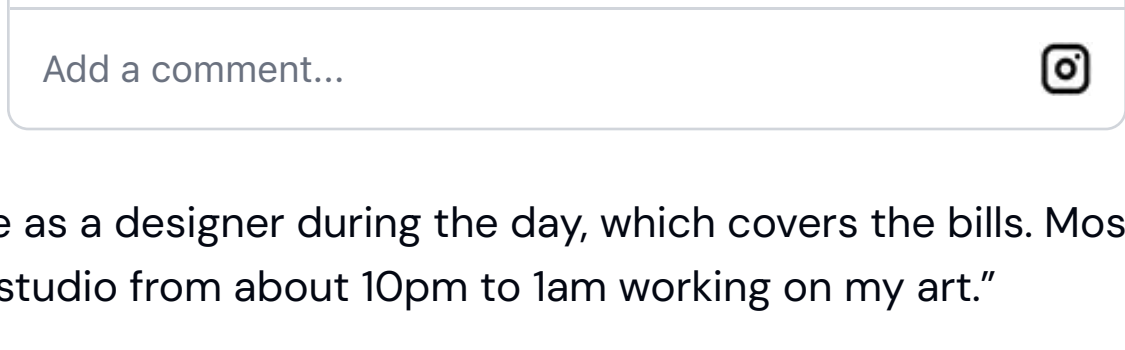
"I've had exhibitions, collaborations, and I'm always working to keep Assyrian stories in the spotlight.



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"I work full time as a designer during the day, which covers the bills. Most nights, you'll find me in the studio from about 10pm to 1am working on my art."

Rabel and his wife continue to share the Assyrian culture with their two children in various ways.

"I keep Assyrian culture alive at home by turning the Assyrian experience into a hands-on, daily practice," he said.

"My kids are in the studio with me whenever I'm working. brushes and paper in hand, while they make their own pieces.

"Oneeta, my eldest, runs the space as 'studio manager', Zaia, the 'assistant studio manager', mixes paints, helps clean up and in general bothers his sister.



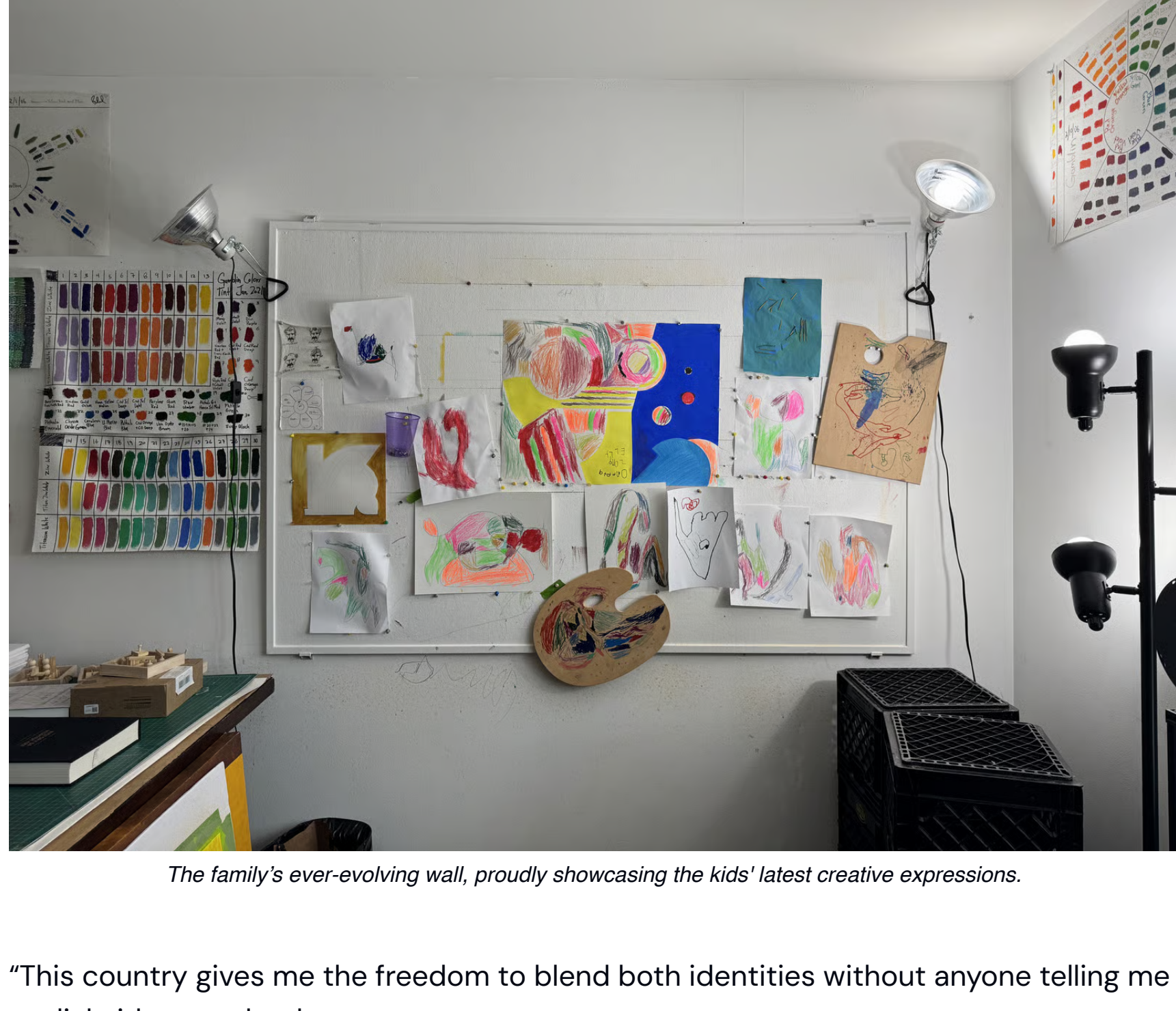
A quiet moment at the library, where Oneeta and Zaia let their imaginations run wild through stories and colouring.

"Their art goes up beside mine, so the culture is literally on our walls. They are actively making art to connect with their ancestors.

"My wife and I have started teaching our children Sureth, and this summer they're attending camp in Mar Sargis, where they practice the language each day and take part in church traditions."

Rabel has some advice for diaspora generations who may feel disconnected from their ethnic nationality.

"Personally, I don't feel conflicted about living in the United States and staying Assyrian," he said.



The family's ever-evolving wall, proudly showcasing the kids' latest creative expressions.

"This country gives me the freedom to blend both identities without anyone telling me to dial either one back.

"If you are in the diaspora and feel disconnected, the cure is simple but not easy: quit waiting for someone else to hand you a cultural starter kit. Pick a passion – language classes, music, embroidery, genealogy, anything – then chase it hard and pull your family in.

"The people I meet online who are thriving have done exactly that: they chose curiosity over comfort and put consistent time into learning where they come from.

"The weekend survives because they make it part of their everyday routine, not just a culture costume."

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