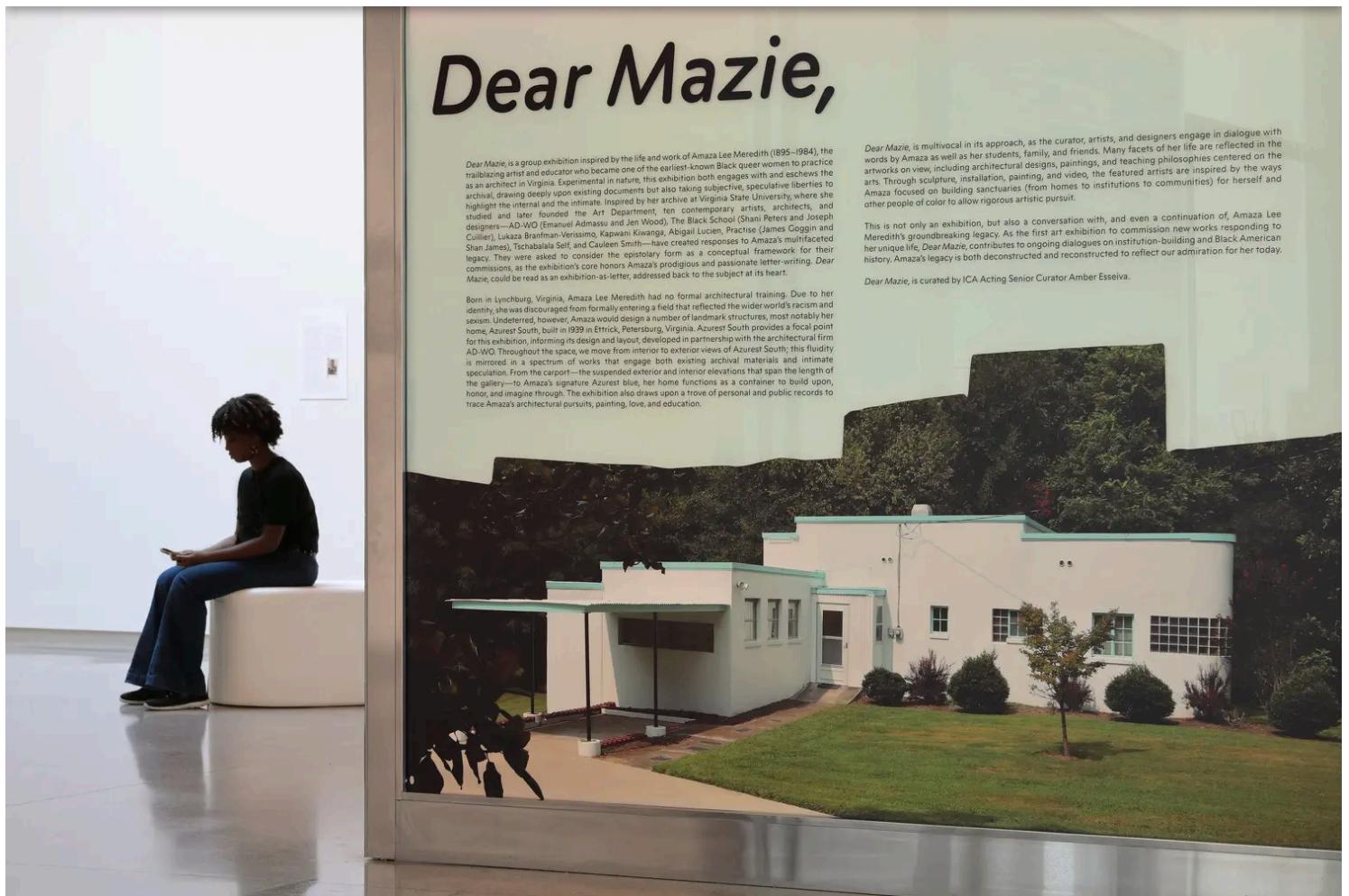


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"Dear Mazie," installation view, ICA at VCU, 2024. (photograph by David Hale)

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Remembering Amaza Lee Meredith, the groundbreaking architect

In a Q&A, Amber Esseiva, senior curator at the ICA at VCU, shares her insights on Meredith, the subject of a current exhibition and an upcoming public lecture.

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By Audrey Alder

“Dear Mazie,” a group exhibition showing at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, highlights the life of Amaza Lee Meredith, the first known Black queer woman to practice as an architect in the United States.

The exhibition sprung from the “desire to bring attention to underrepresented narratives in architecture, particularly those related to Black history and queer identities,” said Amber Esseiva, senior curator at the ICA. “Meredith’s work challenged societal norms and provided sanctuary during a time of oppression. I felt it was crucial to honor her contributions and shed light on the intricate relationships between race, identity and space.”

Esseiva will host a VCUarts Lecture Series event, “A Love Letter to Amaza Lee Meredith,” at 5:30 p.m. on Feb. 4 at the ICA, or virtually via Zoom.

The lecture combines extensive research into Meredith’s archives and personal life, diving into topics of race, gender and queer identity to detail Meredith’s architectural and social contributions and provoke conversation regarding representation and inclusiveness in architecture, education and activism.

Esseiva recently discussed Meredith and the exhibition with VCU News.

Can you tell us about “Dear Mazie?”

“Dear Mazie” is an exhibition that explores the life and legacy of Amaza Lee Meredith, presenting her as a multifaceted figure — an architect, artist, educator and activist. The exhibition is framed as an “exhibition-as-letter,” encouraging artists to respond to Meredith’s extensive correspondence and engage with her work through personal, intimate perspectives. The design incorporates spatial

elements that evoke the essence of her architectural style and the emotional landscapes of her life.

What did your research for this exhibition entail?

The research for “Dear Mazie” involved a deep dive into Meredith’s archives, including her letters, blueprints and project documentation. I examined her life from multiple angles, focusing not only on her architectural achievements but also on her personal relationships and the emotional resonance of her work. This comprehensive research allowed me to create a narrative that honors her legacy and informs the artistic responses of participating artists.



Amber Esseiva, senior curator at the Institute for Contemporary Art.
(courtesy of the ICA)

What did your collaborative and artistic processes look like during the curation of this exhibition?

The collaborative process was rooted in trust and dialogue with the artists. After spending two years researching Meredith, I created tailored finding aids to help

each artist navigate her archive. This approach allowed them to engage with aspects of her life and work that resonated with their own practices. Throughout the curation, I encouraged an experimental spirit, enabling artists to respond through various mediums, such as film, painting and sculpture.

What key themes and ideas does your lecture expand upon?

In my lecture, I expand upon themes of interdisciplinary practice, historical erasure and the politics of space. I discuss how Meredith's work reflects a unique response to the injustices of her time, and how her architectural contributions intersect with issues of race, gender and queer identity. The lecture aims to provoke critical discussions about representation and inclusivity in architectural history.

How does this exhibition and lecture highlight Meredith's pioneering contributions to architecture, education and queer history?

By showcasing her as a transformative figure in architecture and education. By focusing on her innovative designs and her role as a mentor, we aim to illustrate how she created spaces that fostered peace, community and intellectual freedom. Additionally, we explore her significance within queer history, emphasizing her relationships and the ways she navigated societal challenges. This holistic approach seeks to reclaim and honor Meredith's legacy in both architectural and cultural contexts.

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