



# Chris Gazaleh: Bay Area Street Muralist Using Public Art to Advocate for Palestinian Humanity

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Chris Gazaleh is a San Francisco–based street muralist, graffiti artist, designer, musician, and community advocate whose work uses public art to promote humanity, compassion, and cultural integrity, with a particular focus on Palestinian identity and history. His murals and graffiti can be found throughout San Francisco and the greater Bay Area, where they have become recognized markers of socially engaged public art.



Gazaleh’s artistic journey began in childhood, sketching comic books before evolving into graffiti tagging during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Over time, his practice expanded from street tagging into large-scale murals, canvas work, digital illustration, and product design, allowing him to develop a distinctive visual language that blends figurative realism with symbolic storytelling.

## Cultural Roots and Artistic Formation

Born in San Francisco, Gazaleh grew up between the Bay Area and Detroit. His father owned a pizzeria in East Dearborn, Michigan, while his mother worked as a pharmacy technician in Oakland. Although raised within Palestinian culture, Gazaleh did not fully learn Arabic until the age of 21, when he permanently returned to San Francisco to attend San Francisco State University.

While at SF State, Gazaleh became active in the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), where his commitment to political awareness and cultural representation deepened. He initially participated in painting the Edward Said mural before moving on to collaborate on community murals across the city. His trajectory shifted significantly when he was granted his own wall in Clarion Alley by the late, legendary San Francisco muralist CUBA, marking a turning point in his career. Today, Gazaleh’s bold color palette, expressive facial elements, and large-scale figurative compositions are widely recognized throughout the Bay Area street art scene.



## Art as Resistance, Memory, and Human Connection

Gazaleh’s work functions as a direct response to persistent stereotypes surrounding Arabs, Palestinians, and Muslims. For him, art is a medium of love, education, and resistance, offering a counter-narrative rooted in shared humanity. Both his paternal and maternal grandparents were born in Ramallah and were forced to immigrate to the United States following the events of May 1948. His family history includes near tragedy—his paternal grandfather narrowly escaped execution with the help of a Samaritan (Palestinian Jewish) friend—an experience that deeply informs Gazaleh’s worldview.

This interwoven history shapes his belief that Palestinians are part of a single, extended family, connected through layered personal and collective experiences. His murals reflect this philosophy, portraying Palestinian life not as abstraction, but as lived reality.

### **“Humanity Is Key”: A Landmark Bay Area Mural**

In 2018, Gazaleh completed his largest and most ambitious project to date: “Humanity Is Key,” a 3,000-square-foot mural covering an entire building at the Highway 101 onramp at Market and Octavia in San Francisco. Executed with minimal tools and only a brief draft, the mural was constructed organically—more like a mosaic than a rigid plan—allowing the imagery to evolve naturally during the painting process.



The mural greets motorists as they merge onto CA-101, extending from the base of the building to the roof. It depicts Palestinian farmland, a woman wearing an intricately embroidered thobe, and a medina cityscape, set against the backdrop of the separation wall. Interwoven are quotations from Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, and Martin Luther King Jr., creating a form of public art rarely seen in the United States.

Completed in collaboration with creative partner Eli Lippert, the installation stands as a powerful symbol of San Francisco solidarity, Palestinian cultural visibility, and contemporary public art history.

### **Community, Education, and Cultural Preservation**

In an era marked by political violence, misinformation, and global unrest, Gazaleh continues to focus on community building and public education. His work encourages inquiry rather than confrontation, using art as a tool for critical analysis and reflection. Rather than fostering adversarial division, Gazaleh aims to cultivate curiosity—inviting viewers to consider perspectives beyond their immediate social or political environments.

For Gazaleh, community transcends race, religion, and geography. His murals preserve history while expanding public awareness, functioning simultaneously as educational resources, cultural archives, and visual calls for empathy.

### **An Evolving Artistic Identity**

Gazaleh views artistic evolution as essential. By recognizing identity as fluid and continuously transforming, he allows his work to remain responsive, relevant, and enduring. His commitment to growth ensures that his art remains an active force—one capable of reshaping public perception and contributing meaningfully to dialogue, peace, and reconciliation.

Through large-scale murals and public installations, Chris Gazaleh continues to demonstrate how street art and cultural storytelling can become powerful instruments for human connection and collective understanding.

