

# PAINT SECRETS OF THE YOLO SISTERHOOD



Yolo is a working studio for Janie Lowe and Virginia Young, who specialize in custom finishes. Here, Lowe grinds pigment, looking for a color match.

**Two artists join forces with Rodda to create interior paint without pollutants or odor**

By Bridget A. Otto ♦ Photos by Mary Bondarowicz  
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**J**anie Lowe and Virginia Young know paint. They know how to make it and how to use it to create the murals and custom paint work that has kept the phone ringing at their Southeast Portland design studio, Yolo.

The formally trained artists, who call themselves "color nerds," also know that working with toxic chemicals found in many paints isn't their cup of tea.

And that led them to Rodda Paint Co.

Together, the artists and the largest paint manufacturer in the Northwest created Yolo Colorhouse, a toxic-free interior paint in 40 colors that performs like a traditional paint, but without pollutants or odor.

"You can paint a room during the day," says Young, "and throw a party there that night, and no one would know."

The new paint line is something Young and Lowe, both 41, have longed for. Five years ago, Young says, they started thinking about how working with paint every day might affect their health, so they steered toward less-toxic choices.

They experimented with milk- and clay-based paints. They attended workshops and traded mix-it-yourself paint recipes with folks they met there and online. They even striped a wall in their studio with a paint made of clay they collected on a road trip. The earthen colors stack one on top of the other like slices of multilayered ocher cake.



Virginia Young (left) and Janie Lowe painted 30 of their Colorhouse paints on the wall of their studio. The palette, the Earth's Color Collection, is made up of colors they have developed over the years and has grown to 40 choices. The paints come in three sheens: flat, satin and semigloss.



At Rodda, Young and Lowe work with the color systems manager, Hien Nguyen, finalizing the color formulations for Yolo Colorhouse. Rodda also used an automated scrub test on the earth-friendly paint, which stood up as highly durable.

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Young and Lowe love working with this natural medium, but it's limiting. Natural paint can be temperamental, even in their expert hands. And they never made it in commercial quantity. Despite the obvious obstacles — machinery, technology, space demands — they explored creating and selling a line of "healthy" paint.

"That," Young says quickly, "was pretty unrealistic."

Undeterred, they scoured the market for a natural paint. They checked out the low-VOC (volatile organic compound) paint at Environmental Building Supply. They tried Horizon, Rodda's low-VOC paint, and liked the product enough to recommend it to clients nearly every time they did a color consult.

"We thought, 'Why don't we get them to formulate the paint for us?'" Lowe says. They called Rodda, she says with a sheepish grin, and said, "Hey, we have an idea."

Todd Braden fielded that inquiry:

Braden, the go-to guy at Rodda for, as he puts it, "anything confusing or mysterious," says he's known paint for 36 years — his entire life. Yolo's fresh spin intrigued him.

After all, Rodda has been working with low-VOC

### WHAT'S VOC?

**Volatile Organic Compound:** Any carbon compound that easily evaporates. Essentially, all solvents in paint or caulk except water are classified as VOCs. Some government agencies are limiting the amount of volatile organic compounds permitted in paint because of concerns about environmental and health effects.

technology for some time. The company came out with its Horizon line in 1995 and has had 10 years to "fiddle with it and make it better," says Braden, vice president of marketing and part of the third generation of his family to run Rodda.

Although Rodda manufactures paint for a lot of companies — it produced 3.5 million gallons last year — this partnership with an independent such as Yolo is unique, Braden says. Rodda makes, houses and distributes their paint, but Lowe and Young own the license and the right to sell Yolo Colorhouse anywhere — something Braden encourages them to do.

"There's a lot of opportunity in the Northwest," Braden says about non-toxic paint. "I see the demand."

So do others, including Environmental Building



Low and Young's studio in Southeast Portland is decorated with furnishings that show off their custom finishes.



Dry pigments used for developing color.

Supply, which will carry Yolo Colorhouse in both its Portland and Bend stores.

Rodda, which merged with Canada's Cloverdale last May to become the Northwest's largest independent paint manufacturer, will produce 40 colors for Yolo Colorhouse. The palette is grouped into families: leaf, grain, clay, stone, water, air and petal. The colors within each family are numbered simply Leaf #1, Leaf #2, etc., to avoid names that suggest preconceived shades of a color.

"Everyone has their own idea of what mocha is," says Young as an example. "We're trying to simplify."

Braden says that in addition to Yolo's "incredible" palette, the pair created an original way for customers to "sample" the

paints. Forget about color chips. The Yolo Colorhouse display includes poster-size samples of each of the 40 colors in the actual paint, not an ink replica. The sample, with long-lasting tape on the back that doesn't harm a wall, can be hung, moved around, rehung or taken to a furniture store if needed. The no-fuss sheets sell for \$4.99 each.

"In Europe and Asia, the sample sizes are enormous," Braden says. "They've realized the bigger and the easier it is for the customer to make a decision, the more inclined they are to go through with the project."

Braden says that a "ton of customers" look at paint but never get much further than that. "The minute it becomes confusing, people back off."

### WHERE TO GET IT

◆ Visit the Yolo Colorhouse design center at the Portland Home & Garden Show, today through Sunday at the Expo Center.

◆ Yolo Colorhouse will be available at two Rodda stores: 321 S.E. Taylor St., Portland, and 8365 Tonka St., Tualatin; and at Environmental Building Supplies: 819 S.E. Taylor St., Portland, and 550 S.W. Industrial Way, Unit 32, Bend.

To ease confusion and that feeling of being overwhelmed by choices, Yolo Colorhouse also has design kits for sale at the displays. Each boxed kit contains letter-size sheet samples of all 40 colors. The back of each sheet includes suggestions for use — kids' room, hallway etc. — and a list of companion colors.

The theory, Lowe says, is that the customer will use this box, which sells for \$55, as a guide to become his or her own color consultant or designer.

"It's very complete and explanatory," Braden says, adding that it's an education for the customer. "I don't think people understand," he says, "that painting is by far the easiest way to make a change." ◆