



arts

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John Vettese sees what develops

Might and Maine

In northernmost Maine, where U.S. Route 1A runs between two obscure burghs named Limestone and Fort Fairfield, a cluster of trees to the side of the highway is slowly devouring a barn.

I imagine most people traveling this strip of road pay little heed to the minor drama of nature unfolding along their commute. Either its presence doesn't even register with them, or if they do notice, they shrug and keep driving. For Philadelphia photographer Al Wachlin Jr., its significance is monumental.

The structure being assailed is one of the dilapidated "potato houses" dotting Aroostook County. Potato farming has long been the driving force behind the local economy, and these stately rustic buildings were once used to store the crop during the harsh winter months.

But in step with farming across the county, the local industry is in heavy decline. Growers who



Wachlin distresses the coating, presenting the finished product as an exhumed artifact of antiquity.

remain have updated to more efficient metal models. The old potato houses are left to rot and collapse. With them go the traditions of a tight-knit, cooperative agricultural community.

This microcosm of post-industrial America is captured strikingly in Wachlin's solo show "Aroostook: Potato Houses of Northern Maine," running at 3rd Street Gallery on 2nd Street through the end of the month. Thankfully, he refrains from dipping into the sappy waters of nostalgia — a trap that might have easily ensnared the photographer, as his family's Maine roots were the genesis of the project. But no humans appear in the series at all; only a short contextual panel of laconic statistics tells visitors what they are seeing.

Instead, Wachlin keeps his commentary visual:

>>> continued on page 28

Might and Maine

<<< continued from page 27

The elegant monochrome images of the declining old barns afloat in pastoral landscapes are juxtaposed against the sleek, cold color and mechanical detachment of the new barns, images with all the charm of a trade magazine.

If Wachlin's aim was to use his photography to preservationist ends, it seems he arrived to Aroostook County too late; his image of the aforementioned Limestone Road barn shows the building practically being pushed into the soil by the branches engulfing it. Another barn he shot in the town of New Sweden has collapsed inward upon itself — the faces at either end are tilted backward at precarious angles. In *Untitled 2* (pictured, p. 27), a beautiful vignettted field of tall grass contains a barn missing the better part of its roof (the fence post and power lines reaching into the foreground aren't in wonderful shape, either). These buildings, like the traditions they once housed, are beyond preservation.

But it's evident that this was not necessarily Wachlin's goal. His black-and-whites of the old barns are printed with hand-coated emulsion on extremely delicate Japanese gampi paper. The paper lends the images an aged, sepia look, and

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Wachlin further distresses the coating to create cracks and chips, presenting the finished product as an exhumed artifact of antiquity.

On the other hand, his shots of the new barns are purely modern. The images are rendered on an ink-jet printer. They are not even printed on paper, but rather on thin sheets of aluminum. The metallic surface makes the images pop, especially one shot taken in the town of Washburn. In it, a red, semicircular barn sits on a green field against a bright blue and white sky. The colors are vibrant, practically leaping out of the frame, but the scene is clinical and impenetrable.

Compare this to one of the black-and-white images shot in Washburn. Shrubs surround an old barn that has caved in. The field is quiet, the clouds are billowing in the sky, and the funereal mood grips the viewer tight.

In this contrast, we see the restraint that makes Wachlin's exhibit such a strong statement. He could have immersed himself in the people, the lives, the sentimentality. But he instead stepped back and let his aesthetic choices do the talking, treating his subjects as unforgivingly as they've been treated by time.

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"Aroostook," through Dec. 28, 3rd Street Gallery on 2nd Street, 58 N. Second St., 215-625-0993, 3rdstreetgallery.com