

Q / Sports



WHAT A RACKET! Former team captain transforms tennis gear into art

Andrés Bella '99 builds the art in his mind before he reclaims a busted tennis racket, grabs a thicket of nylon string, maybe some heavy-duty shears, and gets to work.

For Bella, tennis is more than a sport he enjoys. It's a living.

"One whole side of my garage is filled with broken tennis material and art supplies—boxes and boxes of string, two containers of rackets, drills, glue, some spray paints," Bella said, reciting an inventory of raw materials rescued from a landfill.

"The way I see it, anything that you create is a form of art. You don't have to follow a certain format," he added. "If you're passionate about it, then go for it."

The former co-captain of the men's tennis team has spent nearly a decade turning tennis racket heads into 3-D portraits of famous people and creating wall-sized abstract pieces, all for gallery exhibitions, commissions and private collections.

Instead of simply painting a portrait on a racket, Bella cuts pieces of salvaged string and glues them to the racket head or other tennis gear to create his pieces. It's a painstaking process, one that Bella has refined in his suburban San Francisco studio.

Bella started hitting tennis balls at 4 years old on the public courts in Queens, New York. A few lessons here and there, a few case studies watching John McEnroe and Boris Becker on TV in the 1980s, and Bella was hooked.

His inspiration still comes from the greatest players in the sport, from Serena Williams and her 23 Grand Slam singles titles to Roger Federer and his 20 Grand Slam singles titles. Other

times, inspiration is sudden and unexpected, like a second-serve ace by one of the world's great tennis players.

With Federer, Bella incorporated a tennis racket portrait of the Swiss star into a four-piece set that spells out "GOAT"—greatest of all time. With Williams, he created two racket portraits to make a composite piece of Williams and her daughter, Alexis Olympia Ohanian Jr.

"A lot of different things inspire me—things I read, things I see, the passing of certain icons, not just tennis," Bella said. "It's a big moment in people's lives when certain icons pass. Sometimes, I just feel like I need to create something to acknowledge their work and the loss."

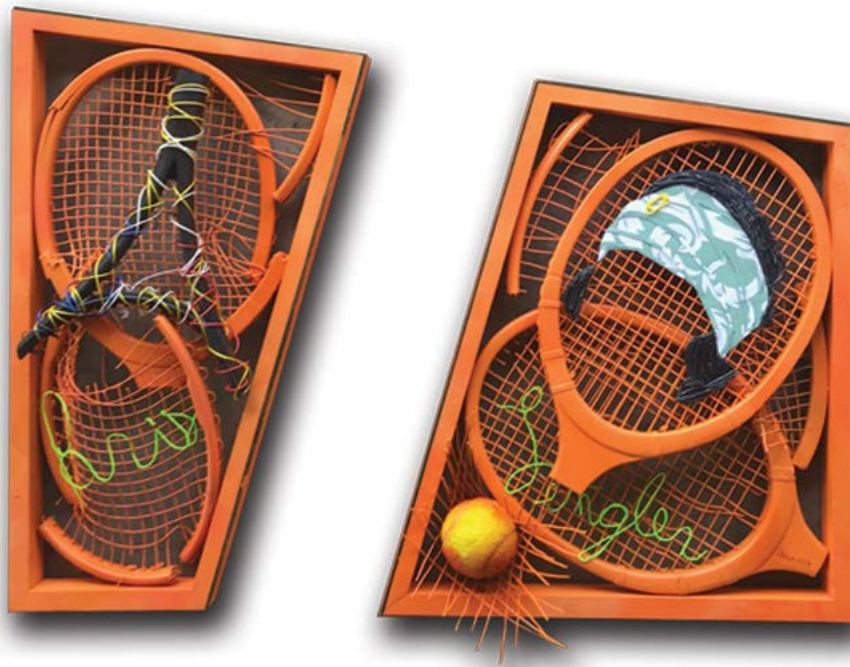
From rock legends David Bowie, John Lennon and Prince, to actress Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia in "Star Wars" to pop artist Andy Warhol and former President John F. Kennedy, Bella finds art in the experiences that people share.



Bella presented Ashleigh Barty, above, with a portrait during the 2019 U.S. Open in New York. Roger Federer is depicted in the art above.



Scan this code for video of
Andrés Bella and his art.



Bella also uses snapped racket grips, tired tennis balls, wooden presses from old-school wooden tennis rackets and other retired equipment for his larger creations. His abstract works include a butterfly-shaped piece titled, "Wings and Losses," and an elephant-shaped piece mounted on a door titled, "After the Ivory."

His work has appeared all across the country, including the U.S. Open, the Benrion Contemporary Gallery and the Midtown Tennis Club in New York City; the Froelich Gallery in Nashville, Tennessee; and the Sanchez Contemporary Gallery in Oakland, California. His pieces also hang in the corporate offices of Wilson Sporting Goods in Chicago and Babolat in France.

"I never took any formal art classes. I was just a visual learner," Bella said. "My first job out of school was in graphic design. It was a good opportunity for me to build off my marketing degree and learn the language of design. I pretty much learned on the job how to use Adobe Illustrator to draw."

From there, Bella began experimenting with color, texture, materials and themes. But it wasn't until his first public showing in 2011 with "Who Framed Roger Federer?" that Bella discovered there was an audience—and, ultimately, a market—for his work.

"My wife, my girlfriend at the time, was finishing her MBA in Nashville, and there was a small gallery there," Bella said. "It was great watching the live reactions of everyone when they looked at my art. When you do something like that, you don't really know if people are going to like it unless you put yourself out there."

Over the past year, Bella has been featured on ESPN and the Tennis Channel during Roland-Garros in Paris. He and his wife, Kimberly, now have a 2½-year-old daughter, Lennon, and a 3-month-old son, Tatum.

"If not for my wife, I never would've been able to do this. Life changes dramatically with kids," Bella said. "I'm doing what I love with whom I love."

—**Brian Koonz**