

Mitch Fine, left, discusses the low-toxin paint job done this year at Clinton Village Convelescent Hospital, in Oakland.



Photo: Lori Eanes

SUE LICK AND JILL BANKS

Pioneering New Paints

Mitch Fine Branches Out—Naturally!

MITCH FINE, son of Howard Fine who owns the 20-year-old Bay Area painting company, *Armstrong Painting*, has a passion for paint! But not just any paint. Last year he started a new division of his father's company and called it *Armstrong Environmental Painting*. Fine Jr. is concerned about the chemicals in paint. He is one of a new generation of business owners who, as David Spero of *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* recently wrote, "is setting out to prove they can have profits without pollution and production without poison."

It is not difficult to see the root of Fine's passion for nontoxic paint. Consider the following: According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), indoor air pollution has been labeled the number one environmental problem facing the American public, and paint is the worst offender in contributing to this problem. Indoor pollutant levels are often as high as 100 times those outdoors. After painting, indoor pollution ratings can soar to 1,000 times the outside level.

Fine uses low-toxicity paints. He says regular latex paints have petrochemical elements that evaporate into the air. His natural paints use citrus oil instead of petrochemicals, and the low-toxicity versions have most of the fumes removed during the manufactur-

ing process. He also says he'll match the effectiveness of his paints against any other paints on the market.

Who should consider low-toxicity paints? Anyone with allergies for a start. Or, how about parents-to-be who are painting a nursery for their unborn child? In the past, new parents may have been happy to bring baby home to a nursery smelling of baby powder and new paint, but

Another concern are solvents, which are present in oil-based paints. When the paint dries, the solvents evaporate and react with sunlight and other gases to form ground-level ozone. Laws have been passed in many states, including California, to limit the harmful ingredients in these paints. The resulting new paints are not as durable or attractive as the old ones, many dealers claim. Most stores stock

cal company offering a low-toxicity service at this time.

Paints dubbed natural or low-toxicity usually cost most per gallon and are more difficult to get. Expect to pay a premium of about 10 percent on interior low-toxicity materials. According to Fine, exterior environmentally safe paints are still extremely pricey. With more research and time the cost of these materials should decrease.

"...a new generation...is setting out to prove they can have profits without pollution and production without poison."

today's environmentally smart new parents have to consider more than whether or not to use disposable diapers.

Environmental concerns about paint have caused manufacturers to change their formulas and many dealers to take certain kinds of paint off the shelves.

Lead, a serious health danger, was taken out of paint after a government ruling in 1978. Most homes built before 1940 and about half of those completed before 1960 were painted with lead-based paint. If you are repainting an

older home, you may want to have it tested for lead before you start sanding and scraping.

only a small percentage of oil-based paints these days and may phase them out altogether within the next few years.

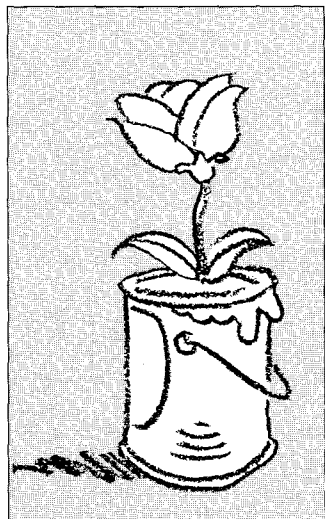
Latex paints are not free of dangerous substances either. Until August 1990, most included mercury, which helped resist mildew. Indoors, this presented a serious health danger. Outdoors, it contributed to pollution. Most manufacturers agreed last summer to stop using mercury, but cans of paint that have been sitting on the store shelf for a long time may still have mercury in them. Check the labels to be sure.

A recent issue of *The Earthwise Consumer* lists several other firms that specialize in natural paints. Among them are *Auro Paints*, (916) 753-3104; *The Old-Fashioned Milk Paint Company*, (508) 448-6336; *Livos Paints*, (800) 621-2591; *Biofa Paints* (800) 628-8113; and *AFM Enterprises* (714) 781-6860. To our knowledge *Armstrong Environmental Painting* at (415) 777-1234 is the only professional lo-

Although there is much concern about the environment these days, most people feel paints available in the general marketplace are as safe as they can be with today's technology. Even painters, working with these chemicals on a daily basis seem unconcerned. Greg Urban of *Urban Paintings* says, "You wouldn't want to drink them, but they're much safer than they used to be."

Fine says, "Paints are categorized as 'hazardous waste.' If you want to put hazardous waste on the inside or outside of your home, that's fine."

