The membrane that separates the present and memory, real space and representation, the concrete and illusory, seems to be at the core of Brendan Van Hek’s works. While apparently simple – made of mirrors, neon, paint and steel – minimal and cool, and like some combination of Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Bruce Nauman – Van Hek pushes against this barrier. 

There is the sense that one looks best at his works from their obverse, from within or behind, as if we move within a mirrored space or a cloud of light. In his recent exhibition of new work at Galerie Düsseldorf in Perth, As if from a distance I could already see myself, the works reversed normal spaces, were not just windows to be looked through or at, but mazes to be entered into. The pathways were unclear, twisting and turning, leading to positions where one could look back at oneself, even while moving through and into uncertain futures. There were literal mazes, or rather plots of journeys through mazes, made of twisted black neon tubing which appeared to float on light. It was as if the objects’ shadows, the secondary component which marks them as three-dimensional and present, had become all encompassing, brilliant and dominant, with the actual line of the diagram sinking back into this glowing support. The line was the negative space and the neon was revealed by its reflection from the wall behind. Brendan Van Hek’s Maze works are both biographic and anonymous – tracing an individual journey yet without identifying information to reveal an author or put flesh to the story.

Over the last five years, Van Hek has been using neon light as an element in itself – as text and in the form of discarded fragments of neon signs (recycled letters and numbers shown as unreadable, cacophonous souvenirs of a modern world), and as sculpture. Whether as a large oval, made up of strips of hand-blown neon tubing, as in Great White Hope (2010) (which won the first Stringer Award when exhibited in last year’s Remix exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia), a series of Untitled works, consisting of a grid work of steel resembling the frame of a building, with neon strips attached, or the Maze works in the recent show, Van Hek uses light as a core medium. It has delineated structures, been transformed into words and phrases, plotted journeys, and worked its way into the eye to illuminate spaces within.

Van Hek uses titles adroitly to suggest narrative and lead viewers into speculative journeys and reflection. The path to luck (another neon work in the recent exhibition); I will never leave you (a multi-panel mirror work shown at the same venue in 2010); End of the road (shown...
at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2009); The Prophecy (shown at TarraWarra in 2010), and many others belie surface cool and minimal purity, hinting at deep waters beneath.

The other major works in this exhibition, including the title piece, equally play with vision, with what is revealed and concealed in the process of looking. As if from a distance I could already see myself is a large, round mirror covered with small hand-drawn marks like blades of grass, or better yet like scales on the mirror’s skin which cast a deep blue filter between the real, the depicted and the imagined. The surface, rather than disappearing from view, as in most encounters with a mirror’s illusion, comes into focus as a barrier or gauze between two states of being, held equally in tension. In another work, Configuration #1, three oval mirrors were placed high on a wall in a position where the viewer could only see elements of the space of the gallery, and never him or herself. They mirrored not the self or the narcissistic gaze, but architecture and the heavens, a place where the individual is superfluous and disappears. These mirrors reveal the environment but not the self, as though it has been put into abeyance and all that matters is the speculative journey called forth by its absence. Just as the Maze works, where the line of neon tube largely disappears into its glowing aura, in his mirror works Van Hek reverses the mirrored space and emphasises the membrane between one space and another. Like the surface tension on a body of water, it functions as a barrier between two states: a surface which resists being broken but which one can glide along, suspended and looking in two directions at once.