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MUSEUMS & ART

Photo Gallery Setting Adds a Glossy Finish

A CREAKY, 80-year-old office building housing an insurance office, an architecture firm and a clinical psychologist's consulting room may seem like an unpromising setting for a photography gallery. But in the case of Stepping Stone, the newest addition to central Long Island's expanding gallery scene, the second-story location on a small side street of downtown Huntington is part of the gallery's mystique. Climb a darkened stair, turn right down a narrow, somewhat forbidding corridor to the last door, and you come to the serene one-room gallery space, an aesthetic oasis plunked down in workaday surroundings.

The tranquil design of the single room - tatami matting on the floor, black trellis on the ceiling and a small Japanese water fountain in the corner - reflects the sensibility of the gallery's founder, Rob Goldman, 37, who as a reward for putting the place together treated himself to a massage within its freshly painted precincts. Goldman is the ringleader of a group of four artists - Bernice Halpern-Cutler, Melissa Gatto-Idler and Bob Mitchell are the others - who formed the gallery as a cooperative. Its mandate is to show what Goldman believes to be remarkable photographs; it opened last month with a show of his own work.

Goldman, who does freelance advertising and editorial work when not making art, was stimulated to start his own gallery by a biography of photographer and art-world magus Alfred Stieglitz. Goldman hopes to do for Huntington what Stieglitz did for New York City in the early part of this century: demonstrate what the fine in fine-art photography really means. "I felt an obligation after I read that book

to show photography to a community that needs as much stimulation as it can get," says Goldman, who lives in Huntington.

Goldman used to be something of a discontented suburbanite: "All I ever wanted," he admits, "was to move to New York." That



The Stepping Stone Gallery in Huntington opened last month with an exhibit of photos by the gallery's founder, Rob Goldman

lasted until he had kids, when the fresh air, grass and beaches exerted a sudden appeal. When the inspiration hit to open a gallery, doing it in the city struck him as a kind of betrayal.

"I felt like a hypocrite," he explains. "How could I think of focusing my attention on Manhattan while I was always complaining that there wasn't enough here?" It took six



months to turn his bright idea into a satisfying reality. Goldman already had the space: a rented room down the hall from his studio that he was using for storage. With the financial contributions of the other members of the cooperative, he built a gallery that he regards as merely a beginning. Stepping Stone, Goldman hopes, will be a step forward in the members' careers, a step toward more generous exhibition space, and a first step for the town of Huntington, which will now have a place devoted to the sale of high-quality photographs. Goldman envisions his tiny art-filled chamber as a potential salon where townspeople might gather to discuss aesthetic matters in a congenial setting - and even buy some photographs in the process.

"It's funny," he says, "I've pooh-poohed Long Island for so long. But there are a lot of people with taste and money out here. Why not cater to them?"

Ariella Budick is a frequent contributor to Newsday.