Consumers face a barrage of new concerns about the environment, and we must wonder if the EPA can bring about legislation and regulations fast enough to protect us all. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs like Mitch Fine provide an alternative for those people who care enough about the environment to make a choice which is different. ♦



The Earthwise

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New Hazards in House Paint — and Safer Solutions

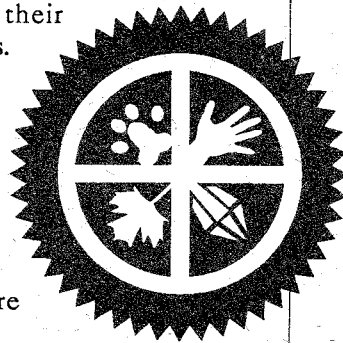
This summer I moved into a new house (an old house, really, but new to me) and was faced with the question of which paint to use on both the exterior and interior of my house. In the process of having to make my decision, I found out new information about dangerous ingredients in water-based latex house paint and experienced first-hand all the issues that needed to be considered.

I've not yet painted the interior of my house, but did have the exterior painted by Armstrong Natural Painting (774 Harrison, San Francisco CA 94107, 415/826-9134), a new environmental division of Armstrong Painting in San Francisco, a well-known local family-owned company that has been providing high-quality service for many years. Mitch Fine, the son of the owner, started this new division because of his concern about the health of his workers, the environment, and the health of his customers. Mitch shared with me the chemical hazards he is concerned about in paint.

The labeling on paint cans, like other consumer products that contain hazardous substances, is governed by the Hazardous Substances Act, which allows product labels to withhold the actual ingredients of a product, as long as there are warnings on the label that the product contains hazardous substances. Paints are made from complex formulas that contain many toxic substances made from nonrenewable petrochemicals. Oil-based paints are more toxic than water-based paints because of their solvents, but even water-based paints can contain such ingredients as polyvinyl acetate, acrylic or styrene butadiene elastomers, ethanol, and formaldehyde.

There are many kinds of warning labels to be found on paint products, depending on their uses and formulas.

Generally they are quite long and explain in detail what to do in case of ingestion or over-exposure to fumes. Here are two examples:



WARNING: Harmful or fatal if swallowed. May cause slight skin irritation and eye irritation. Vapor and spray mist may be harmful if inhaled.

CAUTION: Use with adequate ventilation. Where ventilation is inadequate, use a suitable respirator. In case of eye contact, flush eyes immediately with plenty of water for at least 15 minutes. Do not take internally. Keep out of reach of children.

Of particular concern to Mitch was ethylene glycol, which appears regularly on the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) of water-based latex paints. Ethylene glycol is only one of a large group of chemicals known as glycol ether compounds. Most are clear, colorless liquids. Some are odorless, others have mild pleasant odors, and still others have strong odors. According to HESIS Fact Sheet No. 8 from the Hazard Evaluation System & Information Service (a Berkeley, California organization that provides information to workers on the hazards of workplace chemicals), "Within the class of glycol ethers, the toxicity varies greatly. All *propylene glycol* ethers

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are currently believed to be relatively safe; most ethylene glycol ethers with "methyl" in their names are relatively toxic...The common belief that glycol ethers never evaporate fast enough to create harmful levels in the air is false...some evaporate quickly and can easily reach hazardous levels in the air."

HESIS also reports that "over-exposure to glycol ethers can cause anemia (a shortage of red blood cells), intoxication similar to the effects of alcohol, and irritation of the eyes, nose, or skin. In laboratory animals, low-level exposure to certain glycol ethers can cause birth defects and can damage a male's sperm and testicles. There is some evidence that workplace exposure can reduce human sperm counts...Exposure levels that are high enough to cause intoxication or eye and nose irritation are *more* than high enough to cause anemia and to damage the reproductive systems of test animals. *If you experience intoxication or eye and nose irritation, your exposure should be reduced...* You should not rely on symptoms or on your sense of smell to warn you that you are being overexposed. You can be overexposed without feeling any effects at all. Many glycol ethers have very little odor."

Another problem with paints is mercury, which has been used in about 30 percent of the interior paints manufactured. After a four-year-old boy was discovered to have a rare form of mercury poisoning ~~and a exposure to water-based latex~~

after painting they were 1000 times greater. Another study showed that the product that released volatile organic compounds at the highest rate was paint.

According to the California Waste Management Board, only *dried* latex paint is acceptable in landfills — *liquid* latex paint is considered household hazardous waste and oil-based paints that contain solvents are serious threats to both human health and the environment.

CHOOSING SAFER PAINTS

While water-based latex paints are certainly safer than oil- or solvent-based paints, an even safer alternative would be to make your own paint at home (see formulas in *Nontoxic, Natural & Earthwise*) or purchase a paint made from natural materials or specially formulated to be less toxic. These are somewhat higher in price, but worth using.

Each of these alternative paints are different both in their ingredients and company philosophies, and each will be appropriate for different needs. I personally chose Auro paints for my house because my concern for the environment outweighed my need to have a paint that I could tolerate because of allergic sensitivities.

If, after reviewing this article, you decide to go ahead and use water-based latex paint anyway, you can make the

House Paint (continued)

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