

# What Moves Us in the Middle

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Essay by  
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Sahra Soudi



A heartfelt offering, invitation, and call to action, Sahra Soudi's work asks us to find "principles in relation to community [that] can serve as a guide to remind ourselves and each other of what's important." This is equally urgent as it is imperative when forced and constrained movement confounds us, and freedom continues to evade some.

Soudi powerfully addresses the intersections of community, power, resistance, fugitivity, and interconnectedness in their first solo exhibition *What Moves Us in the Middle* (2025). The exhibition is presented at Hamilton Artist Inc; an artist-run centre in Hamilton with a long history of supporting activist-oriented and politically-engaged artwork. Self-organized by the artist – a curatorial gesture that draws on their rich organizing experience(s) and methodologies – the project calls for marrying art with activism, and for "artists to commit and recommit themselves to mirroring advocacy efforts locally and globally." As a Hamilton-based organizer, multidisciplinary artist, and curator, Soudi clearly embodies this kind of creativity and political simultaneity through their passion for the arts, cross-movement solidarities and disability justice. Inspired by the work of African-American author, educator, filmmaker, and activist Toni Cade Bambara, Soudi seeks to (re-)animate the artist's role in making revolution irresistible. Soudi builds on the work and legacies of Bambara and other politicized artists, near and far, such as Wanda Nanibush, Carole Conde, Karl Beveridge, Gran Fury, and Keith Haring, artists who have shown us ways in which to do so. For Soudi, this involves re-creating their studio space within the architecture and walls of the gallery, frequently and problematically referred to as "the white cube." They invite those of us organizing, connecting, and living alongside one another to convene in this space, wherein our co-relationalities in the room as different people, with different objects, histories, and materialities, can offer meaningful opportunities to be in relationship. This invitation enables cross-cultural learning, creative expression, and empowering solidarities of resistance.

In re-situating their studio in the gallery, Soudi stages the centre of the room as a place to collectively gather, animating what they refer to as 'what moves in the middle'---a generative site that embodies and represents possibilities for movement, interdependence, and connectivity. The main studio table is amassed with artifacts of importance to the artist, all of which are made available for the public to peruse and engage with, including reading and research materials, such as printed activist essays, and colourful art-making supplies (markers; pencil crayons). Spending time with these things enables viewers to (better) see and understand their importance, too; wherein learning about our diverse and intersectional histories and ways in which art-making has particularly empowered resistance movements and marginalized communities can be truly transformative. In this way, visitors to the exhibition are offered an intimate glimpse into Soudi's creative practice, its participatory process(es), and the values that inform/shape their ongoing work as an organizer. In making the artist's studio visible, alongside their research/inspirations, processes and politics, the gallery, too, becomes activated as a space for people to think through such co-relationalities as what moves us, what collectively fails to, and how to imagine and co-create otherwise possibilities and livabilities for us all.

I sat at this same table when I visited the exhibition in January 2025 and engaged in casual conversation with a young person, maybe eight years old. At the table, we coloured together, as I read an article by the late Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs, entitled "Organizing Means Commitment" (2011) and shared with them some of her apt words:

[Anything that people] create, any advance which humankind makes, must have a beginning and that every beginning must be made by those few individuals who choose to begin something because they feel it should be begun. Before something can GROW, it must first BE.

I thanked the young person for being with me in this encounter and exchange, and reminded them of how central young people are and have always been to movements for liberation, such as gestured to by Boggs. While not much was said, the liminal space between us was narrowed, in a gift that was extended to us by the artist, and one that we chose to accept--be it in our own ways and with varying interpretations. Nevertheless, we were both moved to the middle, to the in-between, that Soudi emphasizes, shaped by the simple yet generative things we could offer each other, in time, presence, colour and commitment.

I was also struck by an object placed on the table, unassumingly, in the corner, where there lay a midsize Ziploc bag on sheets of paper. The Ziploc bag read: "Inmate Property Inventory" and contained the list: "Hope, Free Will, Devotion, Asthma Puffer, House Keys." Here, the dual intensity and mundanity of the property bag, in its mighty but flimsy nature, specific yet familiar, reminds me of Black/visual studies scholar Tina Campt's articulation of "fugitivity...not as an act of flight or escape or a strategy of resistance," but "first and foremost as a practice of refusing the terms of negation and dispossession" (2017, p. 96). In many ways, then, the bag, the inventory, the list, and the art gallery itself are all reflective of forms of containment— which call for our attention, engagement, care and concern. In doing so, Soudi's artful intervention – filling the walls with colour, shape and texture, while simultaneously filling the space with conversations, connections and creativities – interrupts the unending relationships and logics of property, prison, the State and other such institutions that seek to restrict. By placing this inventory of dignity and survival in the middle of *What Moves Us*, Soudi speaks to the ongoing seeking and desire for freedom amid the tense realities of ongoing unfreedom, capture and risk.

All around this central gathering space were brightly coloured textiles and abstract canvases affixed to the walls and hung from the ceiling, which work to envelop the "studio," and visitors to it, in a dynamic colourfield of rich textures and hues. Here, colours like fuchsia, lavender and azure blue, reminded me of the ways in which beautiful florals grow in Ontario each summer, and how the lake that surrounds Hamilton continues to ebb and flow, despite the ongoing systems and realities of inequity that surround us. Likewise, bright pastoral greens can evoke such local and nearby histories as the Underground Railroad, in which one of its major routes went through the Niagara region, or the often ongoing and unremembered deaths of migrant farm workers, also a fixture of the region. Within *What Moves Us* Soudi reinforces the artist's role as central to, and in the middle of, recognition and resistance -- not in addition nor an amendment to histories, practices, and relationalities in/of struggle.

Soudi leaves us with one final and poignant call to action, "Free the People, Free the Land," that can be visibly read on a piece of paper that sits on top of the table, just below the property bag, across from a small poster that reads: "THE INSTA-FADA: Instagram stories as tools for RESISTANCE."

What is your story of resistance, and how will you be moved to enact it?

-----Idil Abdillahi (February 2025)

1. Artist's Statement, 2025

2. Ibid.

3. Boggs Organization Means Commitment, 2011, pp. 7- 8.