Art, Opportunity and Ronald Moody

Joan Anim-Addo

Thank you to Andy and the team at Orleans House Gallery for reaching out to us at CCDS (the Centre for Caribbean and Diaspora Studies at Goldsmiths) and inviting our involvement in this celebration of Ronald Moody's art. Being only too well aware that the art historians and archivists have already documented a great deal, I want to focus on the significance of Moody's work from a Caribbean diaspora perspective, especially given that some of the most up-to-the-minute scholars on Moody's art are here with us this evening. Mindful of this, I proceed with caution to offer in the next few minutes a particularly Caribbean perspective on Moody and his art. I draw attention to concerns with art, opportunity and Ronald Moody, himself. How did he do all that this exhibition brings together, especially given some of the grim realities of Caribbean life at the beginning of the twentieth century?

Through the lenses of CCDS (the Centre for Caribbean and Diaspora Studies), it seems particularly significant that Ronald Moody was first ***of*** the Caribbean and secondly, **from** Jamaica. In many ways, it appears to me not so surprising that if a young Caribbean man would become a sculptor in the early decades of the twentieth century, he would be from Jamaica rather than, say, Anguilla, or Tobago or Grenada. Why do I say this? Here, I'm reaching for meanings that cluster around the notion of 'opportunity'. If such opportunity existed at all in the Caribbean region, the chance of it being nurtured or rendered possible would be within a space of relative opportunity. So, a larger population with a firmly established colonial infrastructure would be significant, a larger physical space –like Jamaica– one in which, comparatively speaking, there was more *opportunity* for education and with it, artistic opportunity, even if only for the few. Shirley Gordon's, *A Century of West Indian Education* (1970), stating that 'Barbados alone,' not Jamaica 'had a recognisable secondary school … at the time of Emancipation' (p.227) claims otherwise.

In attempting to centre 'artistic opportunity' aligned with educational into the discussion, it might be illuminating to start with the here and now by considering how one might become an artist today in 2026. Beginning here in London, we're likely to find that even today, becoming an artist – a visual artist – remains a somewhat *obscure* pursuit. Who gets to be an artist today? What does the process involve? Who among such artists can live or are living at present by the proceeds of their art? What kind of artist might you become given the experience and qualifications that are actually open to you? With such questions in mind, let's turn the clock back the better to glimpse the *opportunity* available to a child born –like young Moody– in the first year of the

twentieth century, that is, in the 1900s Caribbean, only three generations after the ending of Atlantic slavery, an institution characterised by brutality; one that specifically denied the humanity of the black person.

Alas, with questions of opportunity in the context of the Caribbean, we must go back to slavery, an **uncomfortable** territory which we have **all** been taught to avoid because not knowing serves best the interest of the powerful. Regardless, we'll tiptoe in, briefly, for the specific purpose of considering the veritable miracle of a modernist Caribbean sculptor, Ronald Moody, emerging in the 1900s. The minimal background information that is needed –as you'll soon discover– is to be found literally at your fingertips. By this, I refer to some recent documentation only a click away on your phone. Your key words are: <**Register** of British Slave Traders>: five words and one click! Additionally – as a kind of bonus– I offer a **single** reference that sums up the importance of such information for us all as we consider Moody's contribution. I refer to an article – again, a click away – entitled, 'Slavery was not a footnote to British history. It helped shape the nation.' The author of the article, William Pettigrew is a professor of history at King's College, London. If, as Pettigrew suggests, slavery in Jamaica 7,000 or so kilometres (4,000-ish miles) away helped to shape Britain, we can be certain that it was shaping people in Jamaica and the Caribbean, more widely: drastically shaping those people.

British slavery officially ended in 1838 in Jamaica. Ronald Moody was born into Jamaica's population approximately two generations later. Many of his grandmother's generation would have experienced the bitter realities of slavery as the engine of production for Britain in its Caribbean colonies. That engine functioned by systematically attempting to dehumanise and debase African-heritage peoples transported to the Caribbean and their descendants.

Against such an historical backdrop, we celebrate today, Ronald Clive Moody, the 'pioneering modernist sculptor and philosopher' (Ahaiwe 47), born in Jamaica in August 1900, about whom I've drawn extensively on Dr. Ego Ahaiwe's thesis with its clear archival focus. Any mistakes in today's address, however, are exclusively, my own. By Ahaiwe's account, Ronald Moody came from a 'prominent middle-class family, of medical and legal professionals.' To a Caribbean-focused scholar, that already seems astoundingly contrary to the norm. How? Why? Ronald's siblings included brothers as well as a sister named Elsie. His brother Charles was a dentist while Harold, his older brother, had already in 1904 travelled to Britain to study medicine at King's College, London, 'graduating at the top of his class in 1910' (Ahaiwe 48). Meanwhile, Ronald,

like his brothers was enjoying a classical education in Jamaica from where he, too, would emerge and travel to London.

It is useful to remember that since slavery had officially ended only three decades earlier, the Moody family exemplifies an astounding combination of industry and opportunity. That said, we can be certain that some member or members within the wider Moody family had endured the vicious, dehumanising experience that slavery entailed. Regardless, Ronald's branch of the family had thrived and come to experience phenomenal success, with education at its centre. Realistically, though, the veritable mess that represented the beginnings of West Indian education following the end of slavery, or the Emancipation period, deserves some attention.

Throughout the Caribbean region, the beginning of an education system meant rival religious groups, dominated by Anglicans and Roman Catholics, fighting to protect their interests through denominational schools. Teachers were invariably untrained and racial stratification was rife, exacerbated by rules denying schooling to children of unmarried parents. This rule was particularly pernicious because during slavery, enslaved people were considered and treated as property. Indeed, individuals were often stamped or branded with a hot iron on the skin to show who owned them. They were not free to marry.

