

Robert Burley, a photographer who loves Lake Ontario: "Donald Trump treats the lake like private property"

Through his powerful images, Canadian photographer Robert Burley—whose work is currently on display in Paris—offers an ecological, political, and cultural reflection on the landscapes of the Great Lakes.

Par Julien Bordier Publié le 4 octobre 2026 à 14h00 Lecture : 6 min.



Lake Ontario, Point Petre # 2 (2022). ROBERT BURLEY

Speaking to *Le Nouvel Obs*, he reacts to Donald Trump's decision to rename Lake Ontario "Lake America" and advocates for the preservation of Indigenous heritage. Thanks to Donald Trump, the world now knows the meaning of the word "hydronymy." On August 27, amidst heated trade negotiations with his Canadian neighbor, the U.S. President signed an executive order renaming Lake Ontario "Lake America." It was a whim quickly implemented for American users on Google Maps and Apple Maps—though not on MapQuest. Canadians still see "Lake Ontario," while the rest of the world now sees "Lake Ontario (Lake America)" displayed over the vast blue expanse that straddles the border. As a reminder, the French explorer Samuel de Champlain (1567–1635) was the first to map the Great Lakes region in 1612. He reportedly named Lake Ontario "Lake St. Louis" in honor of King Louis IX. Later, Louis de Buade, Count of Frontenac (1622–1698)—Governor General of New France—renamed it "Lake Frontenac." However, it was the French Jesuit missionary Pierre Raffeix (1633–1724) who, in 1688, created the map that cemented these lake names in European cartography—names that remained in use until the U.S. President's recent decision.



The map displayed when Donald Trump signed the executive order renaming Lake Ontario "Lake America" in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington on August 27, 2026. ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES VIA AFP

This is not the first time the White House incumbent has manipulated maps to suit his mood. He had previously high-handedly changed the name "Gulf of Mexico" to "Gulf of America." His latest territorial provocation came on September 7, when he posted an image on his Truth Social account showing North America entirely covered by the Stars and Stripes—with the red and white stripes extending over Mexico, the Caribbean... and even as far as Greenland and Iceland.



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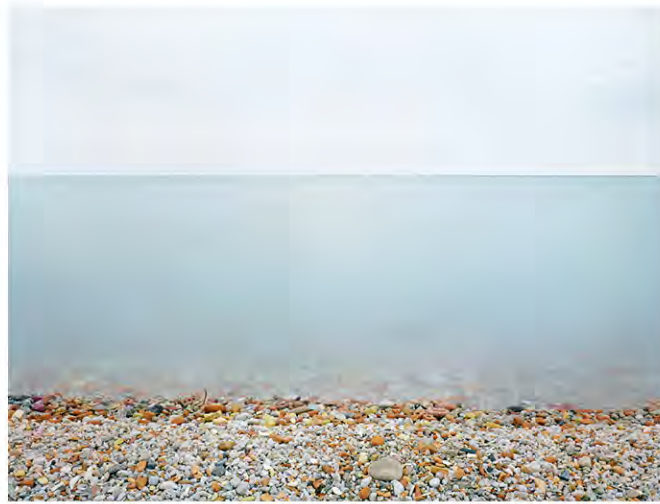
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The map of North America published by Trump on September 7, 2026, on his Truth Social network.

Robert Burley, a prominent figure in Canadian photography, sees right through this presidential provocation, dismissing it as "yet another political stunt by Trump designed to distract from poor poll numbers." However, the move troubles this lover of Lake Ontario: "It treats the lake as private property and the water as a mere commodity. Moreover, it attempts to erase history and threatens the environmental agreements reached between nations over previous decades to protect and preserve this shared resource for future generations."

An associate professor at Toronto Metropolitan University, the 69-year-old artist knows the region—shaped by retreating glaciers some 20,000 years ago—intimately. He spent his childhood on a peninsula jutting into the smallest of the Great Lakes, "a place of sandy beaches and endless shorelines fringed by limestone ledges." Through his artistic practice—akin to that of his compatriot Edward Burtynsky (the two attended the same university)—Robert Burley explores the connections between nature and the city, architecture and landscape. For over twenty years, he has documented the North American Great Lakes basin, one of the planet's most significant surface freshwater resources (holding 21% of the world's reserves). He always follows the same protocol. Whether photographing from major cities like Toronto or Chicago or from uninhabited northern wilderness, his lens is invariably trained on the horizon. He works under overcast skies to highlight the role weather plays in the appearance of these expanses of water. By using long exposures, Robert Burley lends these bodies of water a misty, mysterious quality. His images are currently on display at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris.



Lake Ontario, Toronto #3 (2004). ROBERT BURLEY

"I began this project as part of a small commission for a maternity hospital. The subject seemed obvious: water brings life. Our bodies are more than 75% water at birth, and bodies of water can evoke the primordial womb. While working with a large-format view camera and long film exposures, I produced a photograph that stood out from the rest ('Lake Ontario, Toronto #3'). It presented the subject as simultaneously magnificent and threatened, familiar and unrecognizable, physical and metaphorical. This photograph is both documentary and expressive. It records, in remarkable detail, the rubble of demolished buildings forming a man-made peninsula on the Toronto waterfront, where I had set up my tripod. Yet, the five-minute exposure transforms the water and sky, lending them an abstract, almost painterly quality. Water reflects, absorbs, moves, conceals, and constantly changes, creating subtle fields of color that seem closer to the imagination than to the visible world. The photograph became a kind of threshold: a testament to standing on what was known while gazing into the unknown. It is this tension—between the physical and the metaphorical, the visible and the imaginary, the enduring and the threatened—that became the foundation for the project that followed."



