



QUICK LIT The Arsenal winger Theo Walcott recently ventured into the world of literature with the launch of a series of children's books. He's not the first sportsman to branch out from the football field.

From the movies to MCing, we look at the footballers with a bit on the side at www.independent.co.uk/football

Where do porn stars and nude poets compete for prizes? **Helen Croydon** takes us behind the scenes of the Erotic Awards

A place where sex is never a dirty word

Over the past six months I spent a lot of time gazing at lewd photographic images, watching strippers and scanning through soft-porn films – all part of my duties as a first-time judge for the Erotic Awards 2010. This year I joined the judging panel, along with nine others, among them a pornographer, a former dominatrix and a magazine editor.

The Erotic Awards seek to promote artists, writers, performers, academics and even politicians who have contributed to the battle to liberalise sex. It is a thankless task given the taboo surrounding the subject matter and each year the awards attract accusations that this is yet another excuse for a group of minority eccentrics to show off their fringe lifestyles and put on a public show of soft porn. Eroticism is – strictly speaking – an aesthetic focus on sexual desire and erotic art is work that evokes or explores sexual arousal. The Erotic Awards have a looser definition. It seems any artist who embraces sex, in any form, qualifies for the shortlist. Courting controversy appears to be a more important criterion than the quality of art.

To name a few of the 42 finalists in the 14 cat-



Art Tart (right), a finalist at the Erotic Awards

egories, there was Art Tart – who paints herself in vulgar poses, Amelia Cavallo – a blind burlesque dancer and Brokeback Disco – a light-hearted, funny, gymnastic duet by two flirtatious cowboys.

Writers included Ernesto the Naked Poet – the pen name of a Basque cognitive scientist who describes his insecurities about his penis and then recites his work, naked, to his audience. In the striptease category was Worldmistress, self-de-

scribed as a “Queer femme, kink burlesque performer, striptease and erotic pole dancer, model, professional dominatrix.” A contender in the fashion category included a collection of hand-crafted erotic footwear with heels that double as sex toys and thigh-high boots with pockets for canes.

As a judge I saw enthusiasm emanating from these buoyant artists and performers and their colourful routines. As a journalist who writes extensively about sex and its taboos, I felt tuned in to the rightful concerns of a general public about whether we should embrace overt sexuality for the sake of it.

Tuppy Owens, the founder of the Erotic Awards, says: “People whose profession or art centres on sexual themes are not taken seriously. They are stigmatised by society. People only welcome pieces of work about sex if it is with beautiful imagery. Sex symbols like Marilyn Monroe are glorified, the rest of us are frowned upon if we create a sexual persona. We want to give recognition to those who are great at what they do – they won't get recognition from anyone else.”

At the prize-giving ball, an exhibition of the finalists' work was showcased. “Having an exhibition of art at a sex party adds another dimension

and proves that sex is about more than shagging,” says Owens. “People can discuss painting, literature and dance performances.”

This year sex has been high on the current affairs agenda; the Policing and Crime Bill toughened laws on prostitution, but pro-sex industry campaigners fought it and it is this shared sentiment which got Chris Davies MEP nominated in the Politician of the Year category. Jo King, who formed the first academy dedicated to striptease, was up for a Lifetime Achievement award. Last autumn former call girl Belle de Jour provoked a national debate on the moralities of prostitution when she outed herself. A strikingly similar memoir, *Diary of a Jetsetting Call Girl* by Tracy Quan, had a writing nomination in 2010.

The awards give a needed platform for many original artists, performers and important campaigns which otherwise wouldn't find a voice. For that reason the Erotic Awards are an important event. But judgement should focus on genius, originality and worthiness. We shouldn't celebrate any old work on the vast theme of sex just because it courts controversy or causes a snigger.

erotic-awards.co.uk

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