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Review: Jay Ressler's 'Country Too' offers window into society's relationship with agricultural roots

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Black-and-white photography by Jay Ressler is on view now through the end of the month at Chef Alan's American Bistro in West Reading. As part of his ongoing "Country Too" series, he is presenting a baker's dozen of somber farm images depicting landscapes, barns, old homes and farm equipment in stark, monochromatic focus.

The artist is a native of Berks County. He graduated from Albright College with a degree in psychology and afterward relocated to Pittsburgh, finding employment as a coal miner and later as a foundry machinist. During his time there, he was very active in the arts, participating as a member of the

Associated Artists of Pittsburgh and serving as a board member for the Pittsburgh Society of Artists. Upon his retirement in 2014, he and his wife returned to Berks County.

Wasting no time, he began promoting his work and is widely exhibited throughout the area with numerous showings. These include, among others, the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the Art Association of Harrisburg and the Lancaster County Art Association.



Ressler is a skilled digital photographer, well-versed in techniques of photo manipulation by software. For early pieces, he superimposed images from various sources to produce an emotional and openly political narrative. This exhibition, in contrast, portrays a different side to his artistic approach, offering a set of contemplative rural photographs.

Most of the photos are of a small scale and taken from a distance, as if to impress upon the viewer the overwhelming sky above the rolling landscape and the weighty responsibility farmers have to tend these large crops. This is exemplified clearly in a panoramic photograph titled "Make Hay When the Sun Shines," in which the farmland is seen in deep perspective beneath dramatic cloud formations.

Other works offer a more solemn approach, portraying images of dilapidated barns and other structures that have begun to show their age long ago; some of the structures are literally falling apart. Others, such as "Winter Compound" or "Maiden Creek Mill," offer images of rustic comfort in stone houses.

There are no people to be seen anywhere in this selection. They are subtracted from the equation by only showing the product and not the producer, who at times seems woefully absent, considering the rundown condition of some of these places. To be fair, this is only a minor sampling of the entire series.

From his website, Ressler says: "This series builds on several earlier more urban-based series. Mostly from Berks County Pennsylvania, these landscapes depict both contemporary and rustic scenes typical of the United States countryside. Barns are of special interest. For many scores of years, they were the most majestic structures dominating the American countryside, serving not only the needs of farmers, but also as venues for social gatherings. This is an appreciation of the spaces that continue to be worked. Surprisingly little has been written about barns in the architectural literature."

There is no documentation concerning content at this display and it would have been helpful to have a little backstory. Nonetheless, these photos, albeit darkly romantic and somewhat of a photographic challenge, document the wear and tear, as well as the lifestyle conditions of those who grow our food.

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