

# Former CIA spy finds truth through deception

9/15/97  
By BRUCE HAMILTON  
News-Post Staff

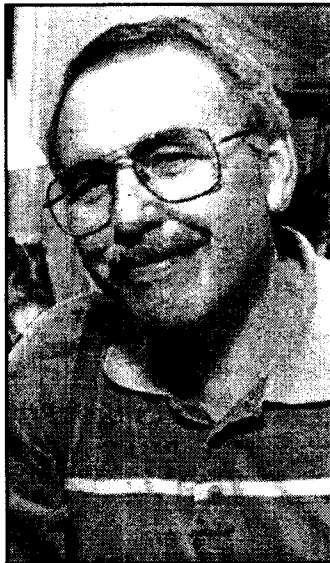
Deception is an art.

Antonio Mendez, a Knoxville resident who spent 25 years working for the Central Intelligence Agency, knows this as well as any former spy. But Mr. Mendez is also an award-winning painter whose images, he says, show the "energy and essence of nature."

The illusions, disguises and even lies of international espionage are intriguing. But truth, Mr. Mendez says, "is much more interesting. It was very easy to win the Cold War. All you had to do was tell them (the Soviets) the truth."

Mr. Mendez, 56, was no ordinary secret agent. He will be honored this week as a CIA "Trailblazer" for founding the agency's physical disguise program, according to a CIA announcement. He invented "techniques to evade hostile surveillance, ensure operational concealment, and synthesize strategic, illusory tradecraft tools," the agency said.

The details of Mr. Mendez' career are few because they



**ANTONIO MENDEZ**

involve classified information. Much of his work officially remains a mystery. He discusses

(Continued on Page A-4)

## Mendez

---

(Continued from Page A-1)  
his career in what he calls "generic" terms.

Mr. Mendez admits he helped forge "personal identity documents. Everything from soup to nuts." He worked on disguises, once transforming an African-American and an Asian into caucasians to make them look like each other. He managed "exfiltration," helping foreign informers escape from their governments or countries. He helped change their identities and break their "trails."

He was involved, he says, in a world crisis — the kind where the lives of American citizens were at stake. There was a rescue. "I conceived the plan right here," he says, gesturing at his kitchen. But the techniques "have to be preserved. You can't talk about them because you've got to use them again."

There are souvenirs of his service in Mr. Mendez' study, which he likes to call his "little museum." There is the photo he shot from a car of the KGB in his rear-view mirror. There is a photograph of former president Jimmy Carter, grinning as he shakes the hand of Mr. Mendez. There is the heavy, round medal called the "Intelligence Star" lying in its case.

The framed citation from the CIA says Mr. Mendez earned the star for his "courageous and heroic performance during an unprecedented intelligence undertaking." It is dated May 1980, about the time of the hostage crisis in Iran.

Six Americans escaped to the Candian embassy where they

were taken in and hidden. In his book "From the Shadows," Robert Gates, former director of the CIA, described a "very brave CIA officer" who "entered Iran with false identities for the six" and managed to get them out. This happened in the first four months of 1980, he wrote.

Asked if he had a hand in the hostage rescue, Mr. Mendez said, "given the fact that Iran is a formidable terrorist threat, I have no comment."

In the artist's studio, colorful landscapes and floral studies line the walls, a contrast to the black-and-white photos of his "museum." In impressionist style, he captures idyllic scenes, many of them from the region. Although he began painting in earnest in 1984, retirement allows him to concentrate on it more.

The principles of art, Mr. Mendez said, are often used in war. In World War II, the U.S. Navy managed to create a phantom fleet using special effects. Silhouettes were made to seem like large boats from a German submarine periscope's perspective. On D-Day, an army of wooden cutouts was used to scare the enemy.

But there are no scarecrows in Mr. Mendez's paintings, no violent wartime scenes. His images focus on tranquil environmental beauty. He wants, he said, "to act as a medium" to show the "magic of our surroundings."

He said he became an artist for the same reasons he became a secret agent, he said. "You've got to have an adventurous spirit. You've got to be a romantic."