Regarding schools, with most West Indian secondary schools up and running after 1870, and since fees were required, only a minuscule number of the black-brown population achieved even primary education. The result was that the emerging educational opportunity was overwhelmingly for the middle classes. That is, mainly white and fair skinned people who could pay (Gordon 239).

It seems inescapable for this discussion, that during the post-emancipation years, education represented another aspect of sparse opportunity. However, Ronald Moody not only attended secondary school, but had a classical education including Art and Music. What luxury! What opportunity! Without a doubt Ronald's own choices leaned heavily in the direction of the arts and while he later appeased his parents by agreeing that he would pursue dentistry in the UK, once he arrived in London, his choice was the Arts. The point being underscored is that unlike most Caribbean families at that time, the Moodys had choice grounded in a sound education. In the post-slavery years, such educational aspiration would become key for most Caribbean families keen to escape the yoke of recent enslavement. Strikingly though, while for most of Moody's Caribbean contemporaries, the Caribbean represented restriction and sparse opportunity, especially so soon after emancipation, Ronald Moody himself occupied the rare position of being able to choose Art. Who in the Caribbean could

afford such a choice, especially given the additional insecurities that World War I brought to the region?

Ronald Moody in England in 1923 would have found a country decidedly scarred by the first World War which had barely ended five years earlier. Soon, however, Moody would travel to France, exploring life as an artist as World War II began. Paris might be considered then the visual artist's mecca. Seemingly so far away when one is in Jamaica, here in the UK, the young artist was only a ferry crossing away. Irresistible for Moody; this nonetheless represents an extraordinary scenario for a young Caribbean man at that time. He has access to tremendous opportunity, and his path-breaking talent leads to a consistent exploration of artistic form, even at a moment when the world had descended into war for the second time in his life. Whether or not you find yourself drawn to Moody's history, what has been gifted us from that history is an undeniably extraordinary legacy, one that the art works on display here at Orleans House Gallery boldly confirm.

Moody's journey within Europe followed; he had developed as someone used to having meaningful choices within reach. Bluntly speaking, he was a person of privilege. He had attended an elite school and such schools in the Caribbean prepared their pupils for completing their education in England. All the teaching material pointed to England. The examination papers were marked in Oxbridge. It is no coincidence that Ronald headed there. Art pointed him further afield to Europe. So, while he'd certainly agreed to study dentistry, for example, he could equally also find or create opportunity, even in post-war London, to do what he really desired: Art. That his older brother was already established in London served to further facilitate the path that Ronald Moody would ultimately choose.

Arising from much of this, the following question is tempting: if *most* brown-black African-heritage people were not being treated as fully human only three generations before Moody was born, how on earth did Moody become among the first visual artists functioning –with exhibitions and sales of work– in England of the mid-60s? With my historian's hat on, this seems a pertinent question especially because throughout the Caribbean of Moody's childhood, educational opportunity was so decidedly sparse for black and brown children. I elide a possible black/brown distinction here because 'opportunity' was more likely to be available to the child perceived as brown for the simple reason that s/he was more likely to be linked through family to someone who was white. It is through such whiteness that 'opportunity' might be most productively negotiated. To be clear, opportunity did not automatically follow, but was *more likely* to follow, and also more likely to promote the male within the public sphere.

The terms ‘opportunity’ and ‘privilege’ have threaded this discussion of Ronald Moody. I have also had reason to bring to the fore the term, “elite”. It is important, though, to make clear that while those terms certainly apply to Moody and particularly his early life, they by no means defined that life. I was fortunate to find a copy of *SAVACOU* on my bookshelf. It was SAVACOU 9/10 published in 1974, with a cover designed by Aubrey Williams. The image of *SAVACOU*, the Carib War Bird, is for many of us – perhaps especially *of* the Caribbean – a signature one that you might look for in the Ronald Moody exhibition. The image became the hallmark of *SAVACOU,* the Journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), with artists collaborating ‘from Kingston to London’ in the 1960s and 70s. Among the names in the CONTENTS pages of this particular Issue, Guest edited by John La Rose and Andrew Salkey, you will find the following included: James Berry, Faustin Charles, Frank John, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Austin Clarke, Roy Heath, E. A. Markham, Donald Hinds, Stuart Hall, Horace Ové, Orlando Patterson, V. S. Naipaul and many more. Within the Preface, the following is to be found:

> At the time of writing, the most recent medium session held at the Keskidee Centre, on Friday 10th March 1972, was *A Tribute to Ronald Moody*, a historical exposition, illustrated with slides, of the Jamaican sculptor, arranged and presented by Errol Lloyd, the Jamaican painter. (p. 8)

Leaving the Caribbean and coming to inhabit the metropolitan motherland, Moody’s world, like that of so many others, would expand in unpredictable ways. There is much to wonder at in Moody’s work, beginning with his choice of sculpture as his predominant medium. In bringing this talk to a close, however, I’d like to point towards Ronald Moody’s finding himself being pulled towards a wider arts movement than his education could have anticipated. That is, along with the struggles for representation within a gathering Caribbean Arts movement concerned as Stuart Hall articulates it, with ‘black consciousness and culture’ in the UK of the period (p.99). It is this period that consolidates a collective identity shift beyond island identity – Jamaican, Grenadian, Barbadian – for peoples of the region as Caribbean peoples with, perhaps, Moody’s Carib Bird, a signifier of historical memory and regional groundings. It seems that coming to England –in a way– creates the Caribbean, the collective identity that has made all of us islanders stronger. Out of many, ONE people! Cheers to Ronald Moody and all that he represents!