

By
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GLOW UP!

The Switzer brothers created colors so bright they can blind you at high noon

WHILE WORKING a summer job, Bob Switzer, 19, had a nasty fall that left him with a skull fracture and optic nerve damage. Suddenly, the young man had to spend extended periods in darkness to let his eyes recover.

Bob's brother Joe, 18, was a chemistry student, and Bob was something of an amateur photographer. Their father had built them a photo lab in the basement of the family house in Berkeley, California, and while Bob recovered in 1933, the brothers passed their time in the darkroom, experimenting with different chemicals. One afternoon, they combined rubbing alcohol and Murine eyedrops, and the result began to mimic fluorescence, a natural phenomenon where some materials absorb light, usually at an ultraviolet wavelength, and transform it into another, typically visible light.

To enhance the fluorescent effect, the brothers mixed their experimental liquid with a shellac so they could spread it, like paint. Under a black light, the duo noticed that the shellacked liquid intensified the colors on the surface of a given object through ultraviolet absorption, which prompted the most dazzling hues. In 1934, the two founded Fluor-S-Art Company, now the DayGlo Color Corporation, to produce and market the pigments. The next year, the brothers figured out how to ditch the black light after they accidentally dipped some silk into a solution of fluorescent dye and alcohol and saw that the fabric glowed even under the sun.

These lively paint compounds helped the U.S. in World War II, when the military began using the Switzer brothers' pigments to paint aircraft as well as runways on aircraft carriers, giving U.S. planes an advantage when they landed during nighttime operations. A 1949 collaboration with Sherwin-Williams made DayGlo paint a fixture on the home front. You've certainly seen the Fire Orange shade, which remains in use in aviation and safety signage for its

high visibility, and Safety Yellow in those bright triangles that save you from tripping over potholes.

The colors entered the counterculture in memorable fashion, as novelist Ken Kesey used DayGlo to create mandala shapes on his famous psychedelic bus, mimicking the trippy visuals conjured by LSD. For all its luridness, DayGlo even entered the worlds of fashion and high art: Jane Fonda wore DayGlo in her popular aerobics videos, while Andy Warhol used the colors to brighten his 1964 *Flowers* series—and the colors make Keith Haring's 1982 *Untitled* an indelible, undeniable sensation.

More recently, rapper Kendrick Lamar teamed up with Reebok to produce a DayGlo-inspired line of shoes in 2015. And DayGlo-heavy installations by renowned artists such as Peter Halley continue to be exhibited across the globe. More than 90 years after the Switzers' happy accident, their bold discovery refuses to fade.♦



A vintage spray-paint canister containing Fire Orange—one of DayGlo's most recognizable and ubiquitous hues—and produced by New York Bronze Powder Company Inc., likely in the early 1980s.