Abstract:

In 1828, Sarah Goodridge painted an extraordinary self-portrait: a three-inch-wide miniature depicting only her breasts, known today as *Beauty Revealed*. Delicately and skillfully, she stippled translucent watercolor on translucent ivory to imbue her bare white skin with ethereal luminosity. Goodridge seems to have gifted this synecdochic portrait to Daniel Webster, and today art historians understand it as an expression of romantic intimacy.

This paper proposes that *Beauty Revealed* also attests to a different kind of intimacy—an ecological intimacy which bridges continents and species and which envelops the small portrait in vast networks of violence and exploitation. Like most miniatures in the early nineteenth-century United States, *Beauty Revealed* was painted on a sliver of ivory cut from an African elephant’s tusk, a fact which remains notably absent in art historical scholarship. This omission obscures the enslavement of West African people and the killing of elephants in the name of the lucrative ivory trade. In turn, keeping this violence out of view allows *Beauty Revealed* and other ivory miniatures to perpetuate a myth of dematerialized white femininity and thus uphold devastating ideologies of racial and ecological hierarchy. This paper reveals instead a profoundly material whiteness, dependent on the subjugation of other bodies, both human and nonhuman.