Lake Ontario, Long Point (2024). ROBERT BURLEY



Lake Huron, Craigeleith #1 (2002). ROBERT BURLEY

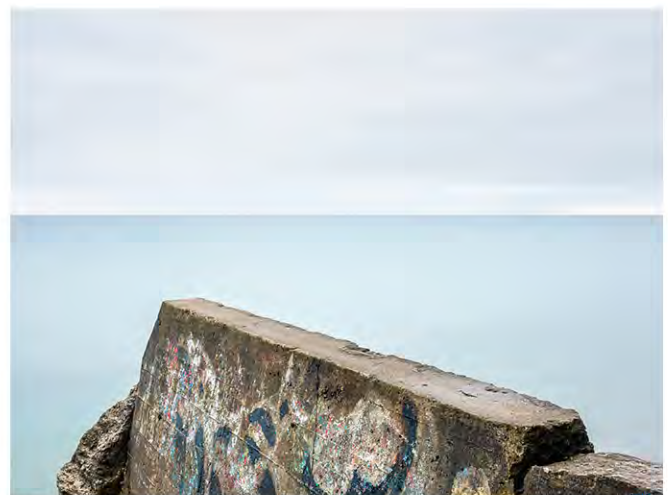


Lake Michigan, Chicago #9 (2022). ROBERT BURLEY

Robert Burley's tranquil images possess an evident political and ecological dimension in a world where pollution, drought, flooding, rising sea levels, and water scarcity are among the major issues of our time. Despite what Donald Trump might think, the five Great Lakes (Superior, Michigan, Erie, Huron, and Ontario) pay no heed to state-drawn borders—a fact highlighted by a vast NASA satellite image displayed on a wall at the Canadian Cultural Centre. This shared geography spans two countries, eight U.S. states, one Canadian province, and numerous First Nations communities. The situation is aptly summarized by the title chosen by exhibition curator Catherine Bédard: "Great Lakes: The Shared Horizon of Inland Seas." "From space, there are no boundaries and nothing bears a name," observes Robert Burley. "The lakes simply appear as a single, interconnected system." Water flows from one body to the next toward the southeast, traveling over 3,400 kilometers and dropping in elevation by a distance equivalent to a 60-story building before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean via the St. Lawrence River.



Lake Ontario, Sandbanks Beach (2026). ROBERT BURLEY



Lake Michigan, Milwaukee #1 (2022). ROBERT BURLEY



The exhibition "Great Lakes: The Shared Horizon of Inland Seas" by Robert Burley at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris. On the right, a satellite image of the Great Lakes region.
VINCENT ROYER, OPENUP STUDIO / CENTRE CULTUREL CANADIEN, 2026

This landscape is not merely physical; it also holds a cultural history that Donald Trump silences by "Americanizing" Lake Ontario. "The name Lake Ontario comes from the Wendat word 'Ontari'io,' meaning 'the lake is beautiful, the lake is large,'" Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney noted on X. "This name dates back more than four hundred years—long before Canadian Confederation and the U.S. Declaration of Independence. We know the United States is changing—its trade relations, foreign policy, national monuments, and even its hydronyms. But Canadians also know the importance of calling things by their true names, and this lake is called 'Lake Ontario'—today and forever."





A view of the Robert Burley exhibition at the Canadian Cultural Center in Paris. On the left, on the ground, the map produced by the Biinaagami project. VINCENT ROYER, OPENUP STUDIO / CANADIAN CULTURAL CENTER, 2026

For the floor of the Canadian Cultural Centre, Robert Burley chose to incorporate a map developed as part of a program called "Biinaagami"—which means "clean and pure waters" in Anishinaabemowin, one of the watershed's Indigenous languages. "It offers all the familiar geographic information of Google Maps while making visible the Indigenous communities, histories, and knowledge systems that have too often been erased, suppressed, or ignored by colonial governance systems," the photographer explains. "Including it is a way of acknowledging that maps reveal not only geography but also different ways of understanding territory, history, and belonging. They are often perceived as instruments of measurement—yet they exist somewhere between observation and invention. Much like photography, cartography transforms reality through framing, selection, scale, perspective, and omission. Both assert a connection to the real while constructing an image of it. A map is an image of the world, but also an image of how we understand the world."

On the wall facing the Biinaagami map appear the names used by Indigenous communities to refer to the lakes: "Erilhonan," "Gichigami," "Karegnondi," "Michigami," and "Ontari'io." It is evident that contemporary names are rooted in Indigenous culture and history. For Robert Burley, it was impossible to overlook this past in the exhibition. "My own British ancestors have ties to the region dating back to the 18th century, but Indigenous peoples have lived here and maintained relationships with these waters for over ten thousand years. The Biinaagami map simply reveals what was hidden in plain sight: a living history and culture that form an essential and vital part of the Great Lakes region."

The future may well prove more turbulent than the water on the surface of Robert Burley's photographs. Donald Trump has his imitators. David Maloney, the Republican representative for Berks County, Pennsylvania, is currently campaigning to rename Lake Erie... "Lake Pennsylvania."

"Great Lakes: The Shared Horizon of Inland Seas," by Robert Burley, at the Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris (8th arrondissement). Runs until November 14. Free admission.