



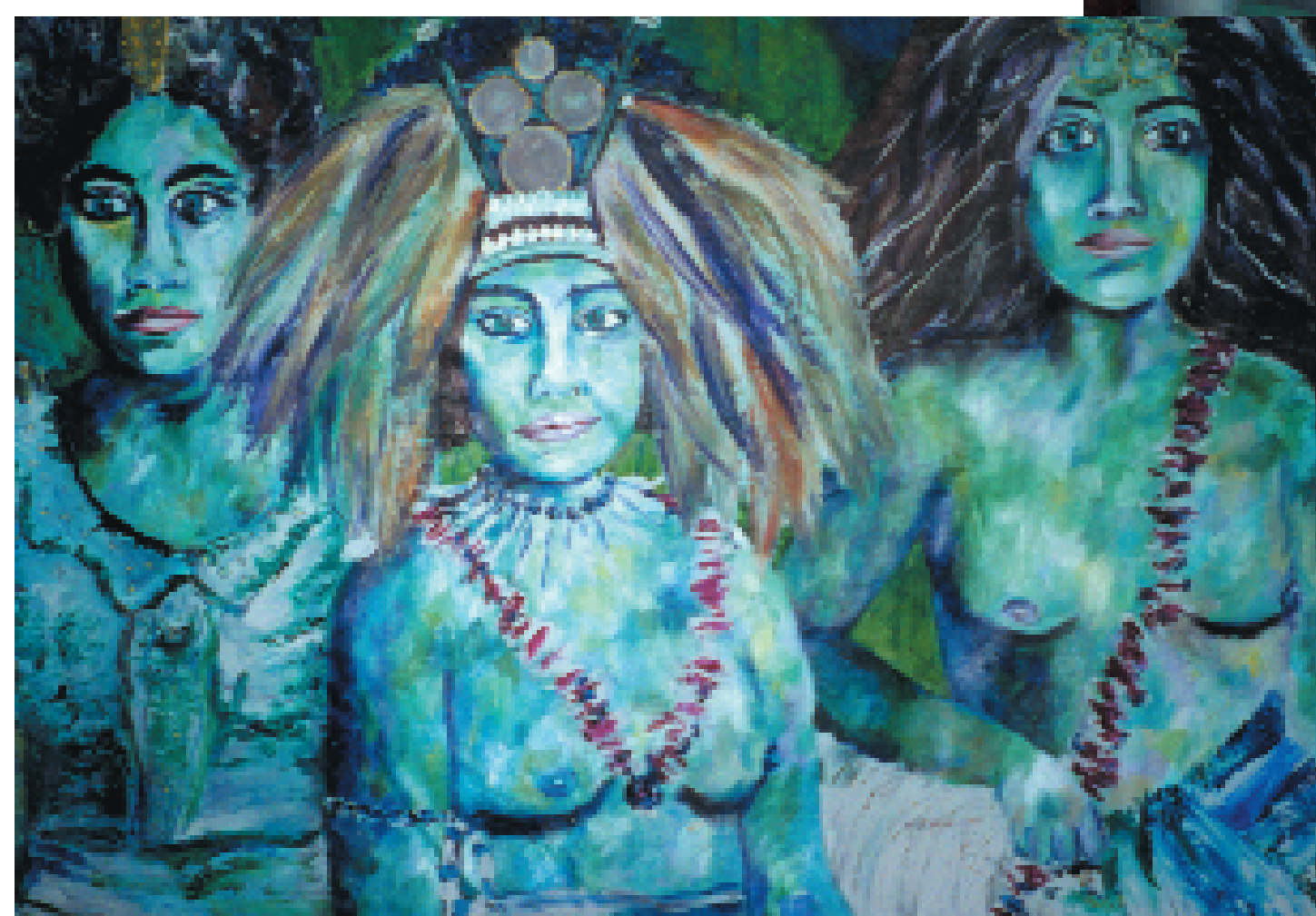
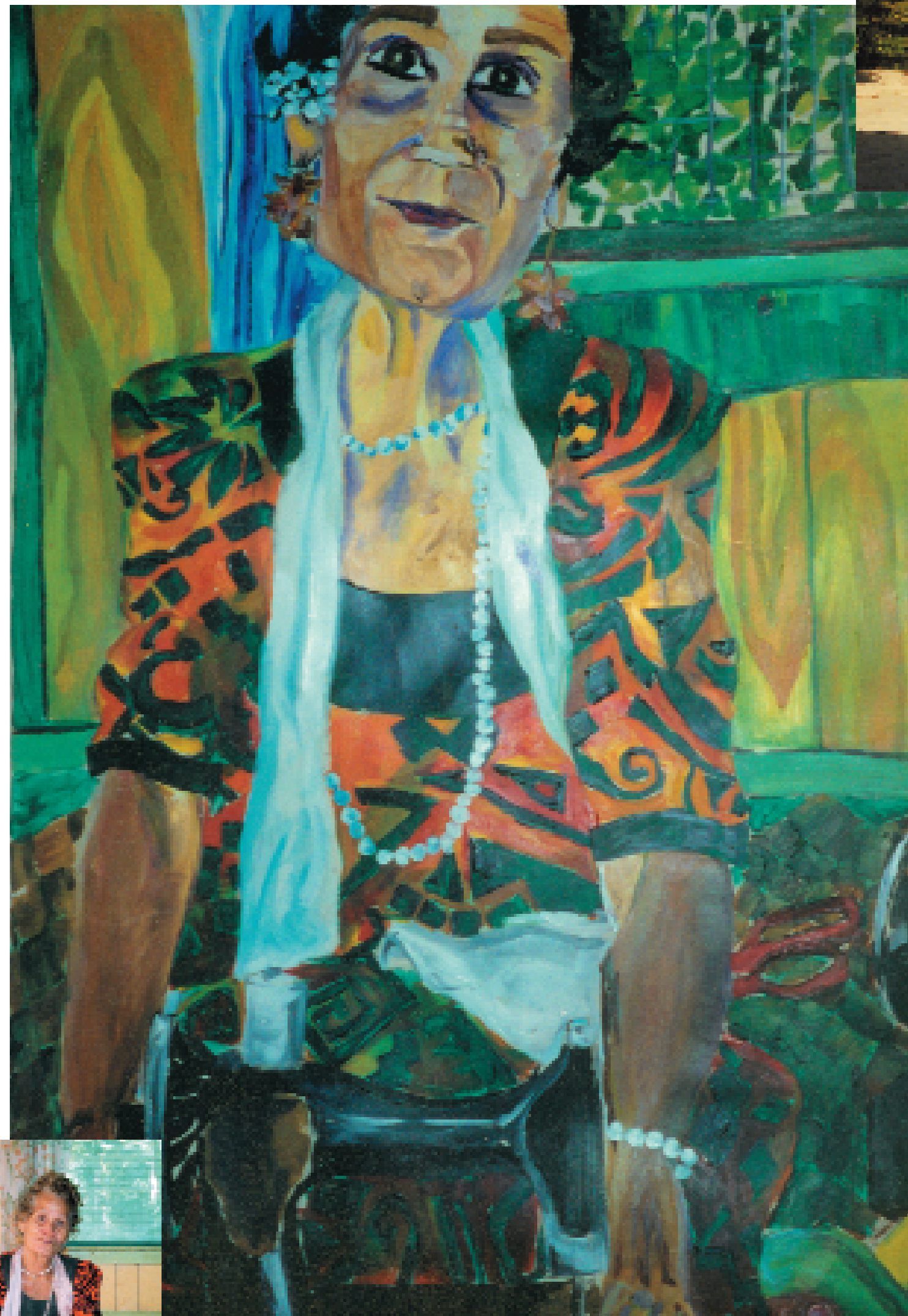
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Portrait of the Entrepreneurial Poor in Samoa

