



GUERRA PAINT AND PIGMENT

Established in 1986

510 East 13th Street
East Village, Manhattan
www.guerrapaint.com
212-529-0628

Subway: L train to First Avenue
Open Monday–Saturday:
12:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Sometimes a person is compelled to start a business due to his or her own needs as a consumer. Guerra Paint and Pigment is one of those places, created because one man thought there must be a better way. Founder and co-owner Art Guerra got the idea to start his own pigment supply shop in the 1970s when he could not find quality paints. “I got hired by CIDA, which was Jimmy Carter giving artists in New York City jobs. I was the first government-hired artist to do murals since the WPA back in the 1930s. So I went out and bought these paints for signs. They wouldn’t mix well and were all-around poor quality,” said Guerra.

Instead of using these inferior paints, Guerra began making his own paints, becoming a pigment connoisseur for the art field and opening up a shop in the East Village in 1986. “Artists were always discovering me because East 13th Street was one of the biggest drug blocks in New York at that time. They would come down here to get their drugs and see my little store. They were always so floored to see how quick and easy it is to make your own paint,” he said. Now, along with co-owners Jody Bretnall and Seren Morey, Guerra supplies the art world with pigments—not only in New York City, but worldwide.

To most, Guerra Paint and Pigment just looks like a paint store. And it is, but to be more specific, it is a pigment supplier. Whether it’s for vinyl, acrylic, watercolor, or any other paints, customers can work with more than 200 powdered or liquid pigment concentrates to create their own paint. The pigment can also be used as a tinting agent for other materials, like grout, stucco, or cement. Guerra also offers metallic, pearlescent, or glitter additives—along with fillers like pumice and ultra-fine glass beads—to give the paint a unique texture.

Why go to all the trouble of making your own paint? First, it is just plain fun. But for more pragmatic reasons, it is about quality and control. The dirty little secret in the paint world is that over-the-counter paint is not all that great. Core ingredients like raw pigment and resin are expensive, so it is no surprise that manufacturers skimp as much as possible, which leaves customers with a paint that fades fast and is hard to control. Need proof? Notice how many outdoor signs that are 20 years old look just as faded as ones painted before World War II. “At our store, you can use as much pigment as you want, making it much more vibrant than a premade paint,” said Bretnall. “Also, if you put it down big

and thick, it's going to stay that way. It's not going to collapse and shrink."

Guerra Paint and Pigment does not actually make the raw pigments itself. It is more like a depository for pigments and pigment conservationists. The world of pigment manufacturing is a complicated one. Pure pigments are not just "dialed up" on a computer using something like Photoshop. Most are created for a specific application by a specific company. Pigments are being discovered and becoming extinct all the time due to demand and cost-effectiveness. "See this cream color?" said Bretnall, pointing to a sample. "It is the actual pigment Buick used on its cream-colored cars in the 1950s and '60s. We have the last 200 pounds of it."

Many pure pigments are first developed by companies for the auto industry due to its need for high quality and durability. "Artists get the hand-me-downs of what's available in the industrial market," said co-owner Seren Morey. This means the owners at Guerra are on a perpetual treasure hunt, going to the ends of the earth for pigments.

Sometimes it is a case of one man's trash is another man's treasure. Some companies are glad to get rid of their discontinued pigments, selling them for pennies on the dollar. "A lot of these pigments would end up covered with spiderwebs and sitting in these dark corners," said Guerra. "I would phone the company up and they'd say, 'Sure, we have a whole corner full of old stuff that we don't want.'" Like Blue 80, which Guerra acquired from a plant in Germany. The pigment was to be used on a high-end Porsche automobile but did not make the final cut. And Crap Green, which is literally the residue a certain

pigment company ends up with after it cleans its pigment manufacturing tanks. "It's ugly as hell," said Bretnall, "but very popular with artists."

The small one-room shop is very popular, and just as colorful as one might imagine. Upon entering, customers are immediately greeted by an enormous color chart that takes up most of the shop's left wall. The chart shows pigment offerings in various textures, opacities, and sheens so that customers can see the limitless possibilities right away. The second half of the shop, stuffed with shelf after shelf of bottles and vials of liquid and powdered pigments, looks like some kind of hyperchromatic pharmacy or mad scientist's laboratory.

Once a customer picks a pigment, the owners are almost insistent on giving first-time users a quick lesson on how to use the pigments with different types of bases and binders for different effects. The initial application is a rewarding one, for it is quite amazing how little pigment is needed to create a vibrant burst of color. Also, with just a few stirs, the colors seem fresher and livelier than paint out of a can.

Artists, designers, average Joes—just about anyone looking for color comes to Guerra Paint and Pigment. And the shop's products have been used on countless items, including stage sets for the Metropolitan Opera and Cirque du Soleil and Lady Gaga's concert tour piano. Oprah Winfrey's house in Hawaii even has some Guerra pigment in it. "One of the things that we've always prided ourselves on is that we're totally artist-run," said Art Guerra. "Anybody that works here is a painter and loves working with this material." It's a good thing, too, for New York City is always craving a little more color.