As the plane lifted me away from humid Samoan shores, I felt as though I was leaving in the middle of my journey. Samoa captivated me for two months, and I became lost in the exploration of Fa'a Samoa, or traditional Samoan culture, and its endless paradoxes. I arrived in Samoa on a quest to paint "economic development" in images according to what I observed and learned during my stay. ★ To do this, I had chosen to work with South Pacific Business Development (SPBD), a microfinance organization. SPBD gives small

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loans to the poor so that they can start their own microenterprises, and the organization threw me into the middle of the changing economic landscape that underprivileged Samoans are experiencing. The small businesses the women start, ranging from fruit stands to handicraft shops, generate income for the entrepreneurs to improve their families' nutrition, pay school fees, and make improvements on their home.

As research for my art, I had women show me why their businesses were important to them. For the first few weeks of my stay, I spent almost every day in the field snapping as many pictures as possible, observing the businesses and housing improvements the women

had made using their loans. Within days I could see how starting these businesses raised not only the physical living standards but also the self-esteem of our women. I also spent an extended time with four women who had started tourist "resorts" on Saleapaga Beach, one of the loveliest strands on the island. Amia, one of the resort owners, used her income to send her eight sons to school.

My artistic instinct was triggered almost immediately. Samoa was a sensory overload. Vibrant

flowers burst in every direction, the air smells of sea salt and earth ovens roasting meals, and the sky alternately spews rain and scorches with sun. My brush oozed with color. Even after being exhausted from village tours, I always painted into the early morning before rising again. My paintings show the coexistence of Samoan tradition with foreign ideas. I left Samoa two days after throwing a large publicity event for SPBD that showcased my paintings for Samoan government officials and business people.

The evening provided a forum for talking about changes and opportunities Samoa is facing as it opens up to the international economy.

As I said in the beginning, I left Samoa in the middle of my project. Even though I was exhausted from the intensity of the artistic experience, my painting style was only beginning to reemerge as I was leaving, and I had to stop my hand abruptly. I have only begun to understand what microfinance and development means to Samoans living in rural villages. Most of the time, I think Western imposition has done more harm than good, disrupting a harmonious, peace-loving culture. Yet change and idea importation is unstoppable, and SPBD is empowering people in the lowest economic sectors to make their own choices about how they will live. I know my paintings have forever captured the richness of tradition and personality I saw in Samoa during the summer of 2002.

